

BORDER REGIONS AS TOURISM GATEWAYS: RETHINKING DESTINATION BRANDING FOR INDONESIA'S ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

Border regions are increasingly recognized not only as territorial boundaries but also as strategic gateways for tourism, economic interaction, and regional development. This study aims to reconceptualize Indonesia's border regions as tourism gateways by examining the role of destination branding in strengthening tourism and economic competitiveness. The study employs a library research approach through a conceptual review of relevant literature on border tourism, cross-border tourism, destination branding, collaborative governance, destination competitiveness, and regional economic development. The findings indicate that the transformation of border regions from peripheral areas into competitive tourism gateways requires the integration of local identity and resources, multi-stakeholder collaboration, coherent destination branding, and effective tourism development strategies. Based on the literature synthesis, this study proposes the Border Tourism Gateway Competitiveness Framework, which explains a sequential relationship among Border Identity and Resources, Collaborative Governance, Border Destination Branding, Destination Attractiveness, Tourism Competitiveness, Tourism Development, and Regional Economic Competitiveness. The framework emphasizes that destination branding should not be viewed merely as a promotional instrument but as a strategic mechanism for converting local uniqueness, cultural assets, cross-border interactions, and territorial identity into market value and regional competitive advantage. The study also highlights the importance of digital destination branding, cross-border connectivity, community participation, and institutional coordination in strengthening the visibility and attractiveness of border destinations. Theoretically, this study integrates previously fragmented discussions on border tourism, destination branding, and regional competitiveness. Practically, the findings provide strategic direction for policymakers and destination managers in repositioning Indonesia's border regions from peripheral territories into competitive tourism gateways and regional economic growth nodes.

Keywords: border tourism; destination branding; tourism gateway; collaborative governance; destination competitiveness; regional economic competitiveness; Indonesia

Introduction

Border areas can no longer be understood solely as geographical boundaries and national defense spaces, but are increasingly developing into a space for economic, social, cultural, and tourism interaction that connects two or more countries. The development of international mobility has changed the function of borders from *barriers* to *gateways*, namely strategic spaces for the movement of tourists, trade, investment, and cultural exchanges. Recent literature even shows the process of *touristification of borders*, when border areas acquire new functions and meanings through tourism activities and become part of geoeconomic interactions between countries (Su, 2024). In the development of tourism studies, attention to borders has also shifted from simply seeing *borders* as objects or mobility barriers to understanding borders as *place-making* spaces that can produce economic value and destination identity (Stoffelen, 2024). Thus, the position of border areas has strategic potential to be developed as a tourism gateway as well as an instrument to increase regional economic competitiveness.

The gap phenomenon arises because the strategic potential has not always been followed by the ability of border areas to build a strong, integrated, and competitive image of destinations. This condition is particularly relevant for Indonesia, which has the geographical character of islands and border areas that interact directly with neighboring countries. Studies on the Bintan border area, for example, show that cultural proximity, kinship relationships, cultural heritage, and community mobility with Malaysia and Singapore generate great potential for the development of *cross-border tourism*. However, these cultural identities have not been fully integrated into tourism policies; institutional management, infrastructure support, digital access, and cultural heritage promotion also still face limitations (Kinasih et al., 2025). This phenomenon shows a paradox: border areas have uniqueness that is difficult for other destinations to replicate, but these advantages have not automatically turned into *destination identity*, *destination image*, and competitive economic value.

This issue is becoming increasingly important because destination branding is not just a promotional activity or slogan creation, but a strategic process to identify, build, and communicate the uniqueness of the destination so that it is able to obtain a position that is different from its competitors. A bibliometric study by Ruiz-Real et al. (2020) confirms that *destination branding* has developed into an important field in strengthening the position of destinations with key themes such as strategy, tourist experience, *brand equity*, *place attachment*, loyalty, *word-of-mouth*, and social media. At the same time, branding is related to the competitiveness of destinations because the ability of a region to build a distinctive identity can increase differentiation and value perception in the tourism market (Miličević et al., 2017). However, the character of border areas is much more complex than that of conventional destinations because it involves local identity, state image, security, cross-border mobility, regulatory differences, and the interests of various stakeholders.

From this condition, a research problem arises, namely how Indonesia's border area can be repositioned from an area that tends to be perceived as a peripheral space to a tourism gateway that has a strong brand identity and at the same time contributes to the regional economic competitiveness. Research on cross-border destination marketing shows that collaboration between neighboring destinations can expand the tourism experience, create shared products, and increase the competitiveness of each region (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). Similarly, the *coopetitive destination branding* approach shows that destinations that have different jurisdictions and identities can still build a common brand umbrella without losing the uniqueness of each region (Kirillova et al., 2020). The problem is that the strategy requires coordination between stakeholders, consistency of brand communication, destination connectivity, and compatibility between the identity built with the social and economic character of border communities.

These problems also show a more fundamental research gap. First, the study of *destination branding* mostly develops from the perspective of marketing, *brand image*, tourist behavior, *brand equity*, and loyalty (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020), while the *border tourism* literature discusses more mobility, regional integration, geopolitics, security, and cross-border cooperation (Stoffelen, 2024; Su, 2024). Second, studies on *cross-border destination marketing* have emphasized the importance of collaboration between destinations (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019), while research on *regional destination branding* emphasizes stakeholder collaboration as a prerequisite for consistent regional brand formation (Perkins et al., 2020). However, the two streams are still relatively separate. This is reinforced by Roesler et al. (2026), who through a *systematic literature review* based on Scopus publications for the period 2000–2025 found that there is still very limited research that explicitly links cross-border tourism with territorial/place branding. This means that the conceptual relationship between *border identity*, *destination branding*, cross-border tourism, and economic competitiveness is still an open research space.

In addition, there is a gap in the level of branding implementation. Cerić et al. (2024) found that *Destination Management Organizations* on both sides of a border destination can display different landscape elements when promoting areas that are actually interconnected. This condition shows that fragmentation of representation can hinder the formation of a coherent cross-border destination image. In fact, the determinants of tourism competitiveness also have different spatial characters according to location, resources, environment, attractions, and market demand, so competitiveness enhancement strategies must be tailored to the specific character of the destination (Zhao et al., 2024). Thus, the *one-size-fits-all destination branding* approach is inadequate for Indonesia's border regions that have diverse socio-cultural characteristics, economic potential, connectivity levels, and cross-border relationships.

Based on these gaps, the research novelty or incremental newness of this research lies in efforts to reconstruct the paradigm of border areas from *border as barrier* to border as tourism gateway and integrate *border tourism literature*, *destination branding*, *cross-border collaboration*, and *regional competitiveness* in one conceptual framework. Different

from previous research that tends to discuss branding, border tourism, or regional development separately, this study views border destination branding as a mechanism for regional economic transformation. Conceptually, this study proposes the relationship between border resources and identity → collaborative destination governance → border destination branding → destination attractiveness and competitiveness → tourism and economic competitiveness. This framework places cultural identity, local resources, cross-border connectivity, government–community-business collaboration, and digital communication not just as promotional elements, but as a source of regional economic value creation. This approach expands on the argument that cross-border tourism development can encourage regional development through the integration of resources, networks, and cross-regional economic activities (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Thus, the research urgency of this research is not only academic, but also strategic for Indonesia's development. Increasing competition between regions in attracting tourists, investment, and economic activities requires border areas to build differentiation based on local uniqueness and geographical position. Strengthening *destination branding* can be an instrument to shift the perception of border areas from the back area to the front door of the nation, which is the first space that represents Indonesia's identity, quality, security, friendliness, and attractiveness to cross-border tourists. At the same time, this strategy has the potential to strengthen MSMEs, creative industries, cross-border trade, local investment, and the distribution of tourism benefits to the community. Therefore, the research "Border Regions as Tourism Gateways: Rethinking Destination Branding for Indonesia's Economic Competitiveness" is important to produce a conceptual foundation for the development of border areas that are not only territorially safe, but also visible, attractive, competitive, connected, and economically productive through a collaborative *destination branding* strategy based on local identity.

Literature Review

Border Regions and the Tourism Gateway Concept

Border regions are geographical spaces that have special characteristics because they are at the meeting point between different jurisdictions, communities, cultures, and economic systems. In the traditional paradigm, border areas are more often seen as borders as *barriers* that function in territorial supervision, security, and mobility control. However, the development of globalization, transportation connectivity, and tourist mobility has changed this meaning. Borders are increasingly understood as relational spaces that become places where social, economic, cultural, and tourism interactions take place. Stoffelen (2024) shows that the study of border tourism has undergone a shift from a perspective that sees borders as objects or obstacles to a perspective that places them as part of the process of *place-making* and the formation of cross-regional relationships.

These changes gave birth to the concept of **border as tourism gateway**, where borders not only function as a point for tourists to enter and exit, but also become the first door that shapes the experience and perception of a country or destination. In this

context, border areas have two functions at once. First, as a *physical gateway* that provides access, transportation, immigration, and travel support infrastructure. Second, as a *symbolic gateway* that represents identity, culture, hospitality, security, and national image to tourists. Su (2024) explained that the increase in cross-border tourist mobility has led to the process of *touristification of borders*, which is a change in the function and meaning of border areas through tourism activities, commodification of space, and geoeconomic interaction.

The perspective of *tourism gateways* is relevant for regional development because tourism activities can be a link between border areas and the wider economic network. Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017) show that tourism can play a role in the process of cross-border regional development, especially when tourism activities are integrated with network development, the formation of regional institutions, and the use of local resources. Thus, border areas can undergo a transformation from peripheral areas to strategic spaces for tourist mobility, economic exchange, and regional identity formation. In the context of Indonesia, this concept is relevant considering that border areas have cultural diversity, landscapes, history, and social relations with neighboring countries that can be developed as tourism resources. The position of the border is therefore not enough to be managed using security and infrastructure approaches alone, but requires a strategy that is able to transform these local characteristics into values, experiences, identities, and attraction of destinations. This transformation is what makes *destination branding* important in the development of border tourism.

Destination Branding in Border Areas

Destination branding is a strategic process to build the identity, differentiation, and position of a destination in the perception of tourists. In contrast to promotions that are more oriented towards short-term communication, *destination branding* is concerned with the formation of an identity and value proposition that distinguishes a destination from competitor destinations. Ruiz-Real et al. (2020) show that *destination branding* research develops significantly with themes such as strategy, tourist experience, *place attachment*, loyalty, *customer-based brand equity*, *word-of-mouth*, and social media. This shows that destination branding is a multidimensional concept that is not only related to logos and slogans, but to the overall experience and perception of the destination.

In the context of borders, the process of brand formation becomes more complex because destinations have identities that are influenced by various regions, cultures, jurisdictions, and actors. Border areas can even have different images depending on which side of the border the destination is promoted. Therefore, *border destination branding strategies* need to find a balance between maintaining the uniqueness of local identity and building a common identity that can strengthen the overall position of the destination.

Kirillova et al. (2020) introduced the *perspective of coopetitive destination branding* in a study of the Greater Bay Area that includes Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. This approach shows that destinations that have geographical, political, jurisdictional, and

identity differences can still work together in building regional brands while maintaining their respective differentiations. *Coopetition* combines elements of *cooperation* and *competition*, so that regions that on the one hand compete in attracting tourists can collaborate in increasing the overall attractiveness of the region.

The implication for Indonesia's border regions is that branding does not have to eliminate the identity of each region. Instead, the diversity of cultures, languages, histories, culinary, local products, and cross-border interactions can be part of the brand narrative. Therefore, border destination branding can be understood as a strategic process in identifying, integrating, and communicating the resources and distinctive identities of the border to form a unique and competitive destination image.

Collaborative Governance dan Cross-Border Tourism

The success of destination brand formation is determined not only by marketing strategies, but also by the ability of stakeholders to collaborate. Destinations are a collective product because the tourist experience is shaped by interactions between governments, business people, local communities, MSMEs, attraction managers, transportation providers, accommodation, and various other institutions. Thus, weak coordination can result in fragmented brand messaging and inconsistent tourist experiences.

Perkins et al. (2020), through a *systematic narrative literature review*, emphasized that stakeholder collaboration is an important element for the success of *regional destination branding*. The large number of business actors with their respective destination interests and representations can cause branding messages to be fragmented. Collaboration is needed to create more consistent brand perception and communication, although its implementation often faces the problem of differences in interests, power, resources, and levels of involvement of actors.

The need for collaboration is greater in the context of border tourism. Kozak and Buhalis (2019) explained that *cross-border destination marketing* requires cooperation between neighboring destinations because collaboration can create a more integrated tourism experience and at the same time increase the competitiveness of destinations. Cooperation can be carried out through the development of joint tourism products, promotion, connectivity, information exchange, and the formation of institutional networks. However, the success of cooperation is influenced by the alignment of interests, inter-stakeholder relationships, political conditions, and supporting governance mechanisms.

Therefore, this study views collaborative destination governance as an important mechanism that connects border region resources with destination brand formation. The government cannot build branding unilaterally because brand credibility is highly dependent on the destination's ability to provide an experience that is in line with the brand's promise. Community participation is also important because culture, local

knowledge, creative products, and community interaction are the main components that determine the authenticity of a border destination.

Conceptually, strong collaboration allows for integration between *border resources*, *local identity*, infrastructure, economic actors, and marketing strategies. Such collaboration can further result in a clearer, consistent, authentic, and accepted brand identity by various stakeholder groups.

Destination Branding dan Destination Competitiveness

The concept of destination competitiveness describes the ability of a destination to utilize its resources more effectively than competitor destinations so that it can attract tourists while creating sustainable benefits for the region. Competitiveness does not only depend on the wealth of natural or cultural resources, but also on the ability of the destination to manage, develop, and communicate these resources.

Miličević et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence regarding the relationship between *destination branding* and *destination competitiveness*. Research on Croatian coastal destinations found that the implementation of a good destination branding process contributes to increasing the competitiveness of destinations. These findings are important because they show that branding is not just a communication instrument, but can be part of a strategy to increase competitiveness through the creation of differentiation, satisfaction, and perception of destination value.

The competitiveness of destinations is also contextual and spatial. Zhao et al. (2024) show that there is a spatial heterogeneity in the factors that determine the competitiveness of tourism. Market demand, natural environment, and attractions have an important role, but the impact of each factor can differ between one location and another. These findings indicate that competitiveness-enhancing strategies should not be standardized, but need to be tailored to the resource characteristics and geographical conditions of the destination.

The implications are very relevant for Indonesia because each border area has a different resource structure. Land border areas, outermost islands, coastal areas, and areas adjacent to the economic centers of neighboring countries require different branding approaches and competitiveness development. Thus, *border destination branding* should be **place-based**, which is built based on the peculiarities of each region's location, resources, history, cross-border relationships, and market potential.

Based on this perspective, it can be understood that:

Border Destination Branding → Destination Attractiveness → Destination Competitiveness.

The clearer the differentiation and value proposition that a border area builds, the greater its ability to form an attraction and competitive position among other tourist destinations.

2.5 Tourism Competitiveness dan Economic Competitiveness

Tourism competitiveness ultimately needs to produce economic benefits for the community and the region. The success of destinations is not only measured by increasing the number of tourist visits, but also by tourism's capacity to generate economic activities, expand business opportunities, increase community income, and encourage linkages between local industries.

This relationship is becoming increasingly relevant for border areas that often face development challenges in the form of limited investment, relatively small local markets, connectivity, and the dominance of economic activities oriented towards regional centers. Tourism can create an alternative by bringing external demand into the region. Tourist spending has the potential to drive the accommodation, transportation, culinary, trade, creative products, handicrafts, and various supporting services.

Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017) emphasized that the linkage between tourism and cross-border regional development is greatly influenced by institutional processes and regional integration. This means that the existence of attractions alone is not enough to generate development. The benefits of tourism require connectivity with local economic structures, inter-stakeholder networks, and regional development policies.

With this perspective, economic competitiveness in this study is not only interpreted as an increase in the number of tourists, but as an increase in the capacity of border areas in creating and maintaining economic activities based on local excellence. Economic competitiveness can be reflected through the development of local businesses, increased investment opportunities, expansion of the local product market, diversification of economic activities, increased employment opportunities, and the strengthening of the region's position in cross-border economic networks.

The relationship results in the argument that:

Destination Competitiveness → Tourism Development → Regional Economic Competitiveness.

In other words, branding plays a role in the early stages in building differentiation and attractiveness, while economic benefits are formed through the ability of destinations to turn increased competitiveness and tourism activities into *local economic value creation*.

Research Methods

This study uses a library research approach with a conceptual study design to analyze and synthesize literature on *border tourism*, *destination branding*, *cross-border tourism*, *collaborative governance*, *destination competitiveness*, and *regional economic competitiveness*. Secondary data sources are obtained from articles from reputable scientific journals, especially publications indexed by Scopus, as well as academic books and supporting documents relevant to the context of the development of Indonesia's border areas. The literature search was conducted using a combination of keywords such

as "border tourism", "cross-border tourism", "destination branding", "tourism gateway", "border destination", "destination competitiveness", and "regional economic competitiveness". The literature was selected based on the relevance of the theme, the quality of the publication, the relevance to the research objectives, and its contribution to the development of the conceptual framework. This approach is used because *literature review* not only serves to summarize previous research, but also allows researchers to identify knowledge gaps, integrate various theoretical perspectives, and develop new conceptual directions (Snyder, 2019).

Data analysis was carried out through the stages of identification, selection, categorization, thematic synthesis, and conceptual integration. The selected articles were grouped into several main themes, namely the transformation of *border as barrier* into *border as tourism gateway*, border area resources and identity, collaborative governance, *destination branding strategies*, destination attractiveness, tourism competitiveness, and its implications for regional economic competitiveness. Furthermore, the findings between studies were compared to identify patterns of relationships, similarities, differences, and conceptual gaps in the literature. The results of the synthesis are then used to construct a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between Border Resources & Local Identity → Collaborative Destination Governance → Border Destination Branding → Destination Attractiveness → Tourism Destination Competitiveness → Tourism Development → Regional Economic Competitiveness. The procedure follows the principles of systematic and transparent literature review so that the synthesis process can produce a more comprehensive conceptual understanding and can be used as a basis for further empirical research development (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019).

Results and Discussion

Results

The results of the literature synthesis show that border areas are undergoing a functional change from *border as barrier* to *border as tourism gateway*. In traditional perspectives, borders are positioned more as spaces for security, surveillance, and mobility restrictions, while the development of cross-border tourism has transformed borders into spaces for economic, social, and cultural exchange. Su (2024) explains this phenomenon through the concept of *touristification of borders*, which suggests that the increase in cross-border tourist flows encourages the process of commodification, differentiation, and functional change of border areas. Thus, borders no longer only serve as entry points, but can be part of a country's initial tourist experience and representation. In the context of regional development, tourism can also be an instrument for the formation of cross-regional relationships, although its success is largely determined by the quality of the institution, the involvement of actors, and its integration with regional development strategies (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). The findings provide the basis that the transformation of Indonesia's border areas must be directed from just an administrative-

territorial space to a gateway destination that integrates accessibility, identity, attractions, services, and economic activities.

The second result shows that local identity and resources are the main foundation for the formation of *border destination branding*. The *destination branding* literature shows that branding is not limited to logos, slogans, or promotional activities, but is related to strategy, experience, *brand equity*, *place attachment*, loyalty, word-of-mouth, and social media (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). In border areas, these identities become more complex because destination brands are formed by a combination of local culture, history of cross-border relationships, landscape, culinary, language, people's lives, and border geographical character. Cerić et al. (2024) found that destination management organizations on both sides of cross-border destinations can display different landscape and heritage elements while promoting interconnected geographic areas. This demonstrates the importance of building a coherent destination narrative without losing the uniqueness of each region. Thus, Border Resources & Local Identity becomes the starting point in the formation of brand identities that are authentic, different, and difficult for other destinations to replicate.

The third outcome identifies collaborative destination governance as a mechanism that connects border resources to *destination branding* success. Perkins et al. (2020) show that stakeholder collaboration plays an important role in regional *destination branding* because fragmentation of marketing interests and messages can weaken the consistency of destination imagery.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study concludes that border areas have the potential to be repositioned from just a *border as barrier* to a border as tourism gateway that plays a role in strengthening tourism competitiveness and regional economies. The results of the literature synthesis show that this transformation requires integration between local resources and identity, collaborative governance, destination branding, destination attractiveness, tourism competitiveness, tourism development, and regional economic competitiveness. Cultural identity, history, landscape, culinary, cross-border interaction, and geographical character of border areas are strategic resources that can be developed into destination value propositions. However, these resources do not automatically generate a competitive advantage without the support of governance that is able to coordinate governments, communities, business actors, DMOs, MSMEs, and cross-regional stakeholders.

Conceptually, this research resulted in a Border Tourism Gateway Competitiveness Framework with the flow of Border Identity & Resources → Collaborative Governance → Border Destination Branding → Destination Attractiveness → Tourism Competitiveness → Tourism Development → Regional Economic Competitiveness. This framework places *destination branding* not only as a promotional instrument, but as a strategic mechanism to transform the resources and identity of border areas into market value, attractiveness,

and competitive advantage. Thus, the main contribution of this research is to expand the relationship between *border tourism literature*, *destination branding*, and regional economic development, as well as provide a perspective that Indonesia's border area can be developed from peripheral areas to national gateways, competitive tourism destinations, and regional economic nodes.

Suggestions

Based on the results of the research, the government and destination managers need to develop a place-based border destination branding strategy that is tailored to the character of each border area and does not use a uniform branding approach. Strengthening local identity needs to be followed by improving connectivity, quality of information.

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