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Rebranding Sawahlunto: From Mining Town to Cultural Tourism under the Leadership of Ir. H. Amran Nur

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ABSTRACT

Sawahlunto is a post-industrial city in West Sumatra formerly known as a colonial coal mining center. Under the leadership of Ir. H. Amran Nur (2003–2013), the city transformed its identity by repositioning itself as a culturally based mining tourism destination. This study employs a qualitative case study approach involving 10 participants (four institutional informants and six complementary non-government participants) using in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to examine the drivers and implementation of the city's rebranding process through the Muzellec and Lambkin rebranding framework. The findings indicate that declining mining activities, population outflow, and urban stagnation became key drivers of policy change. The local government responded through integrated communication strategies, including cultural festivals, city publications, visual identity development, and collaboration with media and community stakeholders, with the Silo structure serving as a central symbolic icon. Unlike many Indonesian post-mining cities that prioritize economic substitution or physical revitalization, Sawahlunto integrates tangible mining heritage with intangible cultural narratives supported by participation among the stakeholders examined. The findings suggest that post-industrial city rebranding can develop as a long-term communicative governance process in which recurring communication practices and collaborative stakeholder engagement contribute to the continuity of urban identity transformation over time.

Keywords: Cultural mining tourism, city rebranding, government public relations, mining town, urban identity

ABSTRAK

Sawahlunto adalah kota pasca-industri di Sumatera Barat yang dulunya dikenal sebagai pusat pertambangan batubara kolonial. Di bawah kepemimpinan Ir. H. Amran Nur (2003–2013), kota ini mentransformasikan identitasnya dengan memposisikan diri sebagai destinasi wisata pertambangan berbasis budaya. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan 10 partisipan (empat informan institusional dan enam partisipan non pemerintah pelengkap, observasi lapangan, dan analisis dokumen untuk meneliti pendorong dan implementasi proses rebranding kota melalui kerangka kerja rebranding Muzellec dan Lambkin. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penurunan aktivitas pertambangan, arus keluar penduduk, dan stagnasi perkotaan menjadi pendorong utama perubahan kebijakan. Pemerintah daerah menanggapi hal ini melalui strategi komunikasi terpadu, termasuk festival budaya, publikasi kota, pengem-

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bangun identitas visual, dan kolaborasi dengan media dan pemangku kepentingan masyarakat, dengan struktur Silo sebagai ikon simbolik utama. Tidak seperti banyak kota pasca-pertambangan di Indonesia yang memprioritaskan substitusi ekonomi atau revitalisasi fisik, Sawahlunto mengintegrasikan warisan pertambangan yang berwujud dengan narasi budaya tak berwujud yang didukung oleh partisipasi para pemangku kepentingan yang diteliti. Temuan mengindikasikan bahwa penataan ulang citra kota pasca-industri dapat berkembang sebagai proses tata kelola komunikatif jangka panjang, ketika praktik komunikasi yang berulang dan keterlibatan kolaboratif para pemangku kepentingan berkontribusi pada keberlanjutan transformasi identitas perkotaan dari waktu ke waktu.

Kata Kunci: Humas pemerintah, identitas perkotaan, kota tambang, *rebranding* kota, wisata tambang yang berbudaya

INTRODUCTION

Sawahlunto is a small town in West Sumatra Province, Indonesia. As early as since the Dutch colonized the local area, it became a core zone of coal mining, a status that has never been interrupted to date, spanning hundreds of years. Unlike many ordinary towns that formed as people gradually settled and naturally expanded little by little, this town carried a clear mission from its birth. In the 19th century, the Dutch colonial authorities that ruled the region built it specifically, with the sole purpose of supporting the development and operation of the Ombilin Coal Mine. The aforementioned Ombilin Coal Mine itself is one of the oldest mining sites in Southeast Asia.

In the academic community that studies mining heritage, there is a widely recognized core judgment: to understand the development paths that former mining-dependent regions have gone through, and how their unique local cultural identities gradually took shape, researching mining heritage is an unavoidable foundation, and all related research must start from this point (García-León et al., 2017). When many people mention mining heritage, they may think it is a vague, intangible, and empty concept, yet it is completely wrong. It has left far too many tangible physical traces. There are old buildings left from the colonial period, the long tunnels used for coal mining, and various supporting facilities for mining operations, all of which are concrete objects that can be witnessed and visited in person. They have long since changed their identity, becoming the unique cultural assets of this small town.

Coal output declined year by year, and local people who had relied on coal mining to make a living lost their livelihoods. Family after family packed up their belongings, moved with their entire households to other places to scrape by. Sawahlunto, a small city that had once sustained all its local operations entirely on coal mines, saw its mines shut down, and the shops along the upstream and downstream industrial chains also could

not keep operating. All industries gradually came to a halt, and the city's entire development became completely stuck, unable to move forward any longer. From 1995 to 2000, in only five years, the city's total local population dropped by 8% (Sawahlunto Statistics Office, 2001), and subsequent academic research directly classified it as a ghost town (Syafrini et al., 2022).

At that time, this city could barely sustain even the most basic daily operations, and was on the verge of complete abandonment. The local government could not stand by and watch it disappear entirely; it had to find a way to draw people back to the city and bring it back to life. Thus, the city completely changed its development trajectory—it abandoned its reliance on coal mining, and pivoted to transform into a tourist city centered on coal mining culture (Syafrini et al., 2022). There was an official named Ir. H. Amran Nur whose tenure lasted from 2003 to 2013. Over the entire decade he held office, the local government launched a full set of practical, implementable policies, all of which centered on developing cultural tourism. Thanks to these policies, the region gradually unearthed the unique value hidden within its decades-long mining history, and put this long-standing legacy to tangible use for tourism development.

With these concrete measures, the small town, which had previously nearly ground to a halt with barely any pedestrians on its desolate streets, slowly recovered and regained its vitality. It re-established its reputation across the entire region, its streets and alleys once again filled with coming and going people, restoring its former bustle and noise. The city has long preserved many valuable historic sites and old buildings, including the coal silos once used to stockpile coal, as well as old buildings left over from the colonial period. All of these old sites and buildings were designated as protected cultural assets (Chang et al., 2023). The local government also specifically renovated each of these old buildings and former sites one by one, transforming them into iconic landmarks that fit the city's new tourism positioning. Since then, whenever outsiders mention these old buildings, they immediately think of Sawahlunto, the small town that successfully transformed into a tourist destination.

The first iconic attractions that out-of-town visitors see upon arriving here are these restored old sites, each of which can tell the story of Sawahlunto's past years of coal mining (Zali et al., 2014). These surviving old heritage sites cannot be left unattended, left to slowly decay under wind and rain. To preserve them for the long term, they require continuous management and maintenance, as well as ongoing renovations, transformations, and new purpose exploration, so that they can be preserved in perpetuity. To keep these old structures preserved in perpetuity, the old facilities originally built to

support coal mining had to be renovated and refurbished, converted into public spaces that can host various cultural events, support the launch of new local creative projects, and receive tourists flocking in from across the country. It was precisely through this kind of transformation that these cultural heritage sites were able to be preserved (Zaborska-Jagieo, 2012).



Figure 1. The Silo, a Historical Relic of Sawahlunto City

Source: Field documentation (2024)

Svalento integrates three elements: cultural heritage conservation, local resident participation, and identity building. This model was proposed by Kotašková (2022) and it was exactly this set of practices that helped it obtain the UNESCO World Heritage title in 2019. Receiving this title confirmed the transformation that the city has been promoting. It was a veritable industrial center in the past, and is now shifting towards becoming a mining tourism destination, and developing mining tourism is currently the city's core development focus. A study by Chatterjee & Dupre (2019) points out that this heritage status can boost local tourism development, strengthen local residents' sense of identity with the city, and also drive local economic growth.

The core question of this study is what successive local governments had relied on to sustain this new urban positioning after Ir. H. Amran Nur first repositioned Sawahlunto as a mining cultural tourism city. They achieved this by integrating and advancing three

tasks: first, making good use of the local remaining mining heritage; second, implementing strategic communication work; and third, mobilizing community residents to participate. Most existing studies on urban brand repositioning only focus on destination marketing and visual identity (Fajri et al., 2024). However, these existing studies have deficiencies. Few of them can clarify how post-industrial cities can sustain the newly redefined urban identity they worked hard to establish over the long term, after the government that initially launched the brand repositioning left office. There is another category of studies that specifically focus on urban renewal. They fail to thoroughly unpack a set of implementable communication logics, which is how to gradually weave the original industrial heritage into the city's new cultural narrative and build a stable urban identity that can withstand uncertainties.

The current research is expected to give three contributions. The first contribution is that this research applies the corporate rebranding model proposed by Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) to the governance of post-industrial cities, which have long broken away from their past development model centered on industrial production. This model is applied to the management affairs of such cities for the first time. The second contribution is that this research clarifies how local leadership, strategic communication, and government public relations work together to sustain a city's new brand across the tenures of multiple successive governments. The third is that this research verifies that combining physical mining heritage with intangible cultural narratives can support the development of sustainable tourism.

Whether Savalon can successfully transform from a mining city to a sustainable city hinges critically on the communication strategy of the local government. Some scholars argue that the city's mining heritage can, on one hand, attract tourists, and on the other hand, preserve local traditional customs (Jelen, 2018). To enable more local residents to understand the value of these mining heritages, and to prevent these old traces that record the city's past from gradually fading from public memory, the government has specially launched four targeted promotion measures: the first is to print promotional materials to carry out popularization and promotion for public; the second is to hold theme activities related to mining heritage; the third is to coordinate various media to jointly support this publicity work; the fourth is to mobilize local residents to participate in person.

To clarify how these concrete, practical measures gradually reshape the city's brand image, this study systematically organizes all previous literature related to government public relations and strategic communication. Government public relations itself has two core functions: first, to build smooth communication channels between the government and the public, so that both sides can work toward the same goal (Broom & Sha, 2013); second, to implement publicity activities to promote the achievement of urban development goals (Sidiq & Harahap, 2019).

This study identifies leadership, strategic communication, and government public relations as three interconnected core pillars in the process of reshaping the city's brand (Zaki et al, 2024). These three pillars each undertake different functions throughout the entire process of city branding, and can also complement each other to form complete support. First, the core role of leadership is to formulate a shared vision for the city's future that all residents can identify with (Kazanskaia, 2025a). Also, the task of strategic communication is to convert this relatively macro vision, which is somewhat distant from the daily lives of ordinary people, into public cognition that ordinary people can understand and easily access, so that everyone can clearly grasp what this vision is. Finally, government public relations takes the lead in advancing the implementation of this vision, turning plans into tangible actions (Kazanskaia, 2025b). The entire research framework is also built on the basis of the research of Ginesta & de San Eugenio (2021). In addition to these core structural roles, leadership with strategic thinking can also promote city brand reshaping through three specific mechanisms: formulating a shared vision, shaping the internal cultural atmosphere of the institution, and influencing the public's perception of the city (Rebecca et al., 2006). Further, this study conducts analysis using the rebranding model proposed by Muzellec & Lambkin (2006). The model is designed to analyze issues related to brand repositioning. It defines rebranding as updating stakeholders' perception of a subject by transforming the subject's identity. To complete a full set of brand repositioning, three core steps must also be followed: first sort out the motivation for carrying out this work, then clarify the goals of the effects to be achieved, and finally implement the specific execution process.

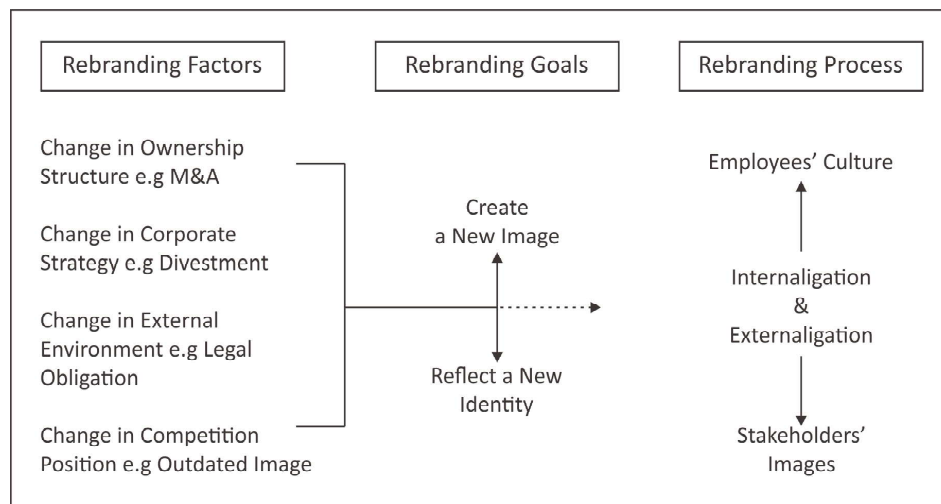


Figure 2. Model of the Rebranding Process

Source: (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006)

This study specifically explores three aspects: first, the specific process by which the city of Sawahlunto gradually advanced rebranding during the tenure of Ir. H. Amran Nur; second, the strategic communication work that supported the external implementation and promotion of this rebranding effort; third, the relevant frameworks that have long supported the city in maintaining its identity as a mineral culture and tourism city.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative case study analyzes Sawahlunto's rebranding and sustainability. It uses a retrospective longitudinal perspective (Blazejewski, 2011; Hassett & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013) to track policies from 2003 through 2024. Data were collected via in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and documentation, leveraging the case study method's capacity to access diverse evidence (Mirhosseini & Bagheri-Lori, 2015).

The data collection method is through semi-structured interviews with key informants which includes: government officials during the Amran Nur period, public relations officials, relevant agencies, Local tourism stakeholders, Cultural figures, and relevant academics. Informants were selected by purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and institutional knowledge of the city branding process.

This study involved 10 relevant participants. Four institutional informants – the Mayor of Sawahlunto during the rebranding period, the Government Public Relations officer, the Head of the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), and the Head of the

Tourism Office. They were selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) direct responsibility in policy formulation or implementation related to city branding, (2) active involvement in communication or promotion activities supporting Sawahlunto's mining tourism identity, and (3) possession of institutional knowledge regarding the transformation of the city's identity. The remaining six participants were selected to provide complementary perspectives on community experience, cultural participation, local business adaptation, and visitor perception. They were two long-term residents (C1–C2), one cultural community representative (C3), one tourism-related SME owner (C4), and two tourists (C5–C6). Their accounts were used to triangulate how the rebranding narrative was interpreted and experienced outside government institutions. They were not treated as representative of the whole Sawahlunto population or as independent evidence of policy effectiveness. Table 1 presents the participant profiles.

Table 1. Informant Profiles

Code Informant	Role/Stakeholder	Period of Involvement	Selection rationale	Information contributed
G1	Former Mayor (Amran Nur)	2003-2013	Initiator	Vision, strategy
G2	GPR Officer	2003-2024	Communication	Media strategy
G3	Head of Bappeda	Regional development planning during the rebranding period	Planning	Policy integration
G4	Head Tourism Office	Tourism development (2003–2024)	Tourism	Destination branding
C1	Community Representative	Resident for more than 20 years	Identity change	Public perception
C2	Community Representative	Resident for more than 20 years	Civic experience	Civic experience and perceived identity recognition
C3	Cultural community representative	Active in a local cultural organization during the study period	Heritage activities	Community participation
C4	SME owner	Active in the local tourism economy during the study period	Creative economy	Economic impacts

C5	Tourist	Visited Sawahlunto during the 2024 fieldwork period	User perspective	Destination image
C6	Tourist	Visited Sawahlunto during the 2024 fieldwork period	User perspective	Experience

**Sources: Developed through the Author's Analytical Framework
Based on Field Data (2025)**

Data were collected using open-ended interviews that guaranteed data redundancy as seen in re-occurrence of themes in the interviews (Bourgeault, et al., 2010). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the exploration of strategic issues related to city communication and branding (Spezzano & Lusby, 2024). Key sites that showed the rebranding process (Cheek et al. 2024) such as the Silo building, Lubang Mbah Soero, Mining Museum area and various activities within cultural festivals were observed non-participatorily.

The observations were made to find visual symbols and representations of postindustrial urban identity. Observations were structured around three levels of analysis: (1) the physical components of branding including heritage architecture, spatial arrangements and visual mining motifs; (2) the communicative representations in signage, tourism stories and marketing materials; and (3) the public participation and engagement behaviors in rebranded cultural spaces. Systematic observation checklist of field notes and visual documentation were used in data collection for analytical rigor and consistency. Direct observations were also conducted to follow the evolution of subsequent government policies. A documentary analysis was undertaken of local government policy archives, local media publications, tourism promotional materials and city government annual reports on branding and public communication (Nurse, 1991).

The primary data were composed of interviews with all 10 participants and non-participant field observations; the secondary data were composed of official policy documents, municipal planning records, visual communication products, tourism materials and media reports. The four institutional informants were employed to reconstruct policy formulation and communication implementation whereas the six non-government participants were utilized to provide complementary accounts in an effort to triangulate community, cultural, business and visitor perspectives. This distinction was preserved during coding and interpretation so that the complementary accounts would not be treated as representative of the population of the city.

For the data analysis of this study, the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman is adopted. The analysis procedures of this model are, in sequence, data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The entire process continues continuously until no new analytical clues can be explored, at which point the analysis terminates (Sugiyono, 2011).

After formally entering the data condensation stage, the researchers assigned codes to all interview transcripts, recorded notes, and relevant materials in their possession one by one. This was done to sort out the patterns of rebranding from the scattered raw materials. There were initially six categories of preliminary codes sorted out, which were leadership communication, mining heritage presentation, government public relations, community participation, tourism promotion, and narrative coherence. At the initial stage of the research, a set of preliminary codes were first organized. These scattered codes were then gathered and integrated, and finally four core themes were extracted: the drivers of brand repositioning, communication strategies, identity construction, and brand sustainability.

To ensure that the analytical process of the entire research is clear and traceable, and to guarantee full transparency of the analysis, this research adopts Muzellec and Lambkin's brand repositioning model as the guiding framework for the whole study. This model can map each dimension at the theoretical level one-to-one with the operational indicators of Sawahlunto. With this set of correspondences, researchers can systematically interpret all the collected data, and all content related to data interpretation is recorded in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of the Muzellec & Lambkin Rebranding Model in the Sawahlunto Case

Rebranding Model Dimension (Muzellec & Lambkin)	Conceptual Indicators	Operational Indicators in Sawahlunto Context	Analytical Categories	Data Sources
Rebranding Drivers	Factors triggering identity change	Economic decline after mining closure; population decline; policy shift toward tourism	Identity crisis narrative; economic transition; policy transformation	Interviews, policy documents, archival reports

Rebranding Objectives	Intended new perception and positioning	Transformation into a Cultural Mining Tourism City	Vision communication; city positioning narrative; tourism-oriented identity framing	Interviews, government publications, promotional materials
Identity Reconstruction (Physical)	Modification of tangible identity elements	Revitalization of mining heritage sites and urban symbols	Visual symbols; heritage revitalization; spatial branding	Observation, visual documentation, tourism sites
Identity Reconstruction (Symbolic/Communicative)	Communication of new meanings and values	Use of Silo icon, festivals, storytelling of mining heritage	Symbolic representation; narrative framing; cultural communication events	Observation, interviews, event documentation
Stakeholder Engagement Process	Internal and external participation in rebranding	Collaboration with communities, cultural groups, tourism actors	Community participation; stakeholder collaboration; co-creation practices	Interviews, community programs, media reports
Rebranding Communication Strategy	Strategic dissemination and image management	Media relations, publications, festivals, partnerships	Government public relations activities; media engagement; tourism promotion strategies	Interviews, media publications, policy archives
Brand Sustainability	Continuity and gradual institutional embedding of identity	Continuation across administrations until 2024	Narrative continuity; leadership communication; indications of policy and institutional embedding	Interviews, annual reports, longitudinal policy review

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 3 details the conversion of raw empirical data into analytical themes. Interviews and documents underwent open coding to form categories. These were interpreted as themes and mapped to Muzellec and Lambkin's rebranding framework.

Table 3. Example of Coding Process and Theme Development

Raw Data (Interview/Document)	Open Coding	Analytical Category	Emerging Theme	Muzellec & Lambkin Dimension
"When coal mining declined, many employees left Sawahlunto, so we had to find another future for the city." (Former Mayor-Amran Nur-G1)	Mining decline; population loss; economic crisis	Identity crisis and economic transition	External drivers of rebranding	Rebranding Drivers
"We promoted the Silo not merely as an old building, but as the symbol of Sawahlunto's new identity." (Government PR Officer-G2)	Symbolic communication; city icon; visual identity	Heritage-based communication	Identity reconstruction through heritage symbols	Identity Reconstruction (Communicative)
"The shift toward cultural tourism was incorporated into the city's long-term development planning so that the branding agenda could continue beyond one administration." (Head of Bappeda-G3)	Long-term planning; policy continuity; institutional integration	Institutional planning and policy alignment	Policy embedding and continuity of rebranding	Brand Sustainability
"Festivals encourage people to appreciate mining history while attracting visitors." (Head of Tourism Office-G4)	Cultural events; tourism promotion; storytelling	Cultural communication strategy	Strategic communication for place branding	Rebranding Communication Strategy
"Receiving UNESCO recognition made us feel more proud of our city and motivated us to preserve its history." (Community Representative-C1)	Civic pride; identity acceptance	Community response	Indications of city-identity acceptance	Brand Sustainability

“The mining heritage is not only preserved as history, but also keeps local traditions alive through cultural performances.” (Cultural Community Representative-C3)	Heritage preservation; cultural performance; community involvement	Community participation in heritage preservation	Collaborative identity construction	Stakeholder Engagement Process
“Since tourism has grown, more visitors come to my business, and we now use local mining stories when introducing our products.” (SME Owner-C4)	Tourism economy; local storytelling; business adaptation	Economic participation and identity utilization	Community-based economic adaptation	Stakeholder Engagement Process
“What impressed me most was that the mining history is experienced throughout the city, not only inside the museums.” (Tourist-C5)	Visitor experience; authentic heritage; destination image	External perception of city identity	Communicated city image	Identity Reconstruction (Communicative)

Source: Developed from interview transcripts

The analytical process generated coding categories that were then compared across all interviews, observations and documentary evidence to identify recurring patterns in government communication practices. Following the principles of thematic analysis, conceptually related categories were grouped into broader strategic dimensions in the analytical framework of Miles and Huberman, which explained the persistence of the Sawahlunto City Council in embedding and communicating the city’s rebranding over time. The classification of communication strategies is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Analytical Dimensions of Government Communication Strategies in Sawahlunto's Rebranding Process

Communication Strategy	Strategic Objective	Main Actors	Target Public	Communication Channels	Empirical Evidence	Function in the Rebranding Process
Mass Publications	Disseminate the new identity of Sawahlunto as a cultural mining tourism city	Government Public Relations; Tourism Office	Local residents, domestic tourists, investors	Brochures, leaflets, official websites, social media, newspapers	Interview with Government PR; tourism brochures; municipal publications	Supports public awareness and reinforces the official city narrative
Cultural Events	Promote mining heritage while encouraging community participation	Tourism Office; Cultural Office; local cultural communities	Local community, visitors, creative communities	SIMFest, Underground Mining Charm Festival, heritage festivals	Interviews with Tourism Office, cultural community; field observations	Creates opportunities for emotional engagement and communicates the city's cultural identity
Visual Identity	Establish consistent visual representation of the new city brand	Local Government; Tourism Office	Residents and visitors	City logo, Silo icon, signage, public spaces, souvenirs	Observation at heritage sites; planning documents	Reinforces symbolic recognition and spatial identity
Media Partnerships	Expand visibility and credibility of city branding	Government PR; local and national media	Regional and national audiences	News coverage, television, online media	Media reports; interview with PR Office	Amplifies communication reach and supports the perceived legitimacy of the rebranding narrative
Stakeholder Relations	Encourage collaborative participation in heritage preservation and tourism	Local Government; SMEs; cultural communities; residents	Community groups, SMEs, tourism actors	Community forums, tourism meetings, collaborative programs	Interviews with SME owner, community representative, residents	Supports co-creation of city identity and contributes to long-term continuity and gradual institutional embedding of rebranding

Source: Author's Analytical Categorization based on Interview Data, Observations, Documentary Analysis, and Policy Archives (2025)

Triangulation consisted of a systematic comparison of documentary and observational evidence with data from interviews (Paul, 1996). Evidence from various data sources was contrasted to determine patterns of recurrence and convergence. The researchers compared evidence from different data sources for recurring patterns and points of convergence. First, the statements made by key informants about the objectives, implementation and continuity of the rebranding strategy were compared with the official policy documents, municipal planning reports, mayoral regulations and tourism development programs in an effort to verify the consistency of the policy.

The preliminary findings derived during the research phase are cross-checked one by one against all accessible media reports and official publicity materials available at the time, to measure exactly how the city's newly constructed urban identity is conveyed to the public. After completing this comparison, the researchers immersed themselves in various urban settings to conduct observations—they visited registered heritage sites, publicly accessible public spaces, and local cultural festival and event sites, where they only documented activities without participating in any event processes, a practice referred to in research as non-participant observation. The purpose of this approach is to verify whether the previously publicized urban branding strategy can be clearly reflected in the city's physical environment and public activities that ordinary people participate in. If, during the verification process, inconsistencies are found between the records from earlier interviews with respondents, the information retrieved from written materials, and the conditions observed on site, researchers do not arbitrarily skip the contradictions to draw direct conclusions. Instead, they first conduct additional verification of more relevant written materials, reorganize all accessible archives and reports, then return to the relevant informed respondents who provided the original information to clarify the contradictory details one by one. Only after all discrepancies are verified and clarified do they begin to interpret the final research conclusions.

This cross-verification process has built a traceable chain of evidence: research data from different sources are cross-checked and validated against one another, every single step from start to finish can be clearly traced, and the actually collected research data are firmly bound to the core analytical themes, eliminating the risk of mismatches between data and themes, which directly elevates this study's academic credibility. To prevent unfounded overgeneralization of conclusions—i.e., the mistake of treating isolated, small-scale cases as universally applicable rules—the research team set a strict mandate: every core theme must be supported by corroboration from at least two independent

data sources. This ensures that all final conclusions are recurring real-world circumstances, never coincidental isolated cases.

RESULTS

Rebranding Drivers: Leadership and Identity Crisis

Sawahlunto has launched a city rebranding initiative to reverse the social and economic decline triggered by the shrinking coal mining industry. All interviewees G1–G4 participating in the research agreed that Mayor Ir. H. Amran Nur, who held office from 2003–2013, was the first person to take the lead in transforming the city into a coal mining cultural tourism destination. The core of this transformation strategy, which involves converting abandoned, decommissioned former coal mining sites into well-planned cultural tourism resources, was cited from G1.

In the subsequent process of advancing the plan, the local government did not rely on top-down directives to force implementation. Instead, it brought together all stakeholders related to the city's development, and after repeated communication and collaboration, drafted the development blueprint for the "Culturally Rich Mining Tourism City", thereby gaining broad consensus. This part of the account is sourced from G2–G4. This inclusive process that incorporated all relevant parties helped the city's new identity obtain widespread societal recognition and institutional legitimacy (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2021).

After the internal plan was implemented, external promotion did not passively wait for opportunities. Proactive, forward-looking leadership expanded the scope of the city's promotion. The mayor personally attended various domestic and international events to promote Sawahlunto's new tourism projects, a detail sourced from G2, G4; at the same time, a unified shared narrative was developed to align all stakeholders' efforts toward the same long-term vision (Rahmanto & Fariza, 2025; Sotaraute & Beer, 2017).

Strategic Communication Practices in the Sawahlunto Rebranding Program

Sawahlunto, Indonesia, was once a town that relied on mining to sustain itself. As the mining industry gradually declined, the entire town fell into decline. Through a well-coordinated set of integrated strategic communication systems, it successfully transformed and became a cultural tourism destination capable of attracting tourists. This core system that enabled its transformation contains three key elements: large-scale information dissemination, specially planned series of cultural events, and unified visual identity

management. The first element involves pushing information across all mainstream media platforms, with promotional content targeting two groups: local residents living in the area and visiting tourists. The goal is to reverse the inherent impression people hold of the town, from “industrial town” to “cultural tourism destination” (Ranta, 2011; Novikova et al., 2018).

The second element is to build benchmark cultural events that represent the town’s new image. Key events such as the Sawahlunto International Music Festival and the Underground Mining Festival have become highly influential communication channels for conveying the new image (Bagariæ et al., 2024). These events not only fully presented the local mining history to all participants, but also effectively attracted a large number of non-local tourists. At the same time, they motivated local residents to actively participate in their hometown’s transformation, and made the entire society generally accept and recognize the town’s image transformation.

The third element is to implement a unified visual communication strategy, establishing unified specifications for all public-facing visual content in the area. From roadside directional signs and promotional logos used for external outreach, to historic old buildings with heritage value, all follow a unified style. In this way, all promotional materials released to the public are fully consistent with the experience of tourists who actually visit the area, eliminating the disconnect between publicity and the real local scene. Within this set of unified visual symbols, the local silo buildings have become the town’s most recognizable landmark, and also the core symbol of Sawahlunto’s transformation.

In addition to these three core supporting efforts, the local area has also maintained long-term stable cooperation with the media. By releasing press releases, inviting media practitioners to conduct on-site visits to the area, and carrying out collaborative G2 reporting, the town’s transformation story has been conveyed to more audiences (Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018). As a supporting promotional measure, this continuous linkage with the media not only enhanced the credibility of the entire town’s image transformation work, but also made more people aware of Sawahlunto’s transformation.

The results also show that, in addition to institutional communication, non-governmental actors also communicate in a complementary manner. The contributions are narrated through the stories of two community representatives (C1–C2), a cultural community representative (C3), a SME owner (C4) and two tourists (C5–C6) via community initiatives, cultural performances, promotion of local business, personal social media content and visitor created digital narratives. In general, such practices were not

formalized by governmental institutions, but they extended the circulation of heritage narratives in everyday interactions. The evidence suggests collaborative tendencies in the interviewed stakeholder group, and not city-wide participation, due to the small and purposively selected non-government group. The results of the interview also indicate a significant communication problem in communicating the colonial mining history of Sawahlunto. One of the government's informants, G4, said that international communication must be carefully framed in terms of narrative given the sensitive history of orang rantai (chained labourers). This led to the conscious development of tourism narratives that focused on resilience, collective memory, heritage preservation and cultural transformation while being historically accurate. This finding suggests that post-industrial city branding of heritage is a balancing act between historical accuracy and destination attractiveness, especially in communicating sensitive historical experiences to diverse audiences.

Identity Reconstruction through Symbolic and Spatial Transformation

To build a new brand image for a city, visual symbols such as patterns and logos that convey information are indispensable conditions. To change people's inherent impression of a city and replace it with a brand-new public perception, everything relies on these visible symbols; without them, this transformation cannot be promoted at all. The city of Sawahlunto in Indonesia successfully achieved this through this very approach. This city once relied on mining for its livelihood. After the mines ceased operations, the original mining facilities were left abandoned there. Instead of demolishing and discarding these old facilities, the local government invested efforts in renovating them, turning them into tourist attractions that can receive visitors and also provide popular science education to tourists.

Informed government officials G1 and G4, who were in charge of the coordination work, confirmed that this renovation was never an impulsive decision from start to finish, but a deliberately designed cognitive shift. The government plans to revamp the city. Its core task is to transform those long-abandoned mines within the city into assets with cultural value, through which the city will build a brand-new identity.

The specific approach to the transformation has also been determined. First, the old facilities left by the mines, including old factory buildings and old equipment, must be preserved in their original state; they cannot be demolished or damaged in any way that alters their original appearance. Next, new connotations will be infused into these old facilities that were once only used for mining, to gradually shape a clear and unique new

urban identity, so that whenever people mention this city, they will immediately associate it with this new positioning.

To advance this work smoothly, the government has established a unified promotional brand for Sawahlunto: Cultural Mining Tourism City. Regardless of which media channel is used for external promotion, this unified term will be adopted, and no chaotic, inconsistent names will be allowed. All external promotional materials will produce visual content in accordance with this unified approach. Even the promotional brochure for Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero uses exclusively mining-related images, and its visual style remains consistent from start to finish.

This consistent visual design connects the city's historical roots as a mining settlement on one end, and sustains its new identity as a city focused on cultural tourism on the other. It prevents the new identity from becoming disconnected from the city's old history. It can not only attract tourists from other regions to visit specifically, but also enable local ordinary residents to immediately understand the government's plan, and clearly grasp what the city will develop into in the future.

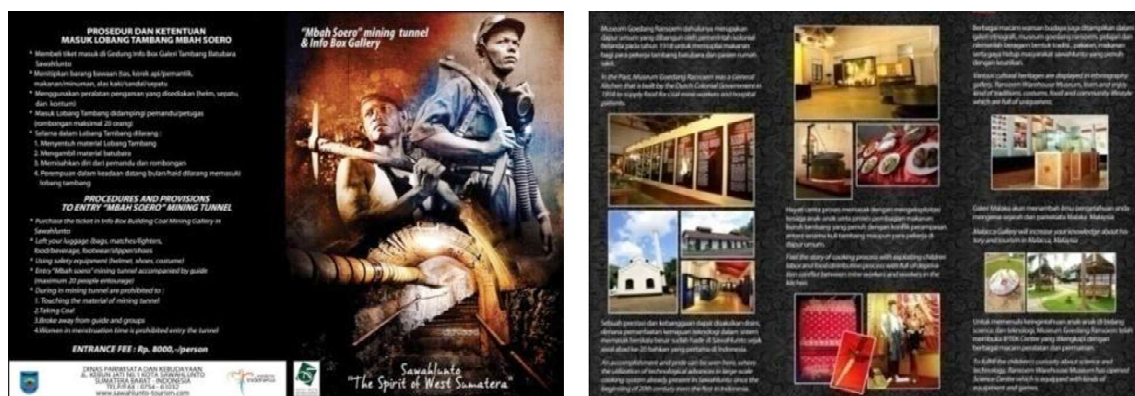


Figure 3. Sawahlunto Tourist Attraction Leaflet

Source: Author's documentation (2024)

The Silo, which was renovated and put back into use, was originally a storage structure for the mine to stockpile extracted minerals, and has now become the core visual landmark in the mining heritage tourism sector of the city of Svalento. Standing right there, it lays out clearly the real experiences of the colonial-era miners who toiled on this land. Two interviewees representing the government, namely respondents labeled G1 and G3, repeatedly stressed that the original industrial style of this building must be preserved. Only in this way can the authenticity of the city's history be safeguarded, allowing the

stories that took place in the past to pass completely and coherently from the past to the present, without becoming distorted or altered over time.

Community representative C1 also mentioned that for native locals, this Silo is not some old building far away in a scenic spot—it is a historical reference point that they can see as soon as they step out of their homes and encounter every single day. When locals lead visiting tourists around and guide them through the city, they always use this Silo as the most reliable landmark, saying “it’s just north of that big Silo”, and everyone can find the right place. Its role goes far beyond that of an old building worth preserving; it is also a communication symbol that can unify the consensus of all people. Even as the city keeps developing and changing, with new buildings and new commercial districts being built one after another, it can hold the historical memories related to the mine and the miners firmly in everyone’s hearts.

Urban symbols are the foundation for constructing identity, as they can help shape external impressions of the city and gradually cultivate a sense of pride among local residents—a conclusion drawn from the study by Xiao et al., 2012. The bonding and reinforcing effect brought by this symbol can be seen everywhere in the city of Svalento. For example, in directories that list local businesses and attractions, such as the Yellow Pages, mine tourism is specifically included as a key feature that defines the core identity of the city. All visual elements related to the mine repeatedly appear in three types of materials across the city: first, promotional materials used to market the city; second, site identification materials placed in various public areas of the city; and third, commercial promotional materials used by local businesses. They maintain a unified form across all different scenarios used to convey information, and their designs have never been arbitrarily changed. This consistency not only makes the city’s ongoing branding renovation project easier for both outsiders and locals to recognize, but also makes the project more persuasive, winning recognition from more people.



Figure 4. Sawahlunto City Yellow Pages Listings

Source: Author's documentation (2024)

Building on the findings of this study, local stakeholders have interpreted the Silo as a 'window to history' and a 'marker of the future'. The latter refers to its historical role as a temporary storage of processed coal before being transported to Teluk Bayur Port, and is a representation of Sawahlunto's industrial heritage. The latter suggests its current function as a landmark in the city's transformation to a cultural mining tourism destination. Interviews with government informants (G1) and community representatives (C2) indicate appears in both official tourism narratives and the stories of the two interviewed stakeholders. The coexistence of these historical and future-oriented meanings indicates that the Sawahlunto case suggests that city rebranding does not necessarily erase industrial identity but reconstructs it into a cultural resource that is able to connect collective memory with future urban aspirations.

The Silo is alive in public discourse, in the built environment of the city and in the digital spaces, the creative outputs, the local forms of art and the content created by visitors. The owner of the SME (C4) said that in the accounts investigated, mining symbols were used more often in souvenir products and culinary branding, because they have become known symbols of Sawahlunto. Similarly, the two tourists (C5 and C6) mentioned that the Silo was the most memorable landmark of the city and an instant visual association with Sawahlunto's heritage identity. The findings suggest that symbolic communication has shifted from government media to communication practices based on community and the market. As noted by Chan et al. (2021), a positive cognitive image can increase community engagement, build brand loyalty, and promote word-of-mouth promotion. Therefore, the symbolic identity reconstruction in Sawahlunto is not only at the visual level but also at the cognitive and social levels, where heritage symbols become a shared reference among the interviewed stakeholders and help to maintain the continuity of the city's rebranding beyond formal government communication.

Sustainability of Rebranding and the Role of Society

Up until 2024, Sawahlunto's steps to rebuild itself as a coal mining cultural tourism destination have never stalled due to the turnover of several consecutive groups of administrators. Even after leadership teams changed, the city's core transformation direction never wavered, with each successive administration continuing to advance toward the same goal. The city's new identity has been continuously consolidated through government projects, heritage protection frameworks, and grassroots community activities; it has never faded with the passage of time, and has also gained wide recognition from non-governmental stakeholders. It is not only the government that is advancing this transformation in a self-reinforcing echo chamber; all relevant civil parties also endorse this new positioning. This development path aligns with the academic conclusions of García-León et al. (2017), which proposed that coal mining heritage is a core strategic asset for reshaping local identity and building urban tourism narratives. The path Sawahlunto is taking perfectly validates the judgment of that research conclusion.

To ensure this urban transformation remains stable in the long term and does not become unsustainable after only a few years of implementation, grassroots community participation is the foundation; relying solely on unilateral government investment can hardly sustain it for long. Today, the city's promotion and publicity work has long shifted from being led entirely by the government to gradually becoming various projects jointly supported by the community. The core narrative of the transformation is no longer only

written in official policy documents, but integrated into residents' daily activities, evolving from an official written requirement into a part of ordinary people's lives. This change exactly matches the established research conclusion put forward by Jelen, 2018: for post-industrial cities to develop sustainable tourism, local community participation in heritage conservation is an indispensable prerequisite, and the transformations taking place in Sawahlunto fully conform to this academically recognized judgment.

This government-people collaboration is not only evident in cultural and tourism promotion scenarios; it is also visible in the city's local MSME ecosystem. MSMEs deliberately incorporate coal-mining-related symbols and local historical stories into their own products and services, a choice that aligns perfectly with the municipal government's policy direction of supporting local creative enterprises, matching the government's planning. In this way, grassroots economic participation has become a stable mechanism that continuously consolidates and sustains the city's new brand in daily production and life, preventing this transformation positioning from remaining only at the publicity level, instead integrating it into daily business operations to be repeatedly strengthened (Saktianingrum et al. 2020).

In addition, there are several formal resident groups: the Sahabat Tambang Community, the Sawahlunto Heritage Walk, and the Local Culture Forum, all of which, through various cultural and educational projects, take the lead in safeguarding the city's historical value, standing at the forefront of protecting the city's history. These efforts complement the local government's strategies perfectly; instead of working separately and independently, they have come together to build a collaborative framework that enables public institutions and local residents to jointly shape and refine the city's growing new identity, advancing the transformation direction in a more solid manner.

The Sawahlunto City Government also implemented a communication strategy with the involvement of influential public figures who were invited to support the promotion of the city's cultural and tourism narrative, in addition to community engagement. They are officially known as "Friends of Sawahlunto City" representing people from different professions, such as academics, journalists, artists, government officials and cultural activists. The program shows that communication support went beyond formal government units, through the mobilization of external advocates whose professional credibility could widen the circulation of the city's heritage narrative.

Tabel 5. The figures of “Friends of Sawahlunto City.”

Ahmad Kanedi	Mayor of Bengkulu
Datuk Ahmad Tamimi Siregar	Artist/Actor (Malaysia)
Andre Juan Michels	<i>Keroncong</i> Music Artist
Asro Kamal Rokan	Senior Indonesian Journalist and Member of the Honorary Council of the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) Central Board (2009–2014), Editor-in-Chief of Republika Jakarta (2003–2005), General Manager of LKBN Antara (Indonesian National News Agency) (2005–2007)
Azwar Anas	Former Governor of West Sumatra, Minister of Transportation and Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs
Budi Yuwono	Director General of Cipta Karya, Ministry of Public Works
Budiyati Abigoya	Chair of the Center for Film and Television Education
Catrini Patrihari Kubontubuh	Lecturer, Executive Committee of the International National Trust Organization (INTO)
Dorodjatun Kuntjoro-Jakti	Professor Emeritus at FEUI, Former Indonesian Ambassador to the United States (1998-2001), and Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs (2001 -2004)
Erwin Nurdin	Editor-in-Chief of Bandara Group
Ferriyanto Gani (Gan Hok Liong)	Entrepreneur, Chairman of the Communication Board of the Unity of the Nation Movement-West Sumatra, Member of the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) West Sumatra, and Advisor to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kadin) West Sumatra
Hartadi A. Sarwono	Deputy Governor of the Bank of Indonesia
Hartati	Musical Creator of <i>Laskar Pelangi</i> (Choreographer)
Hasti Tarekat	Activist for the Preservation of Indonesian Culture
Hiltrud Cordes	Artist (Germany)
Julison Arifin	Director of Business Development at PT Kereta Api Indonesia (Persero) [Indonesian Railways (State-Owned Enterprise)]
Hj. Khamis Bin Hj. Abas	Executive Board Member of the Melaka Museum Authority, and President of the Malaysian Khaf Council
Marzuki Usman	Former Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (1998–1999)
Maulana Yusran	Chairperson, Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI – West Sumatra Chapter)
Mira P. Gunawan	Tourism Researcher, Tourism Institute, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB)
Moehammad Saiful Hadi Chalid	Editor-in-Chief, Perum LKBN Antara (Indonesian National News Agency)

Datuk Dr. Haji Mohd Jamil Bin Mukmin	Deputy Chairman, <i>Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam</i> (DMDI), Malacca, Malaysia
Mundardjito	Professor of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia (UI)
Peter Van Dun	Member, International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)
Quintarina Uniaty	Managing Editor, Scientific Journal of the Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Technology (FALTL), Trisakti University, and Head, Urban Research Center, Research Institute of Trisakti University
Sukrisno	President Director, PT Bukit Asam (Persero) Tbk
Suryadi Asmi	Director, Bank Nagari, West Sumatra
Syahrul Udjud	Deputy Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare Affairs (Religion, Culture, and Tourism) (2001–2003), and Special Staff to the Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia (2004–2009)
Sofjan Wanandi	Chairperson, Indonesian Employers Association (APINDO) (2008–2013)
Tan Sri Zainuddin Maidin	Former Minister of Information, Malaysia; Editor-in-Chief, <i>Utusan Melayu</i> Newspaper
Wahyu Kusumosusanto	Head, Sub-Directorate for State Building and Housing Management Development, Ministry of Public Works of Indonesia
Yayah Khisbiyah	Founder and Director, Center for Cultural Studies and Social Change

Source: The Friends of Sawahlunto Book, 2012

The core goal of the Friends of Sawahlunto City project is to help the city rebuild its brand. To achieve this goal, the project has deliberately brought together public figures from all walks of life to spread the story of the city's historical and cultural heritage to more people. The cooperation models between these individuals and the project vary: some have signed formal agreements, while others have only reached informal arrangements verbally. All of them rely on the credible reputation they have built in their respective industries to spread city-related information more widely. However, from start to finish, no formal statistical assessment has ever been conducted, leaving it unknown whether the audiences who view this content approve of them, and what their level of acceptance of this information is.

In addition to these invited high-profile individuals, local ordinary residents also voluntarily step forward to serve as informal promoters without signing any agreements. They either publish content on social media platforms to promote the city, or casually mention the city's strengths in their daily interactions with family, friends, and colleagues. This unplanned, spontaneously formed, naturally spreading brand promotion content perfectly fits the definition of tertiary communication (Saktianingrum et al., 2020).

Integrating the participation of the local community and the strength of advocates who come from outside the city to support it is exactly the "co-creation" concept mentioned in the field of city branding. This concept was proposed by Kavaratzis & Hatch in 2013, whose core meaning is that when building a city's image, it is not only local government agencies that can participate—all multi-stakeholders related to the city can join in to jointly refine and shape the city's identity. The work advanced by this collective effort can also give rise to many creative urban stories, and these stories can bring about a series of positive effects: improving the city's reputation, arousing local residents' sense of pride, deepening people's sense of belonging to the city, and enhancing the city's competitiveness in the tourism industry (Bastaman, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Extending the Muzellec and Lambkin Rebranding Model in a Post-Industrial City Context

The rebranding model created by Muzellec & Lambkin (2006) explains the identity of the brand change in three phases: rebranding drivers, rebranding objectives, and rebranding process. The model has been widely used in place branding and city rebranding studies because it is relevant in explaining the changes in the image of collective entities such as cities (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011; Zenker & Braun, 2017). By applying this model, the researchers can deeply analyze the transformation of the identity of the city from either the visual and symbolic aspects or structural, historical and socio-cultural dimensions.

a. Factors Leading to Rebranding

The main trigger in the city's rebranding process is identity crisis experienced by the city of Sawahlunto in the early 2000s. According to data, there was a decline of 8% in the city's population over five years until 2000, partly owing to the transfer of employees of Ombilin Mining Unit (UPO) outside the city following a decline in coal mining activities previously handled by PT Bukit Asam. Some 100 million tons of coal still remained in the

ground but at that time coal was cheap and it was not economical to mine any more. The death of the mining sector was an obvious sign that the city had lost its main economic base and, consequently, a significant social and spatial degradation occurred.

Besides the pressure from outside forces, internal interactions within the city government structure are also crucial. Internal factors are political responsibility and stakeholder management which affect significantly the implementation of city branding strategies (Braun, 2012; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). The concept of developing Sawahlunto into a city for mining tourism had been conveyed in the vision and mission of the mayor in the period 1988–2003, Drs. H. Subari Sukardi, through regional regulations to encourage the preservation of heritage. This idea, however, was only systematically realized under the leadership of his successor, Ir. H. Amran Nur. Not only did this leadership change entail changes in policies, but it also introduced a different vision for urban development, one that was more progressive.

Leadership structures in place branding are more similar to ownership structures in corporate organizations and influence the strategic direction and brand positioning (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Thus, leadership is a significant component in mobilizing stakeholders and coordinating resources needed for urban transformation (Sotarauta & Beer, 2017).

The two administrations have very different development orientations, which represent a major strategic shift. The vision which was previously normative during the tenure of Drs. H. Subari Sukardi, began to be physically and communicatively implemented through a series of policy initiatives by Ir. H. Amran Nur. The findings of the interview showed that the implementation of the follow-up of previous regulations was performed by breakthrough strategies in the tourism sector, such as opening access to historical tourist sites, developing public spaces and revitalizing infrastructure. These initiatives are part of systematic efforts to revitalize urban spaces visually and functionally (Grigolon, 2011) while constructing a tourism-oriented urban image at the same time.

b. Rebranding Objectives

This crisis of existence became the basis for the Sawahlunto City Government to formulate several strategic objectives of the rebranding program. These objectives include reviving the local economy through the development of historical tourism as a leading sector (Nomeikaite, 2010), changing the negative perceptions of the city among local and external audiences (Escourido-Calvo et al., 2020), building an inclusive city identity

based on local history and culture, yet open to modernization (Neduèin et al., 2025; Novikova et al., 2018), increasing active community participation in urban development through cultural communities, SMEs and youth involvement (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014), and strengthening the city's position nationally and globally through recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

With consistent smooth cross-group communication, specially planned cultural programs, and cooperation with cross-community civil society organizations, Sawahlunto has gradually achieved all the goals it set out to accomplish. It has transformed its original industrial history from merely being seen as outdated traces of development into enduring cultural values, while fostering widespread community pride across the city that gives local residents a sense of confidence when talking about their hometown. This carefully planned urban rebranding process has sorted out and built a completely new urban identity from scratch, breaking away from the public's past impression of it as a single-dimensional old industrial city, and the newly reconstructed urban identity firmly underpins the ongoing modernization drive today.

c. Rebranding Process

This urban Rebranding Process is advanced simultaneously along two tracks: on one hand, transforming the tangible, physical urban identifiers, and on the other, refining the intangible, non-physical core of the city's image. This approach agrees with conclusions in existing academic literature that urban brands are never created out of thin air, but gradually take shape through the intertwined interplay of a city's spatial layout, symbols representing the city, and the diverse social interactions that occur within it (Zenker & Braun, 2017).

Physical Aspects (Tangible Rebranding)

Several old buildings left over from the city's mining era have been restored and renovated, including the Silo, Goedang Ransoem Museum, and Lubang Tambang Mbah Soero. These restored spaces are used for cultural and tourism projects with popular science education functions, allowing visitors to learn about the local mining history on site. Advancing in tandem with the restoration of old buildings is the renovation of public spaces across the city. In addition to refurbishing public areas, unified themed signs have been installed, and a brand-new city logo has also been launched. This approach to branding the city's entire landscape leverages these physical spaces to pass on the

collective memories shared by local residents (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). These historical heritage sites preserved in the city have become symbolic, signified resources. For example, the aforementioned Silo has evolved into a highly recognizable visual symbol that clearly conveys the city's brand story.

Non-Physical Aspects (Intangible Rebranding)

Besides renovating the city's physical spaces, the local government has also simultaneously advanced the intangible, non-physical dimension of urban image reshaping. This has been implemented through three specific initiatives: first, launching various tourism promotion events; second, carrying out online digital marketing; and third, mobilizing local residents to participate in the image-building process. Events such as the Sawahlunto International Music Festival (SIMFest) and the Underground Mining Charm Festival all share the city's historical past with every participant. These cultural events are not rigid lectures, but highly effective experiential communication tools — participants can explore and experience the city in person, engaging in genuine interaction with the city's symbolic meaning through their firsthand experiences (Bagariae et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the story of Sawahlunto as “A Cultural Mining Tourism City” has been continuously conveyed in various media platforms. Local communities are encouraged to participate in tourism management, creative industries and digital storytelling. This participatory approach illustrates the increasing recognition that city branding is increasingly constructed through collaborative processes involving governments, communities and cultural actors (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Zenker & Erfgen, 2014).

This process proves that city rebranding is not only carried out by the government as the main actor (Zahrah, 2023) but also in collaboration with institutional actors and citizens (Saktianingrum et al., 2020). The interviewed non-government participants, citizens and local actors, were not only the recipients of branding policies but also the producers and diffusers of the city's identity.

The results support and extend the framework of Muzellec and Lambkin. The model offers a good explanation of the general stages of rebranding: the emergence of identity drivers, strategic goals and the transformation of identity. The Sawahlunto case, however, reveals some dimensions only captured by the original framework. Thus, in Sawahlunto, rebranding becomes more of a long-term socio-communicative process. First, the model assumes that rebranding is largely driven and managed by one organization. Meanwhile, the Sawahlunto rebranding was developed through continuous interaction between

government institutions, cultural communities, local businesses, tourism actors, and citizens. The non-government participants interviewed shared the practices that reproduced and reinforced the identity of the city in everyday contexts. Second, the model has little respect for negotiating difficult historical narratives. In Sawahlunto, the rereading of colonial mining heritage was an act of balancing between historical memory, tourism promotion and community identity. Thus, the process of communication was a continuous negotiation of narratives and not simply a presentation of a new image of the city. Finally, the Sawahlunto case indicates that the city rebranding can be a long-term communicative governance process that goes beyond successive political administrations. Therefore, the continuity of the city's branding is dependent on communication and participation.

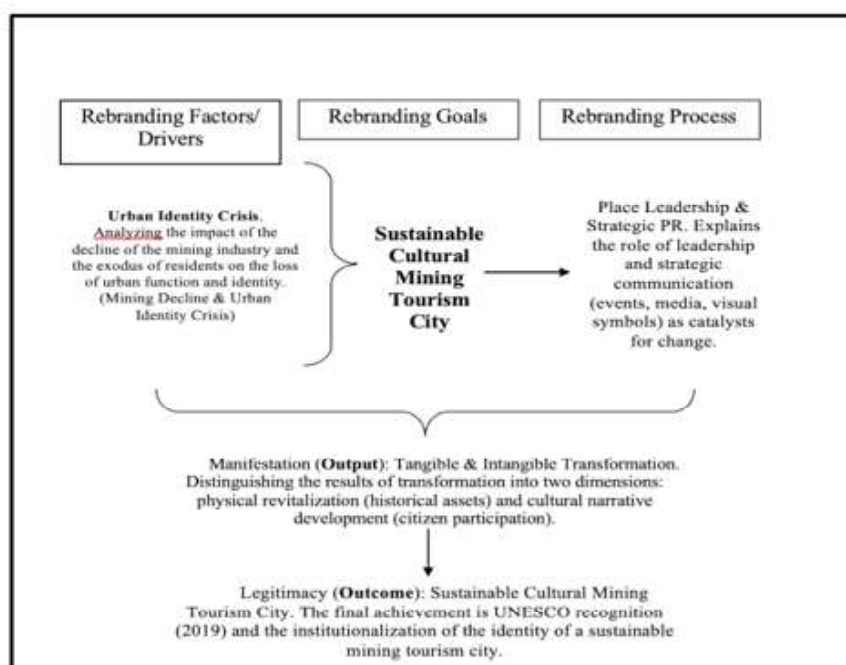


Figure 5. Rebranding Process of Sawahlunto City

Source: Authors's analytical synthesis based on empirical findings

Figure 5 synthesizes how leadership, communication, and transformations interacted as Sawahlunto shifted from coal mining to cultural tourism. This framework explains how combining tangible heritage revitalization and intangible cultural narratives supports the city's continuous rebranding within a UNESCO-recognized context.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the emergence of Sawahlunto as a cultural mining tourism city was a strategy to respond to the socio-economic decline due to the decline of coal mining activities. The process of rebranding was led by the leadership of Ir. H. Amran Nur, who repositioned mining heritage and colonial history as a cultural asset that could sustain a new urban identity. This transformation was further enabled by strategic communication practices involving government public relations, heritage revitalization, cultural events, media engagement and partnerships with local stakeholders. These communication efforts together contributed to strengthening the recognition of Sawahlunto among the stakeholders and materials examined as a heritage-based tourism destination and supported the continuity of the city's branding across successive administrations.

The study also proves that the sustainability of Sawahlunto's rebranding is associated with the interaction between the place leadership, strategic communication, and community participation. The interviews, observations and documentary analysis provide evidence that the sources examined continued to reproduce the city's identity through government communication programs, cultural initiatives, local business activities and community-based promotion. These findings suggest that city branding is an ongoing process of communication and stakeholder engagement that extends beyond the initial implementation of branding policies.

Theoretically, this study extends the urban rebranding model first proposed by Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) to the governance scenario of post-industrial cities. The case of Sawahlunto also demonstrates that to truly succeed in rebranding, a city must rely on communicative governance. A city's shared identity cannot be unilaterally finalized by any single party, but must be continuously consolidated through sustained multi-stakeholder consultation and cross-actor collaboration. This extended perspective derived from long-term tracking research also adds details to the existing theoretical framework. It highlights the core role of continuous communication after the conclusion of the initial rebranding phase.

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