

Research Article

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From Subcultures to City Branding: Grassroots Narratives in Bandung's Sustainable Urban Tourism

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Bandung's urban subcultures play an increasingly important role in shaping participatory city branding within the broader agenda of sustainable urban development. However, the ways in which grassroots creative communities contribute to city identity and co-create branding narratives remain underexplored. This study aims to examine how Bandung's subcultural groups—spanning music, fashion, art, and other creative scenes—produce cultural values, narratives, and collaborative practices that reinforce the city's brand authenticity.

Materials/methods. A qualitative single-case study design was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 13 participants and participant observations across various creative subcultures in Bandung. Narrative branding, participatory governance, and post-subcultural theory guided the analytical framework. Data were coded using thematic analysis to identify recurring cultural values and patterns of grassroots participation within the city's branding ecosystem.

Results. The analysis reveals three integrated domains of grassroots contribution: (1) Cultural infrastructure, demonstrated through community-led creative spaces and cultural learning environments; (2) Social capital and collaboration, characterized by mutual aid, inclusivity, volunteerism, and cross-sector partnerships; (3) Identity narratives and place attachment, expressed through heritage storytelling, visual culture, and community-based creative events. Together, these domains show that Bandung's subcultures act as co-producers of an authentic and emotionally resonant city brand, strengthening cultural resilience and sustainability.

Conclusion. Bandung's grassroots creative networks significantly enrich participatory city branding by generating culturally grounded narratives and collaborative practices. The study contributes a Global South perspective to place-branding scholarship and highlights the strategic importance of informal creative actors in shaping sustainable city identities. Policy implications point to the need for inclusive governance structures that integrate grassroots narratives into formal urban development strategies.



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1. Introduction

City branding has evolved from a top-down marketing into a more participatory, community-oriented practice in recent years (Bisani et al., 2024; M. Kavaratzis, 2012). Early foundational work on citizen participation, such as Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, underscored how genuine power-sharing with citizens (beyond tokenism) is crucial in planning processes (Arnstein, 1969; Gaber, 2019). In the place branding realm, scholars began arguing that residents and local stakeholders should move from being seen as passive "consumers" of the city brand to active co-creators of place identity, for example, laid the groundwork for a participatory view of place branding, calling for an urgent reorientation toward stakeholder involvement in the creation and "ownership" of city brands (Thelander & Säwe, 2015; Y. Zhao et al., 2022). In this view, effective place brands are rooted in the participation of stakeholders – residents, local businesses, cultural communities – whose voices lend legitimacy and authenticity to the brand.

Subsequent studies reinforced this paradigm: Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2013) emphasized that residents are "vitally important" actors in city branding, outlining the diverse roles they play in shaping and communicating a city's image (Braun et al., 2013). Likewise, Aitken and Campelo (2011) argued for community engagement as central to the "Four Rs" of place branding, contending that brands must resonate with local realities and relationships to be sustainable (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Reynolds, Koenig-Lewis, et al., 2022). These foundational contributions shifted the discourse toward more inclusive branding strategies, where a city's identity is co-constructed with those who live and experience it daily.

Building on these concepts, recent research has probed how participatory city branding works in practice and the challenges that come with it. Hereźniak (2017) explored the multifaceted ways citizens can be involved in building and managing city brands, conceptualizing place branding as not just a marketing endeavor but also a form of public policy and governance (Hereźniak, 2017). Her study catalogued various methods of citizen involvement and highlighted the empowering role of technology (e.g., Web 2.0, social media) in enabling more bottom-up brand co-creation. Similarly, Ripoll González and Gale (2020), in an interdisciplinary case of Tasmania, framed place branding as a form of participatory governance. They found that opening up branding processes to public participation can strengthen democratic legitimacy and align the city's image with local values, echoing broader calls for "creating with" communities rather than "for" them (González & Gale, 2020). Despite such optimistic prescriptions, researchers have also identified persistent gaps between the ideal of inclusivity and the reality on the ground. Arnstein's concern about "lip service" participation is often borne out in city branding, while many city campaigns profess community engagement, the depth of actual influence given to local stakeholders can be limited. For instance, Kavaratzis (2012) noted that in practice, stakeholders were frequently treated as a "necessary evil" – consulted only superficially – rather than true partners, calling out the need to move beyond tokenism in branding strategies. This critique set the stage for empirical studies examining power imbalances and barriers in participatory place branding initiatives.

Recent empirical work has shed light on the complexities, paradoxes, and power dynamics inherent in participatory city branding. Källström and Siljeklint (2023), studying two participatory branding cases in Sweden, discovered that local stakeholders often hold paradoxical perceptions of what place branding should be. They identified tensions such as whether branding should target internal vs. external audiences, emphasize exploration vs. exploitation of local culture, see stakeholders as active co-creators vs. passive beneficiaries, and focus on process vs. outcome (Källström & Siljeklint, 2023). Issues of power and legitimacy in such processes are highlighted by Reynolds et al. (2022), who examined stakeholder engagement in two UK city branding projects using Bourdieu's theory of capital. They found that traditionally powerful actors (city officials, tourism

organizations, business elites) often maintain their dominance, while community representatives struggle to gain influence unless they possess specific forms of “cultural capital” – namely, insider knowledge of the place and procedural know-how (Reynolds, Koenig-lewis, et al., 2022).

Such findings underscore the importance of consciously designing inclusive processes. A recent study by Bisani, Daye, and Mortimer (2024) developed a theoretical framework to better align democratic legitimacy with inclusive place branding. Using a UK case study, they showed that conventional marketing-led branding efforts differed markedly from grassroots, voluntary-sector initiatives regarding who is represented and how co-creation occurs (Bisani et al., 2024). Beyond stakeholder participation in general, scholars have also interrogated the cultural dimensions of city branding – how urban subcultures, creative communities, and representations of local culture factor into a city’s identity. The “Creative City” paradigm popularized by Landry and others in the early 2000s posited that cities can drive development by cultivating art, design, and innovation (Gueniffey & Sakamura, 2025; Landry, 2012). However, critical research has since unpacked differences between a capital-‘C’ “Creative City” – a buzzword often adopted by policymakers – and a more organic, “creative city” that grows from subversive, ground-up cultural energies (Alsayel et al., 2022; Magkou et al., 2025).

In a theoretical articulation of this, De Beukelaer (2021) examines Bandung’s trajectory as an “emerging creative city” and introduces the concept of “friction” to describe the tensions between formal city-branding policies and grassroots creative practices (Beukelaer, 2021). He argues that the formalization of the Creative City (e.g., through government programs, slogans, and infrastructure like the Bandung Creative Hub) can lead to depoliticization – glossing over who truly benefits – but that the friction generated by local artists and subcultures resisting or redirecting these narratives can repoliticize the concept, injecting authenticity and contestation back into the city’s cultural identity. Case studies from other cities reinforce how subcultures and local heritage can enrich and challenge place branding. For example, Sabina Andron (2018) investigated London’s street art scene and the rise of street art tours as part of the city’s creative brand. Her work showed that what began as a subversive, grassroots art movement became, through guided tours and municipal endorsement, a commodified “cultural product” that the city leveraged to project a hip, creative image by curating specific murals and graffiti hotspots (notably in Shoreditch) as must-see attractions (Andron, 2023).

Antonie Schmiz (2017) examined Berlin’s failed attempts to designate and market “Chinatown” or “Asiatown” districts as part of its city branding of diversity. A similar dynamic was observed in Berlin: alternative cultural sites that once lay outside the mainstream have been co-opted into the city’s brand. For instance, the Tacheles art squat in Berlin-Mitte, famously became “the publicly perceived representation of Berlin subculture,” to the point that images of its graffiti-clad ruins were sold on postcards as symbols of the city. As one account notes, the acceptance of Tacheles into Berlin’s official narrative “indicates the extent of this phenomenon” – an underground space transforming into a celebrated icon of Berlin’s identity (Schmiz, 2016). These cases illustrate how urban subcultures and creative communities can significantly shape place identity. A comparable story is unfolding in Southeast Asia. Fahmi et al. (2021) studied the case of Kampung Suci in Bandung – an informal neighborhood known for its home-based textile screen printing industry – and how it was reimagined as a “creative tourism kampung” as part of Bandung’s creative city agenda. They found that informality was being strategically used in the city’s branding: the vernacular creativity of kampung artisans became a selling point to attract visitors and investments (Fahmi et al., 2019).

In summary, prior studies have paved the way for a more participatory, culturally grounded approach to city branding, but they also reveal gaps that the present study seeks to address. The literature review above shows a growing recognition that engaging local communities, subcultures, and grassroots initiatives can lend authenticity, legitimacy, and creativity to a city’s brand. Participatory branding is heralded to avoid one-dimensional “sloganeering” and instead build an

identity reflective of the city's diverse narratives. However, existing research also highlights unresolved challenges: power imbalances in stakeholder engagement, potential clashes between official branding agendas and on-the-ground cultural expressions, and the relative dearth of Global South perspectives in mainstream branding discourse.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating Bandung's participatory city branding through the lens of its creative communities and cultural narratives. It builds on the literature by combining insights from participatory governance, creative city theory, and grassroots urbanism. The novelty of our approach lies in demonstrating how a city's brand can be co-created from below in a developing-world context. We examine how Bandung's residents – from creative kampungs leaders to “alternative” youth subcultures—collaborate with or challenge official narratives to project a city identity that is both globally appealing and locally resonant. By comparing Bandung's experience with the international cases, the study not only corroborates but also extends existing theories, showing how participatory city branding can enable grassroots expression, cultural representation, and social change.

From this gap, the study is guided by three questions: (1) How do Bandung's urban subcultures perceive and articulate cultural values that shape the city's identity? (2) In what ways do grassroots practices contribute to participatory city branding? (3) How do these subcultural narratives influence Bandung's sustainable urban development?

Although the reviewed studies provide important insight into participatory city branding, creative cities, and subcultural urbanism, several gaps remain insufficiently addressed. Existing research is largely centered on Western contexts, offering a limited understanding of how participatory branding operates in Global South cities where informal cultural networks and grassroots creative practices are central to everyday urban life. Furthermore, subcultures have rarely been examined as primary actors in co-constructing city identity, despite their growing influence on cultural expression, collaborative practices, and place-based narratives. The intersection between grassroots cultural values and sustainable urban development is also understudied. To address these gaps, this study investigates Bandung's participatory city branding through the lens of its creative communities and subcultural narratives, showing how a city brand can be co-created from below. This conceptual orientation directly informs the guiding research questions presented in the Introduction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Narrative City Branding and Participatory Urbanism

City branding has evolved from a marketing-centric model into a multidisciplinary field that blends urban planning, communication, cultural governance, and place management (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2019; M. Kavaratzis, 2012; Ye & Björner, 2018). Traditional top-down approaches often projected homogenized images of cities through logos and slogans (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990), but scholars increasingly argue for branding as a participatory communicative process involving diverse urban actors (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015) (Paül i Agustí, 2021). Recent studies highlight the importance of engaging citizens as audiences and active brand co-creators (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Braun et al., 2013; Maziashvili et al., 2023). This shift aligns with participatory urbanism, which calls for inclusive decision-making in urban planning and identity formation (Foroughi et al., 2023) (Innes & Booher, 2004). As such, city branding is now seen as a facet of urban governance, enabling stakeholders to collectively articulate and negotiate a city's image (Hereźniak, 2017; Manoharan et al., 2025; R. Zhao et al., 2025).

Communication in participatory branding serves as both a deliberative and performative mechanism. It is deliberative in that it facilitates stakeholder dialogue (Zavattaro, 2014), and

performative in that branding narratives shape how the city is imagined and lived (Ciuculescu, 2024). Branding thus becomes a site of political negotiation where inclusion, identity, and legitimacy intersect (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011; Schwak, 2018). Case studies from Copenhagen (Jensen, 2007), Melbourne (Waite & Gibson, 2009), and Medellín (Brand & Dávila, 2011) illustrate that participatory branding fosters place attachment and civic pride when it aligns with residents' lived experiences. However, critics warn of tokenistic participation or branding "from above" disguised as bottom-up (Goretti et al., 2023; Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2020). Power asymmetries may persist when elite stakeholders dominate narrative construction, marginalizing grassroots voices (Reynolds, Koenig-Lewis, et al., 2022; Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2023).

In Southeast Asia and the Global South, participatory urbanism is emerging through grassroots cultural projects (Fahmi et al., 2019) (Z. Mbinza, 2024). For example, Bandung's Creative City movement integrates informal kampung economies into its branding narrative (Beukelaer, 2021). Such cases underscore the potential of participatory branding to democratize identity-building in cities where informal practices and cultural hybridity thrive. Narrative branding conceptualizes the city as a "story" co-authored by multiple stakeholders (Mihalis Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Instead of static visual identities, narrative branding leverages dynamic, place-based storytelling to communicate a city's evolving character (Björner & Aronsson, 2022). The narrative approach focuses on symbolic representations and cultural expressions, integrating branding with local identity and memory (Foroudi et al., 2025; Ulimaz et al., 2024). Scholars argue that a coherent city narrative should reflect cultural heterogeneity while maintaining thematic unity (Boisen et al., 2018; Grenni et al., 2020; VanHoose et al., 2021). When narratives emerge organically from community practices, they foster authenticity and emotional resonance (Anholt, 2010; Reid et al., 2020).

Branding communication in this context functions through shared meanings and social construction. As Kavaratzis (2013) states, city branding is "identity work," where the projected image must correspond with residents' self-perception. Misalignment can result in symbolic dissonance, where external messaging contradicts internal realities (Sullivan et al., 2022; Zenker et al., 2019). Narratives also serve as "soft power" instruments, shaping external perceptions while influencing policy agendas (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018). For instance, creative narratives in Amsterdam and Berlin were mobilized to attract talent and investment but were rooted in real subcultural histories (Boswinkel & Meerkerk, 2023; Colomb, 2012; Mommaas, 2004).

However, branding can risk essentializing or commodifying local culture if elites monopolize storytelling (Daldanise, 2020; Dinnie, 2010). Communication scholars stress the role of media and discourse in mediating place narratives. Public relations, journalism, social media, and community media contribute to disseminating and contesting branding stories (Zavattaro, 2014). In participatory settings, branding becomes a dialogic process—citizens act as storytellers and critics.

2.2. Urban Subcultures and Post-Subcultural Theory

Urban subcultures—such as music scenes, streetwear communities, or skateboarding collectives—offer a fertile ground for exploring place identity construction and alternative branding practices (Bennett, 1999; Swain et al., 2023). Historically studied as resistant or marginal cultures (Hebdige, 1979), subcultures are now recognized as key actors in creative cities (Bille, 2010; Florida, 2005; Liu et al., 2024). Post-subcultural theory emerged in response to the rigid typologies of early subcultural studies. Scholars like St John (2003) argue that contemporary subcultures are fluid, hybrid, and overlapping (St John, 2003; Muggleton, 2005). Bennett (1999) proposed the notion of "neo-tribes" to describe temporary, affective networks formed around lifestyle and taste (Bennett, 1999). This reconceptualization is crucial for understanding how youth and creative communities contribute to place branding without centralized control.

Subcultures communicate city identity through spatial practices (e.g., street performances, graffiti, gigs), material culture (fashion, zines), and digital storytelling (blogs, social media), offering bottom-up narratives of place (Andron, 2018; Duan et al., 2022). These expressions often contrast or complement official branding, creating tension or synergy (Swaminathan et al., 2020; Temprano-García et al., 2023). In cities like Berlin and London, subcultural branding has been celebrated and co-opted. Shoreditch's transformation from a bohemian enclave to a gentrified brand image illustrates the commodification of alternative cultures (Langeegger, 2015). Meanwhile, in Medellín and São Paulo, graffiti and music scenes have been harnessed to promote inclusive urban renewal (Brand & Dávila, 2011; Kanai & Ortega-Alcazar, 2009).

Branding communication here is performative and symbolic. Subcultural scenes produce narratives embodying values like independence, rebellion, or creativity, often resonating with millennial urban imaginaries (Sweetman, 2013; Sepehr & Felt, 2025). These scenes shape a city's soft image, influencing how locals and outsiders perceive urban authenticity. In Southeast Asia, studies by Ibrahim (2016) and Fahmi et al. (2021) demonstrate how informal creative networks in cities like Bandung and Yogyakarta fuel urban narratives from below (Fahmi et al., 2019) (Cahya et al., 2017). They highlight that subcultural practices in the Global South often operate within informal economies and social structures, creating branding dynamics distinct from Western cities.

Significantly, post-subcultural theory intersects with communication theory through the lens of meaning-making and identity performance. Subcultures construct "narratives of place" not through official discourse but through everyday creative acts. When supported or amplified by urban policy, these acts can become part of the city's official narrative without losing authenticity.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design focusing on Bandung's urban subcultures and their role in city branding. Given the exploratory nature of our research question, a qualitative approach is well-suited to capture the depth of cultural meanings, narratives, and social dynamics at play. Case study research is an approach in which researchers explore real, limited, and current systems (cases) or limited and diverse systems (multiple cases) through detailed and in-depth data collection involving various sources of information (Creswell, 2015; C Nugroho et al., 2024).

We employed a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation to gather data, alongside a review of relevant documents and media. The goal was to construct a rich narrative of how various community actors perceive and contribute to Bandung's identity, and how their grassroots activities align with (or contrast against) official city branding efforts.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

We used purposive and snowball sampling to identify participants actively involved in Bandung's creative subculture scenes. Key informants were drawn from a spectrum of urban subcultural communities, ensuring representation across the city's different "skena" (scenes). These included: independent music artists and event organizers (from punk, metal, indie pop scenes), founders of local fashion labels and streetwear "distro" stores, visual artists and muralists, leaders of automotive enthusiast communities (e.g., classic car and motorcycle clubs), coordinators of urban sports groups (such as skateboarding and parkour communities), coffee shop and culinary micro-entrepreneurs, as well as cultural academics, media practitioners, and local officials familiar with Bandung's creative networks.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 individuals from July 2024 to February 2025, encompassing subculture practitioners and stakeholders in culture and tourism (such as a

representative from the city's culture & tourism office). This diverse sample allowed us to gather multiple perspectives on Bandung's identity from the ground up. Each interviewee was given assurance of confidentiality; in the analysis, we refer to them by first name or pseudonym and role (e.g., "independent musician," "community activist") to preserve anonymity where needed.

3.3. Participant Characteristics

The 13 participants represented creative community actors, cultural practitioners, media practitioners, academics, and local government stakeholders involved in Bandung's urban subcultural and creative networks.

3.4. Interview Protocol Development

The semi-structured interview guide comprised 12 main questions, covering: (1) personal involvement in their creative scene, (2) perceptions of Bandung's cultural identity, (3) examples of community practices contributing to Bandung's image, (4) interactions with the city government, (5) reflections on Bandung's creative values, and (6) views on sustainability and future urban development.

Questions were developed based on narrative branding theory, participatory governance literature, and prior studies on subcultures. Three experts (a communication scholar, an urban planning researcher, and a cultural studies expert) reviewed the instrument to ensure content validity. Revisions were made to improve clarity and cultural sensitivity.

3.5. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia (with some Sundanese colloquial terms emerging, given Bandung's local language context) and later translated to English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We used an interview guide covering topics such as: participants' involvement in their community scene, their perceptions of Bandung's unique cultural values, examples of community activities that they feel represent Bandung, interactions with other subcultures or the city government, and their thoughts on Bandung's image or "brand."

This narrative approach helped elicit rich, anecdotal evidence of the city's grassroots branding. In addition to interviews, we engaged in participant observation at several community events: a local indie music gig, a street market featuring young designers, a mural art session, and a "Sunday morning ride" gathering of car/bike enthusiasts. These observations provided contextual understanding and helped validate insights from interviews (for example, witnessing the collaborative atmosphere often described by participants). We also examined secondary data, such as Bandung's tourism promotional materials, social media groups of local communities, and news articles about Bandung's creative scene, to triangulate our findings and situate them within broader narratives.

Interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed. We employed a thematic analysis approach, coding the data inductively to identify recurring themes and salient concepts. We iteratively coded passages and clustered codes into candidate themes using qualitative data analysis software. An initial coding yielded a wide array of codes (e.g., "innovation," "DIY ethos," "community support," "resistance to mainstream," "Bandung vs Jakarta comparisons," "pride and emotional attachment," etc.). Through iterative refinement and referring to theoretical frameworks, we distilled these into major themes that captured the essence of Bandung's grassroots city identity narrative. This analytic process was dialectical: we continuously moved between the empirical data and relevant theories (strategic communication, participatory branding, post-subcultural theory, etc.) to interpret the findings (Catur Nugroho et al., 2025).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The presentation of findings is organized according to the three research questions of the study. Each thematic category is explained by linking empirical data with the specific question it answers. In reinterpreting the findings, the ten original grassroots cultural values of Bandung's creative communities can be synthesized into three broader categories: Cultural Infrastructure, Social Capital and Collaboration, and Identity Narratives and Place Attachment. Each category encapsulates several initial values and reveals how community-driven initiatives contribute to a sustainable, participatory city branding. The sub-sections discuss each category in depth, applying relevant theories (participatory governance, narrative branding, post-subcultural theory, place attachment), examining stakeholder roles (community, government, private sector, academia), and considering urban policy implications. The analysis highlights that Bandung's grassroots creative communities – through their spaces, networks, and stories – are co-creating an authentic and resilient city brand. Table 1 provides an overview of how the ten values have been grouped into the three categories, with examples of local initiatives illustrating each group.

Table 1. Grouping of Bandung's Grassroots Cultural Values into Broad Categories and Examples

Broad Category	Component Grassroots Values	Illustrative Community Initiatives in Bandung
Cultural Infrastructure	Creativity & innovation; Cultural heritage expression; Education & learning; Environmental stewardship (tied to space)	<i>Saung Angklung Udjo</i> community art center (traditional music learning); <i>Selasar Sunaryo Art Space</i> (multi-disciplinary art; Network of 8 <i>Creative Villages</i> (community-run art districts); <i>Bandung Creative Hub</i> (public creative facility, opened 2018)
Social Capital and Collaboration	Mutual aid (gotong royong); Inclusivity & social cohesion; Volunteerism; Cross-sector partnerships; Youth subculture networks	<i>Bandung Creative City Forum (BCCF)</i> – 50 creatives initiating 250+ collaborative urban projects; <i>Cikapundung River community</i> (student and resident volunteers for river clean-up and public art); <i>Helarfest</i> – city-wide creative festival uniting artists, communities, and local businesses; Car-Free Day volunteer networks promoting sustainable mobility
Identity Narratives and Place Attachment	Local identity pride; Historical awareness; Place attachment; Narrative branding; Cultural authenticity	<i>Komunitas Aleut</i> – heritage walking tours by youth to rediscover Bandung's history; Neighborhood storytelling through murals in <i>Dago Pojok Kreatif</i> (creative kampung) festival; Branding themes like “Bandung Creative City” replacing colonial-era image “Paris van Java”; Media features on community cultural stories (e.g., local newspapers covering Aleut's activities)

4.1.1. Cultural Infrastructure

Bandung's participatory city branding is underpinned by robust cultural infrastructure – the physical, organizational, and institutional platforms that enable creative expression. Grassroots

values related to creativity, learning, and heritage converge here, as communities establish spaces to practice and showcase culture. A prominent example is the proliferation of community-run art and learning centers: Saung Angklung Udjo, a village-based center for traditional music that engages over 1,000 people, and Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, a multidisciplinary cultural gallery open to the public. These spaces, founded by local artists and cultural entrepreneurs, function as living infrastructure for the city’s brand, embodying Bandung’s identity as a creative city. They preserve and update traditional arts while fostering innovation, thus linking cultural heritage with contemporary creativity in the city’s narrative. According to a local cultural scholar:

"Bandung loves innovation. Remember distro culture? It started here. So did the indie scene. It's part of the city's habit—to try out new things from the grassroots." (Informant A, Interview, 2025)

Participatory governance and multi-stakeholder collaboration have been crucial in expanding such infrastructure. Bandung’s municipal government actively supports community cultural centers and has energized local creative development through policy and funding. For instance, the city launched the Creative Villages program in 2015, designating eight urban kampung as thematic creative districts to nurture neighborhood art. As noted:

"In Bandung, we produce things ourselves—design our own T-shirts, organize our own gigs, make our own media. Not just because we're idealists, but because no one supported us in the beginning." (Informant A)

These Creative Villages were made possible by quadruple-helix partnerships – collaborations among local communities, government, academia, and businesses. In practice, this meant residents, artists, universities, and sponsors co-produced facilities (murals, studios, small museums) and programming in their neighborhoods, aligning grassroots energy with professional expertise.

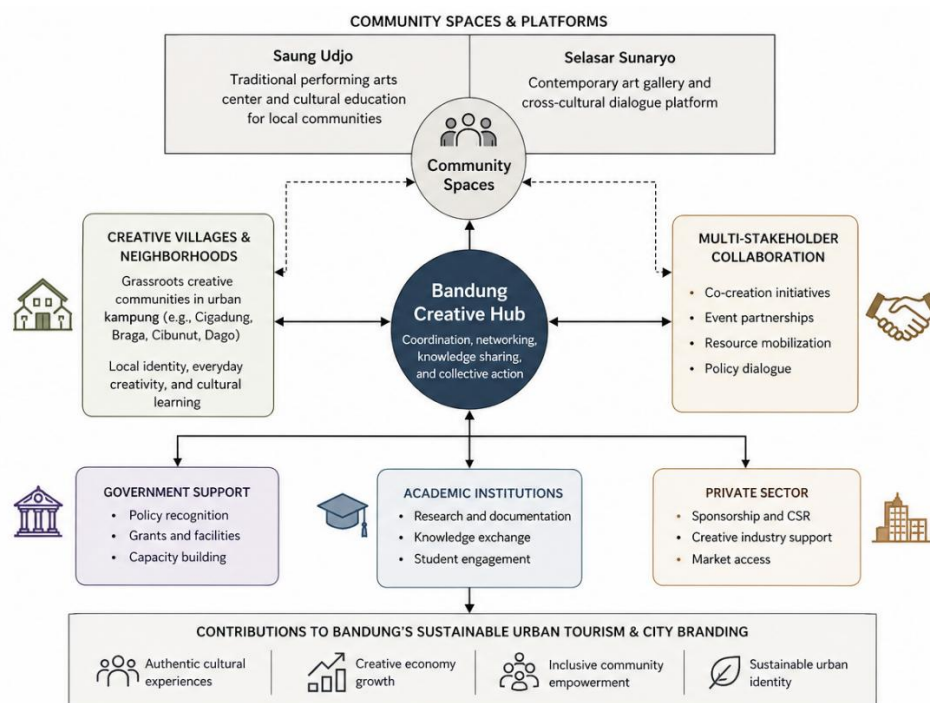


Figure 1. Community-driven Cultural Infrastructure in Bandung. Source: Authors’ analysis based on fieldwork data (2025).

Figure 1 illustrates this network of community-driven cultural infrastructure in Bandung, where informal creative spaces (e.g., street galleries, community libraries) intersect with formal initiatives (e.g., the Bandung Creative Hub) to form an integrated cultural ecosystem. Such infrastructure provides venues for artistic production and becomes a branding asset: creative neighborhoods and iconic art spaces differentiate Bandung's image in Indonesia and internationally. As UNESCO noted in recognizing Bandung as a Creative City of Design, the city's expertise in developing creative environments – from regular workshops and festivals to new design centers – demonstrates a model for sustainable urban cultural development.

The expansion of cultural infrastructure in Bandung exemplifies principles of participatory urban development and cultural planning theory. Rather than top-down branding through shiny megaprojects, Bandung's approach aligns with participatory placemaking, in which local space users actively shape the city's cultural landscape. This approach resonates with Landry's creative city concept, which stresses that nurturing places for art, design, and interaction is key to a city's innovative milieu. It also reflects a co-production governance model: communities identify needs (e.g., youth needing art studios, performers needing stages), and authorities respond by co-investing in facilities or enabling public spaces to be used creatively. The result is a form of collective cultural capital: an infrastructure owned in sentiment by citizens, leading to greater care and sustainability. Indeed, UNESCO observes that Bandung's public design workshops and creative hubs seek inclusive solutions to urban issues through civic engagement, improving public spaces while reinforcing the city's creative reputation. Every community-built amphitheater or art park becomes a civic asset and a storytelling device for the city's brand.

Key stakeholders in cultural infrastructure include local creative communities (artists, youth groups, cultural NGOs), the city government (e.g., the Culture and Tourism Office), educational institutions, and private partners. For example, the Bandung Creative City Forum (BCCF) was initially an independent community coalition. It played a catalytic role by creating *Simpul Spaces* – informal “node” galleries and workshop spaces for creatives and residents. When the BCCF's leader, Ridwan Kamil, became Mayor in 2013, such grassroots ideas were scaled up through city policy. The administration established a formal Creative Economy Committee (2014) and later a city-owned Bandung Creative Hub (2018) to institutionalize support for these spaces.

Urban policy in Bandung thus increasingly treats grassroots cultural infrastructure as part of the city's planning: e.g., adaptive reuse of underutilized government properties for creative co-working hubs, and financial programs such as the Melati credit scheme to fund innovative enterprises and venues. This suggests a governance shift toward embedding cultural participation in city development. Other cities can draw a lesson here: enabling community-led cultural infrastructure (through small grants, zoning allowances for arts, or public-private partnerships for creative space) can yield a dual benefit – it strengthens the social fabric and produces authentic brand landmarks. Ultimately, Bandung's experience shows that sustainable city branding thrives on a foundation of cultural infrastructure co-created with the people, ensuring that the city's identity is physically ingrained in places that citizens and visitors can experience firsthand.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Social Capital and Collaboration

Bandung's city branding success is not solely about places but also about people's networks. The collective energy of its communities – their ability to self-organize, share knowledge, and work together – has generated a vibrant creative atmosphere that defines the city's brand. Scholars argue that effective place branding activates all social forces in a town and reinforces community development. In Bandung, this activation is evident in myriad collaborative initiatives led by youth and citizens. As one creative organizer shared:

"Most communities in Bandung are built on helping each other. If someone wants to organize an event, others pitch in—someone takes care of food, another handles the stage. Not for profit, but because it feels like everyone owns it together." (Informant C, 2025)

One emblematic example is the Bandung Creative City Forum (BCCF), a grassroots coalition of artists, designers, musicians, academics, and entrepreneurs. Formed in 2008 by around 50 concerned creatives, BCCF arose from a shared desire to improve Bandung's urban environment and social climate. Operating initially independent of government, the forum implemented over 250 urban projects, inviting diverse residents to join creative interventions across the city. These projects ranged from small-scale urban acupuncture – such as community design of parks and a canopy walk to save a threatened forest – to city-wide festivals like Helarfest, which engaged dozens of arts and design communities (including traditional performers) in a month-long celebration. Through these activities, BCCF deliberately bridged sectors: it connected private businesses (sponsors and creative entrepreneurs), non-profits, government liaisons, and neighborhood groups into collaborative efforts. Solidarity also marks Bandung's fashion scene:

"Here, if I grow, you grow. That's our power. Fashion brands in Bandung know and support each other." (Informant B, Fashion community member, 2024)

The forum's success not only improved civic life but also altered governance; the election of Ridwan Kamil (BCCF's co-founder) as Mayor institutionalized this participatory ethos in City Hall. What had begun as an informal grassroots collaboration evolved into participatory governance, with the city administration and communities co-creating Bandung's creative programs. The BCCF case highlights how building social capital – trust, networks, and a culture of cooperation – was foundational to Bandung's creative city brand. The brand gained credibility and momentum because it was championed by its citizens, not just a marketing department.

Beyond formal organizations like BCCF, Bandung's social capital is also evident in numerous community initiatives addressing local challenges in creative ways. For instance, along the Cikapundung River, youth students, artists, and residents formed communities to revitalize public spaces and educate others. The Cikapundung Community conducts weekly river clean-ups and even introduced urban eco-tourism with rafting in the downtown river, turning an environmental effort into a city attraction. Another group, Sakola Cikapundung, exemplifies social entrepreneurship and inclusion: it teaches children and homemakers skills like English and handicrafts using recycled waste, thereby combining education, waste reduction, and income generation for locals. These initiatives thrive on the spirit of volunteerism and the values of gotong royong (mutual help), engaging stakeholders from students and academics to homemakers. Car Free Days, now a popular weekly event in Bandung, similarly grew from community advocacy for a healthier city; local forums coordinate street activities on these traffic-free days, blending environmental goals (reduced pollution) with creative street culture (performances, food stalls).

In each example, collaboration is key – residents partner with local NGOs, receive some support or permission from city officials, and sometimes involve local businesses (e.g., sponsoring events or providing materials). These micro-collaborations accumulate into a macro impact: they improve urban livability and reinforce a narrative of Bandung as an inclusive, community-powered city.

The thriving collaborations in Bandung's creative communities can be viewed through social capital and post-subcultural theories. As Putnam defines it, social capital is the networks, norms, and trust that enable collective action. Bandung's grassroots exemplify this: their dense interconnections (through forums, meet-ups, workshops) and shared norms of cooperation produce a high capacity for self-organized projects. This reservoir of social capital directly enhances participatory branding – citizens collectively take ownership of the city's image and improvement. From a branding perspective, Kavaratzis and colleagues have argued that participatory place branding leads to a more

legitimate and sustainable brand, as it incorporates resident input and fosters community buy-in. Bandung's case affirms this: the brand message ("creative city") emerged organically from what communities were already doing, making it credible and deeply rooted.

Post-subcultural theory offers additional insight, particularly regarding Bandung's youth-driven creative scenes. Unlike the rigid subcultures of the past, post-subcultures are fluid, overlapping networks of young people who share creative practices rather than a single identity. Bandung's indie music bands, street artists, skateboarders, tech start-up geeks, and traditional art enthusiasts do not operate in isolation – many individuals straddle multiple communities or shift between them, creating a dynamic web of collaboration. This fluidity has been advantageous: it has prevented fragmentation and encouraged a city-wide creative alliance. For example, BCCF's founding members came from diverse "scenes" (architecture, music, graphic design, etc.) yet united under a common goal for the city. The post-subcultural lens helps explain why Bandung's creative youth readily engaged in civic projects – their identity was not limited to subcultural rebellion, but open to cooperation and civic innovation. This aligns with theories that contemporary youth cultures can be agents of urban change when provided an inclusive platform. The Bandung government's openness to youthful ideas (Ridwan Kamil's mayoral tenure often invited youth proposals and incorporated them) demonstrates a practical implementation of participatory governance in branding: rather than branding being a top-down communication, it became a co-created process in which authorities and citizens continuously interact to shape the narrative.

Building and leveraging social capital for city branding requires deliberate roles. Communities and creative collectives are the drivers – they contribute time, skills, and local knowledge. In Bandung, informal leaders (activists, artists, community organizers) often emerge as champions who rally others. The private sector can provide resources and expertise; for instance, local tech companies or fashion businesses in Bandung have sponsored hackathons or design competitions that double as brand events. As seen with the Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB) design faculty engaging in city projects, Academia contributes through design labs and student community service programs. Notably, the local government's role is to enable and connect these stakeholders. Bandung's government facilitated the BCCF-led projects by reducing bureaucratic hurdles and later integrating BCCF into the city's decision-making (e.g., appointing community figures to advisory roles).

Additionally, policies like the Regional Development Acceleration Innovation Program (PIPPK) provided small grants at the neighborhood level to fund citizen proposals, thereby seeding countless micro-initiatives and strengthening grassroots collaboration. Such policies are participatory budgeting and planning tools that institutionalize collaboration. The implication for urban policy is clear: to achieve a sustainable, participatory brand, cities should invest in social infrastructure – not just physical assets but also programs that bring people together (festivals, forums, volunteer days) and platforms that encourage co-creation (crowdsourced ideas, community grant competitions). By doing so, the city brand becomes a living process. In Bandung's case, the continuity of collaborative spirit (as older creative leaders mentor new youth organizers) ensures that the city's brand identity can evolve and endure despite political or economic changes. The resilience of Bandung's brand – its ability to remain authentic and energetic over time – stems from this deep well of social capital among its citizens.

4.2.2. Identity Narratives and Place Attachment

While the previous categories focused on tangible outputs (spaces and projects), this category delves into the meaning behind those outputs – the narratives Bandung's people create about their city and the sense of belonging that motivates them. Sustainable city branding in Bandung has been dramatically reinforced by community-crafted narratives and a strong sense of attachment among citizens to their locale. Theoretically, this aligns with narrative branding, which posits that a city's

brand is essentially the sum of stories people tell about it, and with place attachment theory, which holds that people protect and promote places they deeply care about.

Bandung's grassroots communities have actively narrated the city's identity from the bottom up. One vivid example is Komunitas Aleut, a heritage community that organizes weekly walking tours to historical sites around the city. Comprising mostly young residents, Komunitas Aleut uses the concept of "Aleut" (walking hand-in-hand) to make heritage exploration fun and social. Since 2006, they have introduced countless Bandung citizens to the "unpublicized heritage treasures" of their city, from colonial-era buildings to old neighborhoods, effectively turning history into a shared narrative for the younger generation.

The impact on city branding is significant: by uncovering and celebrating Bandung's authentic history, Aleut has enriched the city's image with depth and authenticity. A study on their contribution concluded that Komunitas Aleut has helped build a more genuine and distinguishable image of Bandung than other cities. In other words, these heritage narratives differentiate Bandung from generic "modern metropolis" brands – they emphasize unique local character, which is a key to competitive identity. Moreover, because these stories are told by locals with passion, they foster pride and identification of citizens with their city. Residents who join Aleut walks often report a stronger emotional connection to Bandung's places and a desire to preserve them, demonstrating how grassroots narrative-making feeds directly into place attachment.

Contemporary creative narratives are also emerging from grassroots initiatives. Bandung's creative communities do not reject the modern city branding of Bandung as a "Creative City" – instead, they populate it with content. They continually shape what "creative city" means in context through festivals, social media, and everyday cultural practices. For instance, during Helarfest (the annual creative festival initiated by BCCF), participants weave traditional arts and modern design into public performances. This blends old and new narratives: Bandung is portrayed as a city where heritage and innovation coexist harmoniously.

In Dago Pojok's Creative Kampung Festival, residents turned their walls into mural canvases and held art workshops in the narrow lanes. The narrative from this kampung is powerful: it tells of a community transforming its environment through art, symbolizing Bandung's broader narrative of creativity blossoming in unexpected corners. Such stories often catch media attention and circulate widely. Local and national media have highlighted Bandung's kampung arts and heritage walks, amplifying the grassroots narratives to a broader audience. The bandwidth of storytelling extends to digital realms as well – Instagram, blogs, and YouTube are filled with content from community events, further projecting Bandung's identity as a creative, community-centric city.

These observations underscore the importance of narrative and attachment in participatory city branding. Narrative city branding theory (e.g., Kavaratzis & Hatch's models) suggests that the most compelling city brands emerge when internal narratives (stories residents tell one another) intersect with external narratives (stories told to outsiders) in a coherent way. Bandung's internal narratives – be it the pride of "Bandung Lautan Api" (a historic patriotic tale), the moniker "Paris van Java" (a legacy of fashion capital), or the newer creative ethos – all feed into what is communicated externally. In recent years, the city government's branding strategy has wisely shifted to capitalize on these organic stories. For example, Bandung's tagline under Mayor Ridwan Kamil became "Bandung Juara" ("Championship Bandung"), implying excellence, but real community achievements in creativity and innovation substantiated it.

Additionally, place attachment theory helps explain why these narratives have such an impact. People who develop attachment to place (through personal or collective experiences) are more likely to engage in pro-place behavior – preserving a heritage building, volunteering in a community art project, or promoting the city to visitors. Bandung's grassroots initiatives strengthened place

attachment by creating experiential opportunities, such as heritage tours, interactive art installations, and community gardens, where citizens actively connect with their city's places. Environmental psychology studies (e.g., Scannell & Gifford) note that such direct participation can deepen emotional bonds to place. We see this in how Bandung's citizens rallied to save the Babakan Siliwangi urban forest through creative advocacy – a love for the city's natural and cultural landscape fueled collective action to preserve it. This becomes part of the city's brand narrative: Bandung is known as a city that cares for its heritage and environment, not because of a slogan, but because its people demonstrate that care.

In crafting identity narratives, the primary storytellers are the citizens and communities. However, other stakeholders have roles in nurturing or disseminating these stories. Local government can act as a facilitator and platform provider. For instance, the City of Bandung's tourism office collaborates with communities such as the Aleut and the Bandung Heritage Society to host events (e.g., "Bandung Heritage Walks," in partnership with hotels and heritage experts). The government effectively endorses grassroots narratives as part of the official brand by supporting such events. This is a form of co-branding between the city and its citizens. The media and creative industry stakeholders (writers, photographers, influencers) are also crucial: they document and broadcast the grassroots narratives. In Bandung, local newspapers, bloggers, and even international outlets (such as British Council reports and UNESCO profiles) have highlighted community innovation and cultural stories, lending credibility and broader reach to the city's narrative. From a policy standpoint, one implication is the importance of heritage and cultural policies that recognize community contributions. Protecting historic sites (with community input on what to preserve), funding community arts programs, and including local narratives in city museums or official publications can institutionalize the grassroots stories.

Bandung's grassroots creative communities – building cultural infrastructure, fostering social collaboration, and propagating authentic narratives – have become the heart of its sustainable, participatory city branding. They exemplify how a city's cultural DNA can be leveraged for development: community participation has given Bandung a distinctive competitive edge as a creative city. Today, the Bandung brand is inseparable from its citizens' collective creativity and pride. This participatory branding model yields not only a compelling image for tourism and investment, but also tangible improvements in urban sustainability – socially (through inclusiveness and capacity building), culturally (through heritage preservation and innovation), and even environmentally (through community-led greening and transit initiatives).

Bandung provides a case for international urban policy and planning that branding and sustainability can mutually reinforce when people are put at the center. The city's experience suggests that when residents co-create the city's image and reality, the outcome is a brand rooted in genuine local values and a city more resilient in the face of change. The ongoing challenge will be to maintain this collaborative momentum and ensure that as Bandung grows, its grassroots remain integral to shaping its future narrative – a challenge that Bandung appears well-equipped to meet, given the firm foundation of cultural values and community engagement already in place.

5. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that grassroots urban subcultures are not merely cultural byproducts of urban life but are vital components of participatory city branding and sustainable urban identity, particularly in the Global South context. By examining Bandung's creative communities—from heritage walk activists and muralists to independent musicians and fashion entrepreneurs—we found that subcultural actors co-produce the city's brand through everyday practices, spatial interventions, and narrative expressions. These grassroots contributions form a living infrastructure of meaning, legitimacy, and identity that top-down branding strategies alone cannot achieve.

Through a synthesis of qualitative data and theoretical frameworks—including participatory governance, narrative branding, and post-subcultural theory—we identified three critical domains where grassroots values shape Bandung's brand: (1) Cultural Infrastructure, where citizen-led creative spaces are both functional and symbolic assets; (2) Social Capital and Collaboration, where strong networks and mutual aid practices drive participatory engagement; and (3) Identity Narratives and Place Attachment, where collective storytelling and emotional bonds foster authenticity in the city's image. These elements contribute to branding and sustainable development through inclusive governance, cultural preservation, and socio-spatial equity.

Bandung's case illustrates that when local communities are empowered as co-authors of urban identity, the result is a brand that resonates deeply with residents and appeals credibly to external audiences. The city's recognition by UNESCO as a Creative City of Design reflects this synergy between community-led innovation and institutional support. Future research could extend this work by exploring longitudinal impacts of participatory branding on governance outcomes or by comparing cases across different socio-political contexts.

6. Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen the role of grassroots creative communities in Bandung's participatory city branding and sustainable urban development. First, local government agencies—particularly the Culture and Tourism Office—should provide consistent institutional support for community-led cultural initiatives by facilitating access to public spaces, micro-grants, and collaborative platforms. Second, structured capacity-building programs should be offered regularly to creative community leaders, including training in project management, digital storytelling, and participatory governance, to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of their initiatives. Third, developing integrated narrative branding tools that incorporate grassroots cultural values—such as heritage storytelling, subcultural creativity, and community-based environment practices—would significantly strengthen the authenticity and coherence of Bandung's city brand. Finally, future research should expand to comparative studies across several Indonesian or Global South cities and explore multi-stakeholder dynamics using mixed-method approaches to deepen understanding of how grassroots cultural ecosystems contribute to long-term urban branding and governance outcomes.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Wa Ode Seprina conceived the study, conducted the fieldwork, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Asep Suryana, Dadang Sugiana, and Centurion Chandratama Priyatna contributed to the conceptual development of the study, supervised the research process, critically reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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Ethical Approval. This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection and interview activities.

Data Availability Statement. The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the qualitative nature of the research and confidentiality considerations, the data are not publicly available.

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