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Research Paper

Festival as Cultural Branding and Regional Identity: Study of Sagarurung festival at Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy for strengthening regional identity and cultural promotion in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI) Regency, Indonesia. A mixed methods approach with qualitative dominance was employed by integrating qualitative data from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis with quantitative assessment through SWOT analysis using IFAS and EFAS frameworks. Data were collected from government representatives, festival organizers, cultural practitioners, MSME actors, and local communities, then analyzed through thematic analysis and strategic evaluation. The findings reveal that the Sagarurung Festival functions as a platform for transforming local cultural resources into symbolic representations of PALI Regency through cultural performances, smoked Sagarurung fish as culinary heritage, and community participation. The IFAS and EFAS results position the festival in quadrant I (Aggressive Strategy), indicating strong cultural assets and favorable external opportunities. However, challenges remain in cultural curation, digital promotion, documentation, and structured storytelling. This study contributes to cultural branding and festival studies by demonstrating how sub-national festivals can support regional identity construction and sustainable cultural promotion through the integration of cultural resources and strategic development.

Keywords: *Cultural Branding, Sagarurung Festival, Regional Identity, Qualitative Research.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing competition among regions to attract visitors, investment, and public recognition has intensified alongside the growth of the global tourism industry. In an increasingly competitive tourism environment, destination success is no longer determined solely by the availability of tourism attractions but also by the ability to establish a distinctive destination identity that differentiates one place from its competitors. The shift in tourist preferences from mass tourism toward authentic, culture-based experiences has encouraged destinations worldwide to position local culture as a strategic source of competitiveness (Getz & Page, 2024; Richards, 2021). Consequently, tourism development has evolved beyond increasing visitor numbers toward creating cultural narratives that strengthen destination identity, destination image, and long-term competitiveness. This transformation is also evident in Indonesia, where domestic tourism has become a major driver of post-pandemic tourism recovery.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, domestic tourist trips exceeded one billion in 2024, while South Sumatra Province recorded 26.07 million domestic tourist trips during January to December 2025, representing a 43.67% increase compared with the previous year. Despite this positive trend, tourism demand remains concentrated in a limited number of established destinations, leaving many emerging regencies facing challenges in attracting visitors and strengthening their competitive position. These conditions suggest that increasing visitor numbers alone is insufficient; destinations must also develop distinctive identities capable of differentiating themselves within an increasingly competitive tourism market. Within this context, cultural branding has become an important destination development strategy. Rather than relying solely on promotional campaigns, cultural branding emphasizes the creation of destination identity through local culture, collective memory, and community participation.

As cultural tourism increasingly focuses on authentic experiences rooted in everyday life, traditions, and local communities festivals have become one of the most effective instruments for translating cultural resources into destination identities (Richards, 2021). Cultural festivals provide opportunities for destinations to communicate local narratives through performances, gastronomy, traditional arts, and community participation, thereby creating symbolic meanings that enhance destination image and competitiveness (Getz & Page, 2024; Jepson & Clarke, 2015).

This issue is particularly relevant for Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI) Regency, one of the emerging tourism destinations in South Sumatra Province. Although domestic tourist trips to PALI increased from approximately 513,089 in 2024 to 593,804 in 2025, its contribution to provincial tourism remains relatively small, and its tourism growth is still lower than several neighboring regencies. These conditions indicate that PALI requires not only tourism development but also a stronger destination identity capable of positioning the regency within the increasingly competitive tourism landscape of South Sumatra. To address this challenge, the Government of PALI Regency introduced the Sagarurung Festival in 2022 as its flagship cultural festival. Rather than functioning solely as an annual event, the festival was designed as a cultural branding initiative that integrates traditional performances, local gastronomy, creative industries, MSME exhibitions, and community participation into a unified representation of PALI's cultural identity. At the center of this cultural narrative is smoked Sagarurung fish, a traditional culinary heritage that symbolizes local history, indigenous knowledge, and the relationship between local communities and their riverine environment (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Within the festival, this culinary heritage functions not merely as a local product but as a cultural symbol supporting the construction of PALI's destination identity.

Previous studies have widely examined cultural festivals in terms of tourism impacts, visitor satisfaction, destination image, and event management (Getz & Page, 2024; Richards, 2021). Research

has also demonstrated that festivals contribute to place branding by enhancing destination visibility and creating memorable visitor experiences (Lopes & Hiray, 2024). Similarly, studies on gastronomic heritage have highlighted the role of traditional food in expressing authenticity, cultural memory, and local identity (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). However, these streams of research have largely evolved independently. Existing studies predominantly investigate festivals as tourism attractions or events, while research on gastronomic heritage mainly emphasizes food experiences and destination attractiveness rather than its strategic role in destination branding.

Furthermore, cultural branding has primarily focused on metropolitan cities, heritage cities, and internationally established destinations where branding strategies are supported by mature tourism systems (Eshuis & Ripoll González, 2025; Richards, 2021). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to district-level cultural festivals in emerging destinations, particularly those that utilize local culinary heritage as the central branding element. More specifically, there remains limited empirical evidence explaining how a cultural festival transforms gastronomic heritage into a destination identity through community participation and strategic destination branding, and how this process contributes to destination competitiveness in developing regions.

Therefore, this study examines the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency, where smoked Sagarurung fish functions not merely as a culinary product but as the core cultural symbol around which the festival constructs and communicates regional identity. By integrating gastronomic heritage, cultural festivals, destination identity, and SWOT analysis, this study provides an incremental contribution to the cultural branding and cultural tourism literature. Although it does not propose a new theoretical framework, it extends existing knowledge by offering empirical evidence on how a district-level cultural festival can function as a strategic branding mechanism for an emerging tourism destination seeking to strengthen its identity and competitiveness.

This study examines the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency using SWOT analysis to evaluate its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in supporting destination identity and tourism competitiveness. Unlike previous studies that primarily assessed festival performance or visitor behavior, this research focuses on how the festival strategically transforms local cultural resources particularly smoked Sagarurung fish and community cultural expressions into a coherent regional identity. The study therefore makes an incremental contribution to the cultural branding and cultural tourism literature by providing empirical evidence on how a district-level cultural festival can function as a strategic branding mechanism for an emerging destination. Although it does not propose a new theoretical model, the findings enrich the understanding of festival-based cultural branding and offer practical insights for destinations seeking to strengthen their identity and competitiveness through local cultural heritage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cultural Branding

Cultural branding provides the primary theoretical lens for this study because it explains how cultural resources are strategically transformed into a distinctive destination identity rather than merely functioning as tourism attractions. Unlike conventional destination branding, which often emphasizes logos, slogans, or promotional campaigns, cultural branding focuses on the symbolic meanings embedded in local traditions, heritage, and community practices that differentiate one destination from another (Richards, 2021). In this perspective, culture is understood as a strategic resource capable of creating place identity, strengthening destination image, and enhancing long-term competitiveness. This perspective is particularly relevant to emerging destinations, where limited

financial and promotional resources require destinations to capitalize on unique cultural assets as sources of competitive advantage. Therefore, cultural branding is considered the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study because the Sagarurung Festival was established not only to attract visitors but also to communicate and reinforce the cultural identity of PALI Regency through its local heritage.

However, cultural branding cannot be understood independently from the processes through which cultural meanings are created and communicated. Therefore, this study integrates several complementary theoretical perspectives. Event Tourism emphasizes that festivals are planned events capable of generating symbolic value, attracting visitors, and enhancing destination competitiveness (Getz & Page, 2016). Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, festivals serve as communication platforms through which destinations translate cultural resources into memorable visitor experiences. Similarly, Destination image suggests that visitors' perceptions are formed through symbolic meanings and experiential encounters created during tourism experiences (Quinn, 2005). Consequently, cultural festivals contribute not only to attracting tourists but also to shaping how destinations are perceived by internal and external audiences. The symbolic dimension of cultural branding is further explained through the concept of cultural heritage and food symbolism.

Traditional food represents more than a tourism product; it embodies collective memory, authenticity, and cultural identity (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Gastronomic heritage therefore becomes an important medium through which destinations communicate their uniqueness. In the context of this study, smoked Sagarurung fish functions as the central cultural symbol that connects local history, indigenous knowledge, and regional identity, enabling the festival to communicate a distinctive narrative of PALI Regency. Finally, the effectiveness of cultural branding depends on the active involvement of local communities. Community participation is widely recognized as a critical factor in sustaining cultural tourism because local communities are not merely beneficiaries of tourism development but also producers and custodians of cultural meanings (Satrya et al., 2023). Their participation in planning, organizing, and performing cultural activities ensures that destination branding reflects authentic cultural values rather than externally constructed promotional messages. Community participation therefore reinforces both the credibility and sustainability of cultural branding initiatives.

2.2. Cultural festival

Previous studies have demonstrated that cultural festivals contribute significantly to tourism development, destination attractiveness, visitor satisfaction, and regional economic growth. Research on cultural events has highlighted the importance of festival quality, innovation, cultural attractions, and community involvement in enhancing visitor experiences and supporting destination competitiveness. In the context of the Sagarurung Festival, previous studies have confirmed that festival atmosphere, cultural elements, and innovative event design positively influence tourists' visitation decisions and overall festival performance (Pratama et al., 2025; Anggraini et al., 2026).

However, several limitations remain in the existing literature. First, prior studies have primarily focused on festival attractiveness, visitor behavior, and operational performance, with limited attention given to how cultural festivals function as cultural branding mechanisms that construct and communicate regional identity. Second, although culinary heritage has been recognized as an important component of cultural tourism, limited research has examined how traditional foods such as smoked sagarurung fish are transformed into symbolic branding assets that represent local identity and cultural memory. Third, studies on festival innovation and management have mainly emphasized event quality and success indicators, while the long-term contribution of innovation to cultural branding sustainability and destination identity formation remains underexplored. Finally, despite the

acknowledged importance of community participation in sustainable tourism development, limited research investigates how local community involvement contributes to cultural ownership, authenticity, and identity reinforcement within district-level cultural festivals (See table 1).

Table 1. Previous Empirical Research on Cultural Festival

Gap Area	Description	Future Research Directions	Justification (Previous Research Findings)
Cultural branding effectiveness and regional identity construction	Previous studies emphasize festival attractiveness, destination appeal, and tourism decision-making outcomes. However, limited research examines how cultural festivals function as structured cultural branding mechanisms that construct and communicate regional identity, particularly at the regency level such as PALI. Most studies still position festivals as tourism drivers rather than identity-building instruments.	Future research should explore how festivals operate as cultural branding platforms that transform local cultural resources into symbolic identity representations through narratives, performances, and community engagement. A qualitative or mixed-method approach is needed to examine identity construction mechanisms in depth.	(Anggraini et al., 2026) found that festival attractiveness at the Sagarurung Festival significantly influences tourists' visiting decisions, confirming festivals as drivers of tourism demand. However, the study focuses on behavioral outcomes rather than identity construction or branding processes.
Festival quality, innovation, and branding sustainability	Recent studies highlight the importance of festival quality and innovation in improving event success and sustainability. However, research still focuses on operational performance and visitor satisfaction rather than long-term cultural branding impact and identity continuity.	Future research should investigate how innovation in festival design contributes not only to event success but also to sustainable cultural branding and long-term destination identity formation.	(Pratama et al., 2025) demonstrate that trend-driven innovation enhances regional festival quality and improves event performance.
Culinary heritage and symbolic branding transformation	Existing research on culinary-based festivals primarily focuses on tourist experience and attraction. Limited studies investigate how culinary heritage is transformed into symbolic branding assets that represent regional identity and cultural memory.	Future studies should analyze how culinary traditions (e.g., smoked sagarurung fish) are constructed as cultural symbols and integrated into festival narratives as part of place branding strategies.	(Richards, 2021) highlights the increasing importance of authenticity in cultural tourism, while emphasize food heritage as a carrier of identity and memory. However, (Anggraini et al., 2026) and (Pratama et al., 2025) focus more on attractiveness and innovation rather than symbolic transformation of culinary heritage into branding meaning, indicating a clear conceptual gap.

Gap Area	Description	Future Research Directions	Justification (Previous Research Findings)
Community participation and cultural identity sustainability	Community participation is widely acknowledged in festival studies, but limited research explores how participation contributes to cultural ownership, identity formation, and sustainability of cultural practices.	Future research should examine how community engagement shapes cultural transmission, authenticity, and long-term identity reinforcement in festival contexts.	(Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of community involvement in sustainable tourism and identity formation. However, none of the recent studies on PALI festivals (Anggraini et al., 2026) and (Pratama et al., 2025) deeply analyze community participation as a mechanism of cultural identity construction, indicating a clear empirical gap.

Source: Research Result, 2026

Although previous studies have extensively examined cultural festivals, destination branding, gastronomic heritage, and community participation, these concepts have generally been investigated separately. Existing research rarely explains how a district-level cultural festival integrates these elements into a coherent cultural branding strategy capable of strengthening destination identity and competitiveness in an emerging destination. This fragmentation in the literature provides the theoretical basis for the present study.

Accordingly, this research synthesizes these complementary perspectives by positioning cultural branding as the overarching theoretical framework, while Event Tourism, Destination Image, Cultural Heritage and Food Symbolism, and Community Participation explain the mechanisms through which the Sagarurung Festival constructs and communicates the identity of PALI Regency. This integrated framework contributes to the cultural tourism literature by demonstrating how a district-level cultural festival can strategically transform gastronomic heritage into a destination branding mechanism, thereby extending existing discussions on cultural branding beyond well-established tourism destinations.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. Specifically, it explores how cultural identity representation, culinary heritage, and community participation are integrated through cultural narratives to construct and strengthen the regional identity of PALI Regency. By doing so, the study contributes to the theoretical development of cultural branding and cultural tourism literature while providing practical insights for local governments and tourism stakeholders in developing sustainable and culturally grounded destination branding strategies.

2.3. Conceptual Frame Work

The conceptual framework is grounded in Cultural Branding Theory, which positions cultural festivals as strategic platforms through which destinations transform local cultural resources into distinctive destination identities (Richards, 2021). In this study, the Sagarurung Festival serves as the central mechanism that mobilizes three interrelated dimensions which are cultural identity representation, culinary heritage, and community participation (See Figure 1). These dimensions are

not treated as independent components but as complementary cultural resources that collectively shape the branding process.

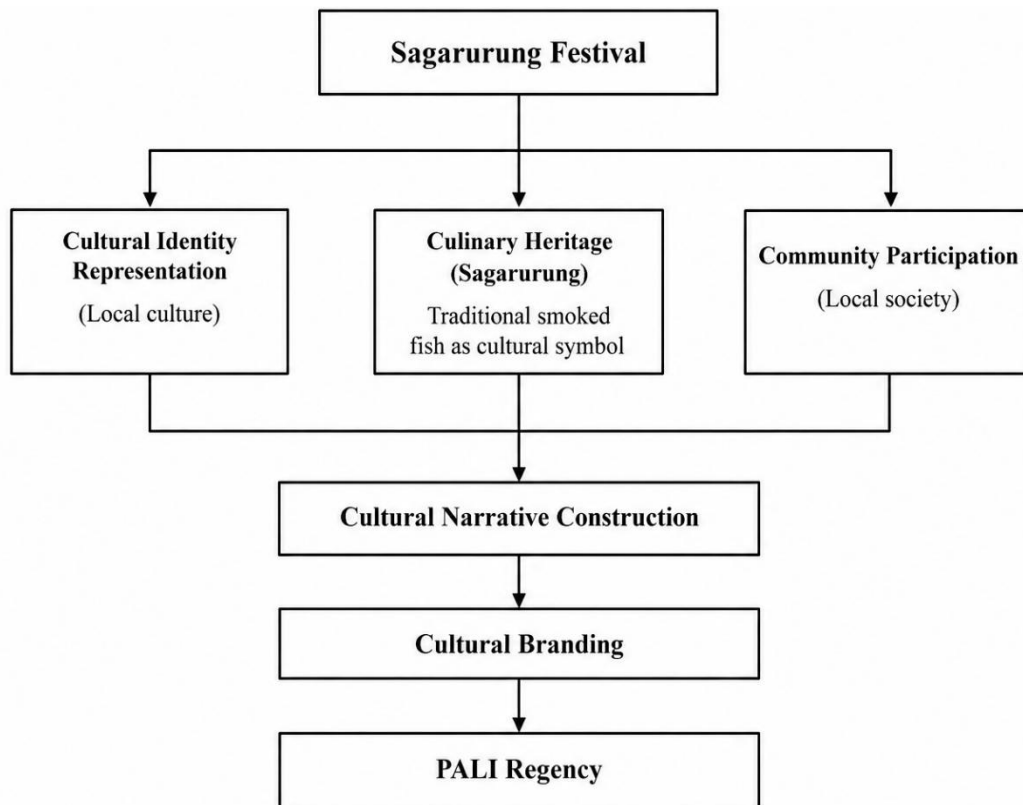


Figure1. Conceptual Frame Work
Source: Authors own elaboration, 2026

The representation of local traditions, performances, and cultural values provides symbolic expressions of PALI Regency's identity, while smoked Sagarurung fish functions as a tangible representation of gastronomic heritage that conveys authenticity and cultural memory (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). At the same time, community participation ensures that these cultural expressions remain authentic, locally embedded, and socially legitimate. Rather than directly creating destination branding, these three dimensions interact to produce a shared cultural narrative that communicates the uniqueness and meaning of the destination.

The framework therefore proposes that cultural narrative construction acts as the mediating mechanism through which local cultural resources are translated into a coherent cultural branding process. This process subsequently strengthens destination identity and tourism competitiveness by differentiating PALI Regency from competing destinations through authentic cultural experiences and symbolic representations. Furthermore, the framework recognizes a feedback mechanism. As cultural branding enhances destination recognition, visitor engagement, and community pride, these outcomes reinforce local participation and encourage the continued preservation of cultural heritage. Consequently, the Sagarurung Festival evolves from a recurring cultural event into a sustainable branding mechanism that continuously reproduces and strengthens the cultural identity of PALI Regency.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how the Sagarurung Festival functions as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the objective of this study is to understand the meanings, processes, and interpretations underlying the construction of regional identity through cultural festivals rather than to measure causal relationships or test hypotheses. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore complex social phenomena by examining participants' experiences, perspectives, and interactions within their natural settings (Creswell, 2013). This approach is particularly relevant for investigating cultural branding, as destination identity is socially constructed through cultural narratives, community participation, and stakeholder interactions.

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, collecting and interpreting data through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. These methods enabled an in-depth understanding of how stakeholders including government officials, community members, MSME actors, and festival organizers perceive and utilize the Sagarurung Festival as a medium for representing and communicating the cultural identity of PALI Regency. Conducting the study in the natural setting of the festival also allowed the researcher to observe cultural performances, community participation, and symbolic representations embedded within the event. To ensure a systematic interpretation of the qualitative data, this study employed thematic analysis following the coding procedures (Saldaña, 2009). Interview transcripts, field observations, and documentary evidence were coded to identify recurring themes related to cultural branding, destination identity, gastronomic heritage, community participation, and tourism development. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to synthesize stakeholders' perspectives and reveal the processes through which the Sagarurung Festival constructs and communicates the cultural identity of PALI Regency.

To formulate strategic recommendations, the findings from the thematic analysis were subsequently interpreted using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) framework. In this study, SWOT was not employed as a quantitative analytical technique, but as a qualitative strategic analysis tool (Gürel & Tat, 2017). The internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and threats, were identified and interpreted from the qualitative evidence obtained through interviews, observations, and document analysis. This approach enabled the researcher to translate qualitative findings into strategic implications for strengthening the role of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding initiative.

The Sagarurung Festival was selected as a single case study because it represents the flagship cultural festival initiated by the Government of PALI Regency to promote local identity through smoked Sagarurung fish, cultural performances, creative industries, and community participation. As an emerging destination, PALI Regency provides an appropriate context for examining how cultural festivals can function as branding mechanisms that communicate regional identity and enhance destination competitiveness. This case therefore offers valuable empirical insights into the role of district-level cultural festivals in supporting cultural branding and sustainable tourism development.

3.2. Population and sample

The target population of this study was stakeholders involved in the Sagarurung Festival in Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI) Regency, particularly those engaged in festival planning, implementation, and cultural representation. These stakeholders were selected because they play a central role in the cultural branding process, especially in transforming local culinary heritage into regional identity symbols. This study used purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant

information. Purposive sampling is a common technique in qualitative research that involves selecting information rich cases based on their knowledge and relevance to the research focus (Patton, 2015; Campbell et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria were: (1) directly involved in the Sagarurung Festival as government officials, organizers, MSME actors, cultural practitioners, community members, or visitors; (2) having experience in festival planning, implementation, or evaluation; (3) aged 17–50 years; (4) willing to participate in 60–90-minute interviews; and (5) having sufficient knowledge of festival-related cultural and tourism activities.

Based on these criteria, 12 participants were selected from the Department of Tourism, MSME Office, festival organizers, local business actors, community representatives, and visitors (see Table 2). Although the number of participants was limited, it was appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study focused on in-depth understanding rather than generalization. Data saturation was used to determine sample adequacy, where data collection was stopped when no new themes emerged. Saturation refers to the point at which additional data no longer provides new insights or information (Saunders et al., 2018; Guest et al., 2020). In this study, saturation was reached when interview responses became repetitive and consistent across participants.

Table 2: Informants Characteristics

Stakeholder	Role	Number of informants
Department of Tourism PALI Regency	Tourism policy and festival development	2
MSME Office PALI Regency	MSME development and culinary promotion	2
Festival Organizer	Festival planning and implementation	1
Local Business Actors	Culinary exhibitors and local business owners	2
Community	Cultural preservation and traditional performances	2
Visitors	Visitor perceptions and festival experience	3

Source: Research Result, 2026

3.3. Data collection procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the role of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method because they enabled the researcher to explore participants' perspectives and experiences in depth while maintaining consistency across the main themes of the study, namely cultural identity representation, culinary heritage, community participation, and the process of cultural branding through the Sagarurung Festival (Creswell, 2017).

Data collection was conducted both offline and online between October 2024 and June 2025. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct knowledge, experience, and involvement in the planning and implementation of the Sagarurung Festival. A total of 12 key informants participated in the study, including representatives from the Tourism Office, festival organizers, MSME actors, cultural practitioners, local community members, and festival visitors. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants permission, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy and analytical rigor (Miles et al., 2014). In addition to interviews, participant observation was conducted during the festival to examine stakeholder interactions, cultural performances, community engagement, and the implementation of cultural branding practices. Documentary analysis was also undertaken using festival proposals,

government reports, promotional materials, media publications, and relevant policy documents to triangulate the findings and strengthen the credibility of the research.

This study adhered to established research ethics principles throughout the data collection process. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the purpose of audio recording, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized through coding during transcription, analysis, and reporting. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014).

The analysis began with open coding of the interview transcripts, followed by the grouping of similar codes into broader themes representing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy. These themes were subsequently interpreted through the lenses of Cultural Branding Theory, Event Tourism Theory, Destination Image Theory, Cultural Heritage and Food Symbolism Theory, and Community Participation Theory to explain how the festival contributes to destination identity construction and tourism competitiveness.

The results of the thematic analysis subsequently informed the development of the Internal Factor Analysis Summary (IFAS) and External Factor Analysis Summary (EFAS) matrices. Rather than being derived from statistical survey data, the weights and ratings assigned to each SWOT factor were established through a systematic qualitative assessment based on three criteria: (1) the frequency with which themes emerged across interviews, (2) the perceived importance of each issue as expressed by different stakeholder groups, and (3) triangulation with observational findings and documentary evidence.

To enhance methodological transparency and reduce subjectivity, the identified internal and external factors were subsequently reviewed through expert judgment involving three specialists: a tourism academic, a festival management practitioner, and a representative of the PALI Regency Tourism Office. Through this process, consensus was reached regarding the relative importance (weights) and influence (ratings) of each SWOT factor (David & David, 2016). This procedure strengthened the objectivity, transparency, and reliability of the SWOT analysis by ensuring that the strategic evaluation reflected not only the researcher's interpretation but also the perspectives of experienced stakeholders. By integrating in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, thematic analysis, and expert validation, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how the Sagarurung Festival functions as a cultural branding mechanism that constructs and communicates the identity of PALI Regency while informing strategic recommendations for sustainable destination development based on local cultural heritage.

The operationalization of variables in this study is grounded in Cultural Branding Theory (Richards, 2021), which explains that cultural elements can be transformed into symbolic representations that construct and communicate destination identity. This is supported by Event Tourism Theory (Getz & Page, 2016), which emphasizes that festivals function as strategic tools for destination attraction and experience creation. Furthermore, Destination Image Theory (Quinn, 2005) highlights that visitor perception is shaped by symbolic and experiential elements embedded in events. In addition, Cultural Heritage and Food Symbolism Theory (Everett & Aitchison, 2008) explains that culinary practices such as smoked Sagarurung fish represent cultural memory and authenticity. Finally, Community Participation Theory (Satrya et al., 2023) emphasizes the role of local stakeholders in maintaining authenticity and co-constructing cultural meaning (See Table 3).

Table 3. Operational Variables

Variable	Indicators	Sources
Cultural Identity Representation	Representation of local culture	(Quinn, 2005; Richards, 2021)
	Cultural symbols	
	Cultural values	
Culinary Heritage	Meaning of local food	(Everett & Aitchison, 2008)
	Culinary identity	
	Food as cultural symbol	
Cultural Branding Strategy	Purpose of the festival	(Getz & Page, 2016; Richards, 2021)
	Destination promotion	
	Destination positioning	
Community Participation	Community involvement	(Satrya et al., 2023)
	Participation in planning	
	Sense of ownership	
Cultural Narrative Construction	Cultural storytelling	(Quinn, 2005; Richards, 2021)
	Identity communication	
	Visitor perception	

Source: Research Result, 2026

3.4. Data analysis techniques

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of (Miles et al., 2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis process involved systematic coding, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, to identify key themes related to cultural branding, stakeholder participation, and festival promotion within the Sagarurung Festival context. To complement thematic analysis, this study employed a qualitative SWOT framework to interpret strategic factors influencing the festival (See Table 4). SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used to identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats within a specific context (Gürel & Tat, 2017).

Table 4. SWOT Analysis

INTERNAL EXTERNAL	S (Strengths)	W (Weakness)
O (Opportunities)	SO Strategy Formulating strategies that utilize strengths to capitalize on opportunities.	WO Strategy Formulating strategies that minimize weaknesses by taking advantage of opportunities
T (Threats)	ST Strategy Formulating strategies that utilize strengths to overcome threats	WT Strategy Formulating strategies that minimize weaknesses and avoid threats

Adapted from: Gürel & Tat, (2017)

In addition, IFAS (Internal Factor Analysis Summary) and EFAS (External Factor Analysis Summary) were used to systematically evaluate and weight internal and external strategic factors, allowing a more structured interpretation of the festival's strategic position (David & David, 2016). The Internal Factors Analysis Summary (IFAS) and External Factors Analysis Summary (EFAS) matrices were utilized to

systematically assess strategic factors. The weighting process was conducted using a scale ranging from 0.0 (not important) to 1.0 (very important), while ratings were assigned on a scale of 1 (below average) to 4 (excellent) (David & David, 2016). This combination enables a comprehensive assessment of how the Sagarurung Festival operates as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents, as well as member checking and systematic documentation of the research process (Creswell, 2013).

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that the Sagarurung Festival has developed into an important cultural platform for representing and communicating the identity of PALI Regency. Across interviews with government representatives, festival organizers, cultural practitioners, MSME actors, and local communities, participants consistently emphasized that the festival is more than an annual celebration; it functions as a medium through which local traditions, cultural performances, and community values are introduced to wider audiences. This cultural representation has strengthened public awareness of PALI cultural uniqueness and reinforced the festival's role in differentiating the regency from competing destinations. As one informant from government explained, *"the festival is our way of introducing PALI identity. Through traditional performances, local customs, and community participation, visitors can immediately understand what makes PALI different."*

Beyond cultural performances, participants identified smoked Sagarurung fish as the festival's most distinctive cultural asset. The culinary heritage was consistently described as a symbol of local history, traditional knowledge, and the close relationship between the community and the river environment. Rather than functioning solely as a local food product, smoked Sagarurung fish has become a cultural icon that strengthens the authenticity of the festival and supports the construction of PALI destination identity. One MSME participant noted, *"when people hear the name PALI, we hope they immediately remember smoked Sagarurung fish because it represents our region and cannot easily be found elsewhere."*

The interviews also revealed that community participation constitutes another important internal strength of the festival. Local residents actively contribute to cultural performances, culinary exhibitions, handicraft displays, and festival organization. Such participation not only enhances the authenticity of the event but also strengthens community ownership of local cultural heritage. Several participants emphasized that the success of the festival largely depends on the active involvement of local communities rather than solely on government initiatives.

Without the local community, this festival would lose its authenticity because the culture belongs to the people statement from visitor. Despite these strengths, respondents also identified several internal challenges that limit the effectiveness of the festival as a cultural branding strategy. Although the festival successfully showcases various cultural elements, participants argued that these components have not yet been integrated into a coherent branding narrative capable of consistently communicating the identity of PALI Regency.

Promotional activities remain largely event-oriented, while digital storytelling and destination positioning are still underdeveloped. In addition, community participation is concentrated primarily on festival implementation, whereas involvement in strategic planning and decision-making remains relatively limited. A festival organizer explained, from many cultural activities, they still stand separately. We need one strong story that connects them all and clearly represents the identity of PALI. These findings indicate that the Sagarurung Festival possesses substantial internal strengths, particularly in terms of cultural identity representation, culinary heritage, and community participation. However, weaknesses remain in the areas of branding consistency, destination storytelling, strategic communication, and stakeholder involvement in long-term planning. These recurring themes, identified

through thematic analysis and validated through observations and document analysis, were subsequently synthesized into the Internal Factor Analysis Summary (IFAS) to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Internal Factor Analysis (IFAS)

No	Dimension	SWOT	Statements
1	Cultural Identity Representation	Strength	Sagarurung Festival effectively represents the cultural identity of PALI Regency through local traditions, cultural performances, and regional values.
2	Cultural Identity Representation	Strength	The festival provides a platform to showcase local cultural symbols and strengthen community awareness of PALI's cultural uniqueness.
3	Cultural Identity Representation	Weakness	Cultural representation within the festival has not been fully developed into a consistent identity narrative that differentiates PALI from other destinations.
4	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Strength	Smoked Sagarurung fish functions as a distinctive culinary heritage that represents the authenticity and cultural uniqueness of PALI Regency.
5	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Strength	The festival creates opportunities to promote local culinary products and strengthen MSME involvement through culinary exhibitions.
6	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Weakness	The cultural meaning and historical narrative behind Sagarurung fish have not been optimally communicated to visitors.
7	Cultural Branding Strategy	Strength	The festival has potential as a cultural branding platform by combining cultural elements, tourism activities, and local economic promotion.
8	Cultural Branding Strategy	Weakness	Branding strategies, including digital storytelling, promotional consistency, and destination positioning, are still limited.
9	Community Participation	Strength	Strong involvement of local communities, MSMEs, and cultural actors supports the authenticity and sustainability of the festival.
10	Community Participation	Weakness	Community involvement is often focused on event implementation, while participation in strategic planning and decision-making remains limited.
11	Cultural Narrative Construction	Strength	The festival provides a space for storytelling and communication of PALI's cultural values through performances, culinary elements, and community activities.
12	Cultural Narrative Construction	Weakness	The cultural narratives presented during the festival require stronger documentation and structured storytelling to reach wider audiences.

Source: Research Result, 2026

Overall, these qualitative findings are consistent with the EFAS analysis presented in Table 6. The analysis identifies major external opportunities, including the growing demand for cultural and culinary tourism, government support, digital media development, institutional collaboration, and increasing public awareness of cultural preservation. MSME participant emphasized the role of digital media in expanding the festival reach Social media has made it easier for us to introduce Sagarurung fish to people outside PALI. Many visitors first learned about the festival through online promotions.

Participants also highlighted that collaboration with tourism institutions, cultural organizations, and educational institutions could further strengthen destination promotion and cultural preservation.

Despite these opportunities, respondents also identified several external challenges. Increasing competition from other regional cultural festivals requires the Sagarurung Festival to continuously innovate in order to maintain its distinctiveness.

Participants further noted that limited promotional resources, unequal digital capabilities among stakeholders, and the relatively small production capacity of local MSMEs may constrain the long-term effectiveness of the festival as a cultural branding initiative. At the same time, several external threats remain, including competition from other cultural festivals, limited promotional capacity, uneven stakeholder capabilities, restricted MSME production capacity, and the need for continuous innovation in cultural storytelling. These findings suggest that the future success of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy will depend not only on its internal cultural strengths but also on its ability to capitalize on emerging opportunities while responding effectively to external challenges.

Table 6. External Factor Analysis (EFAS)

No	Dimension	SWOT	Statements
1	Cultural Identity Representation	Opportunity	The increasing interest in cultural tourism provides opportunities to position Sagarurung Festival as a representation of PALI's cultural identity.
2	Cultural Identity Representation	Opportunity	Collaboration with tourism institutions and cultural communities can strengthen cultural preservation and destination image development.
3	Cultural Identity Representation	Threat	Competition with other regional cultural festivals may reduce the uniqueness and visibility of Sagarurung Festival.
4	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Opportunity	The growing trend of culinary tourism creates opportunities to promote Sagarurung fish as a regional cultural symbol.
5	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Opportunity	Digital platforms provide wider opportunities to introduce Sagarurung culinary heritage to external audiences.
6	Culinary Heritage (Sagarurung Fish)	Threat	Limited production capacity and business sustainability among MSMEs may affect the continuity of culinary branding.
7	Cultural Branding Strategy	Opportunity	Government support and tourism development programs provide opportunities to strengthen festival branding and promotion.
8	Cultural Branding Strategy	Threat	Limited promotional reach and competition among tourism destinations may influence the effectiveness of cultural branding.
9	Community Participation	Opportunity	Increasing community awareness of cultural preservation can strengthen local participation and ownership of the festival.
10	Community Participation	Threat	Differences in digital literacy, resources, and stakeholder capacity may limit equal participation.
11	Cultural Narrative Construction	Opportunity	Social media and digital storytelling provide opportunities to expand cultural narratives and improve visitor engagement.
12	Cultural Narrative Construction	Threat	Without continuous innovation, cultural narratives may become less relevant and less attractive to younger audiences.

Source: Research Result, 2026

The internal and external conditions of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency were analyzed using the SWOT method. The analysis identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats based on five dimensions of the conceptual framework: cultural identity representation, culinary heritage (Sagarurung fish), cultural branding strategy, community participation, and cultural narrative construction. The SWOT factors were identified from semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis involving relevant

stakeholders, including government representatives, festival organizers, MSME actors, cultural practitioners, community members, and visitors. Each factor was assessed based on its influence and importance using a rating scale from 1.0 (low) to 4.0 (very high) (Mital et al., 2018).

Internal factors were analyzed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the festival in representing local culture, utilizing culinary heritage, engaging communities, and building cultural narratives. Meanwhile, external factors were analyzed to identify opportunities and threats affecting the sustainability and development of the festival as a cultural branding strategy. Each factor was assigned a weight ranging from 0.0 (not important) to 1.0 (very important) to determine its strategic significance. The SWOT analysis was used to identify priority strategies for strengthening the role of the Sagarurung Festival in constructing and promoting the cultural identity of PALI Regency.

Table 6. Strength Factors

No	Strength Factors	Weight	Rating	Score
1	Strong representation of PALI cultural identity through traditions, cultural performances, and regional values	0.20	4	0.80
2	Sagarurung fish as a distinctive culinary heritage representing local authenticity and cultural uniqueness	0.25	4	1.00
3	The festival functions as a cultural branding platform integrating culture, tourism, and local economic promotion	0.20	4	0.80
4	Strong involvement of local communities, MSMEs, and cultural actors supporting festival authenticity	0.20	3	0.60
5	The festival provides a space for cultural storytelling through performances, culinary elements, and activities	0.15	3	0.45
Total Strength Score		1.00		3.65

Source: Research Result, 2026

Table 7. Weakness Factors

No	Weakness Factors	Weight	Rating	Score
1	Cultural representation has not been fully developed into a strong and consistent identity narrative	0.25	2	0.50
2	Cultural meaning and historical narrative of Sagarurung fish have not been optimally communicated	0.20	2	0.40
3	Branding strategies, digital storytelling, and destination positioning are still limited	0.25	2	0.50
4	Community involvement is still focused on implementation rather than strategic planning	0.15	2	0.30
5	Limited documentation and structured storytelling reduce wider cultural communication	0.15	1	0.15
Total Weakness Score		1.00		1.85

Source: Research Result, 2026

The results of the SWOT analysis through the Internal Factor Analysis Summary (IFAS) and External Factor Analysis Summary (EFAS) (Mital et al., 2018) show the strategic position of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding instrument in PALI Regency. The IFAS calculation indicates that the total Strength score is 3.65 (Table 6), while the total Weakness score is 1.85 (Table 7), resulting in a positive internal factor score of 1.80 ($3.65 - 1.85 = 1.80$). This finding demonstrates that the Sagarurung Festival has strong internal potential supported by its ability to represent PALI's cultural identity, utilize smoked Sagarurung fish as a distinctive culinary heritage, involve local communities and cultural actors, and provide a platform for cultural storytelling. These strengths indicate that the

festival possesses valuable cultural resources that can be developed as part of regional branding strategies. However, several internal limitations remain, including the lack of a consistent cultural identity narrative, limited communication of the historical meaning of Sagarurung fish, insufficient branding and digital storytelling strategies, and limited documentation of cultural narratives.

Table 8. Opportunity Factors

No	Opportunity Factors	Weight	Rating	Score
1	Increasing interest in cultural tourism creates opportunities to position Sagarurung Festival as a cultural attraction	0.20	4	0.80
2	Collaboration with tourism institutions and cultural communities supports cultural preservation and destination image development	0.20	4	0.80
3	Culinary tourism trends provide opportunities to promote Sagarurung fish as a regional cultural symbol	0.20	4	0.80
4	Digital platforms provide opportunities to expand cultural promotion and visitor engagement	0.20	3	0.60
5	Government support and tourism development programs strengthen festival branding opportunities	0.20	4	0.80
Total Opportunity Score		1.00		3.80

Source: Research Result, 2026

Table 9. Threat Factors

No	Threat Factors	Weight	Rating	Score
1	Competition with other regional cultural festivals may reduce festival visibility	0.25	2	0.50
2	Limited production capacity and MSME sustainability may affect culinary branding continuity	0.20	2	0.40
3	Limited promotional reach compared with other tourism destinations	0.20	2	0.40
4	Differences in digital literacy and stakeholder capacity may limit participation	0.15	2	0.30
5	Lack of innovation may reduce cultural narrative relevance for younger audiences	0.20	2	0.40
Total Threat Score		1.00		2.00

Source: Research Result, 2026

Furthermore, the EFAS calculation shows that the total Opportunity score is 3.80 (Table 8), while the total Threat score is 2.00 (Table 9), producing a positive external factor score of 1.80 ($3.80 - 2.00 = 1.80$). This result indicates that the external environment provides greater opportunities than threats for the development of the Sagarurung Festival. The opportunities include the increasing interest in cultural tourism, the potential of culinary tourism development through Sagarurung fish, the use of digital platforms for wider cultural promotion, government support, and collaboration with tourism institutions and cultural communities. Nevertheless, several external challenges must be considered, such as competition with other regional festivals, limited MSME capacity, differences in digital literacy, and the need for continuous innovation to maintain cultural relevance.

Based on the combined IFAS and EFAS results, the Sagarurung Festival obtains a positive internal score of 1.80 and a positive external score of 1.80, positioning the festival in Quadrant I of the SWOT Matrix (see Figure 2). This position indicates that the festival has strong internal capabilities and favorable external conditions, allowing it to maximize its cultural assets and available opportunities.

Therefore, the strategic direction focuses on strengthening cultural identity representation, developing Sagarurung fish as a culinary heritage symbol, improving cultural narratives and digital branding strategies, and enhancing stakeholder collaboration. Through these strategies, the Sagarurung Festival can be further developed as a distinctive cultural branding platform that strengthens the identity and image of PALI Regency.

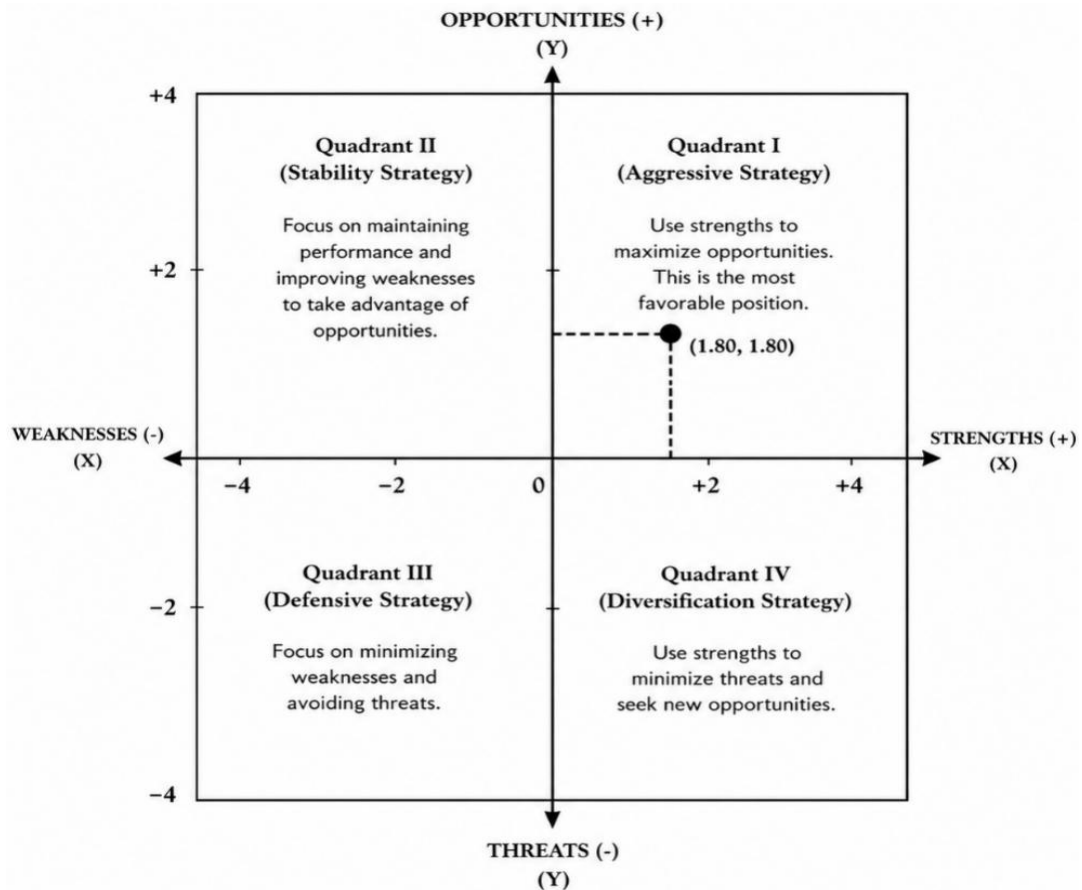


Figure 2. Combined IFAS and EFAS Sagarurung Festival
Adapted from: David & David, (2016)

Based on the IFAS and EFAS calculation results, the Sagarurung Festival is positioned in Quadrant I with an internal score of 1.80 and an external score of 1.80. This position indicates that the festival has strong internal potential and favorable external conditions to support its development as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. The Quadrant I position suggests the implementation of a SO (Strength–Opportunity) strategy, which focuses on utilizing existing strengths, such as cultural identity representation, Sagarurung fish as culinary heritage, community involvement, and cultural storytelling, to maximize opportunities in cultural tourism development, digital promotion, and stakeholder collaboration. Therefore, the Sagarurung Festival should strengthen its cultural branding through improved storytelling, destination promotion, and sustainable community participation to enhance PALI Regency's cultural identity and tourism image.

5. DISCUSSION

Table 10 presents the SWOT matrix developed from the integration of the Internal Factor Analysis Summary (IFAS) and External Factor Analysis Summary (EFAS), which formulates strategic alternatives

for strengthening the role of the Sagarurung Festival as a cultural branding strategy in PALI Regency. The matrix combines internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats to generate four strategic approaches, namely Strength–Opportunity (SO), Weakness–Opportunity (WO), Strength–Threat (ST), and Weakness–Threat (WT) strategies (David & David, 2016). Among these alternatives, the SO strategy is identified as the primary strategic priority because the festival possesses strong internal capabilities supported by favorable external conditions.

Tabel 10: SWOT Matrix of Sagarurung Festival

IFAS	S	W
	1. Effective representation of PALI Regency's cultural identity through traditions, cultural performances, and regional values.	1. Cultural identity has not yet been developed into a consistent branding narrative.
	2. Smoked Sagarurung fish serves as a distinctive culinary heritage representing local authenticity.	2. The historical and cultural meaning of Sagarurung fish has not been optimally communicated.
	3. The festival functions as a cultural branding platform integrating culture, tourism, and local economic promotion.	3. Branding strategy, digital storytelling, and destination positioning remain limited.
	4. Strong participation of local communities, MSMEs, and cultural actors supports authenticity and sustainability.	4. Community participation is concentrated on implementation rather than strategic planning.
	5. The festival provides opportunities for cultural storytelling through performances, culinary exhibitions, and community activities.	5. Documentation and structured cultural storytelling remain limited.
EFAS	SO Strategies	WO Strategies
	1. Strengthen the representation of PALI's cultural identity by integrating cultural performances, local traditions, and Sagarurung fish into a unified cultural branding strategy.	1. Develop a consistent cultural identity narrative by utilizing government support and collaboration with tourism institutions.
1. Growing interest in cultural tourism.	2. Utilize digital platforms to promote cultural narratives, culinary heritage, and festival activities to broader audiences.	2. Strengthen digital storytelling and destination positioning through social media and other digital platforms.
2. Collaboration with tourism institutions and cultural communities.	3. Expand collaboration with government, tourism institutions, cultural communities, and MSMEs to strengthen destination branding and cultural preservation.	3. Improve communication of the historical and cultural values of Sagarurung fish through exhibitions, interpretation, and promotional media.
3. Digital platforms provide wider promotional opportunities.	4. Develop tourism programs that integrate cultural performances, culinary experiences, and community participation to enhance visitor experiences.	4. Increase community participation in festival planning and cultural preservation activities through collaborative programs.
4. Government support for tourism development.		
T	ST Strategies	WT Strategies
1. Competition from other regional cultural festivals.	1. Differentiate the Sagarurung Festival by emphasizing its unique cultural identity and distinctive culinary heritage.	1. Improve documentation and preservation of cultural narratives to strengthen the festival's identity amid increasing competition.
2. Limited MSME production capacity.		

3. Limited promotional reach compared with competing destinations.	2. Strengthen collaboration among communities, MSMEs, and cultural actors to maintain the authenticity and sustainability of the festival.	2. Enhance destination branding through more structured and integrated promotional strategies.
4. Differences in digital literacy and stakeholder capacity.	3. Utilize cultural storytelling and digital promotion to strengthen the competitiveness and visibility of the festival.	3. Encourage broader community participation in strategic planning to improve the sustainability of cultural branding.
5. Cultural narratives may lose relevance without continuous innovation.	4. Continuously innovate cultural performances and festival programs to maintain visitor interest and relevance.	4. Develop continuous innovation in cultural storytelling and festival programs to maintain relevance for younger generations and wider audiences.

Source: Research Result, 2026

The findings demonstrate that the Sagarurung Festival functions as more than an annual cultural event; it operates as a strategic cultural branding mechanism through which PALI Regency communicates and reinforces its destination identity. Rather than relying on conventional destination promotion, the festival transforms local cultural resources into symbolic representations that differentiate PALI from competing destinations. This finding supports that cultural branding is not merely the promotion of cultural assets but the strategic construction of destination identity through cultural meanings and narratives. However, the present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that, in an emerging district destination, cultural branding is constructed through the integration of culinary heritage, community participation, and cultural storytelling, rather than through heritage assets alone (Richards, 2021).

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of smoked Sagarurung fish. Previous studies have generally discussed gastronomy as an attraction that enriches visitor experiences (Everett & Aitchison, 2008). In contrast, this study indicates that Sagarurung fish performs a broader symbolic function by acting as the central narrative connecting local history, river culture, community identity, and the festival itself. Therefore, culinary heritage should not merely be interpreted as a tourism product but as a branding asset capable of communicating destination identity. This finding contributes to the cultural branding literature by illustrating how local gastronomy can become the core element around which destination narratives are constructed, particularly in emerging destinations with limited promotional resources.

The study also highlights that community participation is fundamental to the effectiveness of festival-based cultural branding. Community involvement enhances the authenticity and sustainability of cultural tourism. Nevertheless, this research suggests that participation alone is insufficient for effective destination branding (Satrya et al., 2023). Although local communities actively participate in festival implementation, their involvement in strategic planning, branding decisions, and narrative development remains limited. This indicates that successful cultural branding requires communities not only as cultural performers but also as co-creators of destination identity, thereby extending previous discussions on community participation in cultural tourism.

The SWOT analysis further demonstrates that the effectiveness of the Sagarurung Festival depends on the interaction between internal cultural resources and the external tourism environment. The SO strategy indicates that the festival possesses sufficient internal strengths to capitalize on the growing demand for cultural and culinary tourism. However, rather than generally recommending stronger promotion, the findings suggest several context-specific strategies. First, the festival should develop a unified cultural storytelling framework that consistently links Sagarurung fish, traditional

performances, local history, and river culture under a single destination narrative. Second, digital interpretation should be strengthened through QR-code-based storytelling, documentary videos, multilingual promotional content, and interactive social media campaigns targeting younger visitors. Third, collaboration should move beyond event implementation by involving universities, cultural institutions, tourism communities, and MSMEs in documenting, interpreting, and disseminating PALI's cultural heritage. Finally, community participation should be institutionalized through participatory planning forums, enabling local residents to contribute directly to branding strategies rather than solely supporting operational activities.

The ST and WT strategies also provide important managerial implications. Increasing competition among regional cultural festivals suggests that PALI should avoid competing through event scale alone. Instead, differentiation should be achieved by emphasizing the festival's distinctive identity based on smoked Sagarurung fish as an authentic gastronomic heritage that cannot easily be replicated by competing destinations. Simultaneously, addressing weaknesses in documentation and digital storytelling will require systematic archiving of oral histories, culinary traditions, and festival performances, ensuring that cultural narratives remain relevant while preserving authenticity for future generations.

This study makes an incremental contribution to the cultural branding literature. Previous research has primarily examined cultural branding in metropolitan cities, UNESCO heritage destinations, or well-established tourism regions, where branding is generally associated with iconic heritage resources or large-scale cultural events. By contrast, this study demonstrates that district-level cultural festivals can also function as effective cultural branding mechanisms when they integrate cultural identity, culinary heritage, community participation, and coherent storytelling into a unified destination narrative. Rather than proposing a new theoretical model, the study enriches existing cultural branding theory by providing empirical evidence that festival-based cultural branding in emerging destinations is a multidimensional process in which gastronomic heritage acts as the central symbolic resource connecting identity, community, and destination competitiveness.

Overall, these findings suggest that the long-term competitiveness of emerging destinations depends not only on organizing cultural festivals but also on strategically transforming local cultural resources into coherent branding narratives that create distinctive destination identities. Consequently, the Sagarurung Festival should be understood not simply as an annual tourism event but as an ongoing cultural branding platform capable of strengthening regional identity, enhancing destination competitiveness, and supporting sustainable tourism development. The findings imply that cultural festivals can function as strategic instruments for strengthening regional identity and tourism branding. The Sagarurung Festival demonstrates how local cultural assets can be transformed into symbolic capital through structured cultural events supported by government institutions and community participation. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of improving cultural curation, digital promotion, and intergenerational cultural transfer to ensure festival sustainability. The integration of social media promotion and community-based participation can strengthen the festival's visibility and long-term impact on tourism and local economic development.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the Sagarurung Festival has the potential to function as a cultural branding mechanism for PALI Regency by integrating cultural identity, culinary heritage, community participation, and cultural narratives into a destination branding process. Rather than serving solely as an annual cultural event, the festival represents a strategic platform through which local cultural

resources are communicated to strengthen regional identity and destination differentiation. However, the findings also reveal that the festival's branding effectiveness has not yet been fully optimized. The SWOT analysis indicates that although PALI possesses strong cultural assets, the absence of a consistent branding narrative, limited digital storytelling, and insufficient communication of the historical significance of smoked Sagarurung fish constrain the festival's ability to establish a distinctive destination identity.

This study provides an incremental contribution to the literature on cultural branding and cultural tourism by demonstrating that district-level cultural festivals can function as branding mechanisms through the interaction of cultural identity representation, gastronomic heritage, community participation, and cultural storytelling. While previous studies have primarily examined cultural branding in metropolitan or well-established heritage destinations, this research extends the discussion to an emerging destination context and highlights the strategic role of local culinary heritage as a symbolic resource for destination identity construction. Although the study does not propose a new theoretical model, it enriches existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence of how festival-based cultural branding can support destination competitiveness in developing regions.

The findings suggest that the Government of PALI Regency and festival organizers should move beyond event organization toward a more integrated cultural branding strategy. Priority actions include developing a unified destination narrative centered on smoked Sagarurung fish, strengthening digital storytelling through social media, websites, and audiovisual content, expanding collaboration with tourism institutions, universities, and cultural communities, and involving local stakeholders in strategic planning rather than only festival implementation. Establishing systematic documentation and interpretation of PALI's cultural heritage would also strengthen the festival's authenticity while improving its long-term branding effectiveness.

This study is limited to a qualitative case study of a single cultural festival in one regency, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other destinations. Future research could undertake comparative analyses of cultural festivals across different regions, examine visitor perceptions of festival-based cultural branding, or evaluate the long-term impacts of cultural branding on destination image, tourist behavior, and local economic development using mixed-method or longitudinal approaches.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Muh. Yahyaddin: Conceptualizing, Methodology, Validation, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision.

Nadia Chairunnisa Andra Shita Marini: Conceptualizing, Methodology, Validation, Investigation Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Project Administration.

Esxi Martia Gusma: Validation, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing – Review & Editing.

Meisya Anggraini: Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there no commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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