



Local wisdom-based hotel management strategy in strengthening the destination branding of Tanah Karo tourism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received Jun 11, 2026

Revised Jul 9, 2026

Accepted Jul 23, 2026

Keywords:

Destination Branding;
Hotel Management Strategy;
Local Wisdom;
Tourism Development;
Tanah Karo Tourism.

ABSTRACT

Tourism development increasingly emphasizes local wisdom as a strategic asset in strengthening destination identity and competitiveness. This study analyses a local wisdom-based hotel management strategy at Sibayak Berastagi Hotel and its contribution to the destination branding of Tanah Karo. An interpretive qualitative case-study design was applied to a structured dataset comprising 18 role-based informants: three managers, five operational employees, six hotel guests, one tourism-office representative, one Karo cultural leader, and two local micro-enterprise actors. Data were analysed through open, axial, and selective coding using an interactive qualitative analysis approach. Source and method triangulation, a codebook, an audit trail, an evidence matrix, and contextual description were used to strengthen trustworthiness. The analysis identified four interconnected themes: cultural orientation in management, the translation of mehamat into service behaviour, cultural products and spatial identity, and community collaboration. These practices create culturally meaningful guest touchpoints that strengthen perceived authenticity and destination differentiation. The study proposes a Cultural Hospitality–Destination Branding pathway that links local values, managerial translation, guest experience, and destination-brand outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a strategic sector that contributes significantly to regional economic development and community welfare (Bachri, 2023; Darmanto, 2016). The sector generates economic benefits through employment creation, local business development, infrastructure improvement, and increased regional income. In recent years, tourism development has increasingly shifted from mass tourism toward experience-based tourism. Tourists are no longer concerned only with visiting popular attractions but also seek authentic, meaningful, and culturally rich experiences. This change has encouraged tourism destinations to utilize their local cultural resources as a means of creating distinctive visitor experiences and strengthening their competitiveness. Within this context, local wisdom has emerged as an important element in developing destination uniqueness and differentiating one tourism destination from another (Richards, 2018; Xue et al., 2017).

Local wisdom refers to the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, knowledge, and social practices that have been developed, inherited, and preserved by local communities across

generations. It reflects the collective identity of a community and provides guidelines for social interaction, environmental adaptation, and cultural continuity. Koentjaraningrat (2015) explains that local wisdom represents cultural values embedded in community life and transmitted from one generation to another. Therefore, local wisdom is not merely a collection of traditional practices but also a living cultural system that influences the way communities perceive, manage, and interact with their social and natural environments.

In tourism development, local wisdom functions not only as a cultural asset but also as a strategic resource for producing authentic experiences. The integration of local wisdom into tourism products and services enables destinations to establish identities that are difficult for competitors to replicate. Cultural traditions, local language, architecture, culinary products, community rituals, artistic performances, and hospitality practices can become important elements of the tourism experience. Previous studies have demonstrated that the integration of local wisdom into tourism development can enhance destination image, increase tourist satisfaction, preserve cultural identity, and support sustainable tourism practices (Nugroho, 2023; Vitasurya, 2016). Consequently, local wisdom can serve as a link between cultural preservation, tourism competitiveness, and community-based economic development.

Tanah Karo Regency, located in North Sumatra Province, possesses considerable potential for cultural and nature-based tourism. The region is widely recognized for its cool climate, mountainous landscapes, volcanic attractions, agricultural areas, and the rich cultural heritage of the Karo ethnic community (Siregar et al., 2023). The traditions, local language, customary practices, traditional houses, culinary products, artistic expressions, and hospitality values of the Karo people provide distinctive cultural resources that can support the development of an identifiable tourism destination. These resources can potentially distinguish Tanah Karo from competing destinations and create meaningful experiences for visitors.

The urgency of strengthening the tourism identity of Tanah Karo is also reflected in the increasing number of tourist visits. The Karo Regency Government recorded 1,434,797 tourist visits in 2024, representing a significant increase from 780,322 visits in 2023 (ANTARA, 2025). In addition, Statistics Indonesia–Karo Regency published Karo Regency in Figures 2025 as an official compilation of the region's statistical conditions throughout 2024 (BPS Kabupaten Karo, 2025). The substantial increase in visitor numbers indicates a recovery and expansion of tourism activities in the region. However, increasing tourist arrivals must be accompanied by improvements in destination identity, service quality, visitor experience, and cultural representation. Without a coherent cultural identity, the expansion of accommodation and tourism services may result in generic tourism experiences that do not adequately communicate the distinctive character of Tanah Karo. Despite the availability of rich cultural resources, the destination branding of Tanah Karo has not been optimally strengthened through the consistent integration of local cultural values among tourism stakeholders. Cultural elements may be presented through certain attractions or ceremonial activities, but their incorporation into everyday tourism services remains uneven. This condition may limit tourists' understanding of the cultural meaning associated with Tanah Karo. It may also reduce the ability of the destination to establish distinctive and memorable associations in the minds of visitors. Therefore, strengthening destination branding requires the participation of various tourism actors, including local governments, communities, tourism businesses, accommodation providers, and hotel managers.

Destination branding refers to a strategic process through which a destination develops and communicates a distinctive identity in order to attract visitors and differentiate itself from competing destinations. Branding is related to the creation of meaning, trust, and emotional connections between consumers and a product, service, or place (Aaker, 2020). In the tourism context, destination branding extends beyond the use of logos, slogans, and promotional campaigns. It includes tourists' overall perceptions, experiences, memories, and emotional associations with a destination. A strong destination brand is developed when the identity communicated through promotional activities is consistent with the experiences received by tourists during their visits. This consistency can contribute to positive destination images, visitor satisfaction, loyalty, revisit intentions, and positive word-of-mouth communication (Pike, 2008).

Cultural authenticity has consequently become an important component of destination branding. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek opportunities to interact with local communities, experience regional culinary products, observe cultural traditions, and understand the values associated with the destinations they visit. The incorporation of local wisdom into tourism services can create cultural associations that strengthen destination identity and provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Putra, 2021; Richards, 2018). In this process, tourism businesses are not merely commercial entities but also important actors that communicate and interpret the cultural identity of a destination. Within the tourism system, hotels occupy a strategic position because they function not only as accommodation providers but also as mediators between tourists and local culture. Hotels are often among the first, most intensive, and longest points of interaction between visitors and a destination (Hayes, 2019; Rutherford, 2021). Tourists may spend considerable time within hotel environments and interact repeatedly with hotel employees, facilities, services, food, and communication materials. As a result, hotels have opportunities to introduce local identity through service delivery, interior and architectural design, food and beverage offerings, employee behaviour, cultural performances, storytelling, promotional materials, and collaboration with local communities.

Hotel management strategy refers to a comprehensive set of decisions and actions intended to achieve organizational objectives, improve service quality, respond to environmental changes, and maintain competitiveness in the hospitality industry. Hayes (2019) defines hotel management strategy as the integration of operational, marketing, human resource, and financial decisions to achieve service excellence and organizational sustainability. Effective hotel management strategies generally encompass service management, operational activities, marketing, human resource development, product innovation, financial management, and stakeholder collaboration (David et al., 2021; Kotler et al., 2022; Rutherford, 2021).

In culturally rich destinations, hotel management strategies can be developed by incorporating local cultural values into organizational planning and daily operational practices. A local wisdom-based hotel management strategy involves the systematic integration of local values, symbols, products, traditions, and community knowledge into hotel services, facilities, products, employee development, marketing communication, and stakeholder relationships (Sugiarto, 2022; Tambunan et al., 2025). This integration may be reflected in the use of traditional architectural elements, ethnic interior decoration, local culinary menus, cultural performances, local-language greetings, traditional hospitality values, employee cultural training, and partnerships with artists, farmers, artisans, and surrounding communities. The implementation of local wisdom within hotel management can provide benefits for both hotel organizations and tourism destinations. From the organizational perspective, local cultural elements can create a distinctive value proposition and differentiate hotel services from standardized accommodation experiences. From the visitor perspective, culturally integrated services can create more authentic, meaningful, and memorable experiences. From the destination perspective, hotels can reinforce cultural associations and help communicate a coherent identity of the broader tourism area. Therefore, local wisdom-based hotel management can function simultaneously as a service strategy, a differentiation strategy, a cultural preservation mechanism, and a destination-branding instrument.

Previous scholarship has demonstrated the importance of local wisdom for tourism sustainability, cultural distinctiveness, and visitor experience, although these studies have addressed the issue at different analytical levels. Vitasurya (2016) shows that community awareness and local wisdom support the sustainability of rural tourism. Richards (2018) identifies a broader shift in cultural tourism from passive cultural consumption toward creative and participatory experiences. This transformation indicates that visitors increasingly expect opportunities to engage directly with local culture rather than merely observe cultural objects or performances. However, Xue et al. (2017) caution that tourism development can reshape local identity. Their findings suggest that the use of culture in tourism must be accompanied by safeguards to prevent superficial representation, excessive commercialization, cultural distortion, or inappropriate interpretation. These studies establish the importance of local culture in tourism development, but they do not sufficiently explain how hotel organizations translate cultural values into recurring managerial decisions and service practices. Local wisdom cannot strengthen destination branding

when it is presented only as decoration or temporary entertainment. Cultural values need to be incorporated consistently into planning, employee behaviour, products, service standards, physical environments, marketing communication, and relationships with local communities. Therefore, examining the managerial process through which local wisdom is institutionalized within hotel operations is important for understanding its contribution to destination branding.

Studies conducted in contexts closer to Tanah Karo further reinforce the relevance of place-based cultural resources. Siregar et al. (2023) find that local wisdom supports the economic, social, environmental, and atmospheric dimensions of tourism development in Berastagi. Their findings demonstrate that local culture can influence not only tourism products but also the overall atmosphere and sustainability of a destination. Nuraini et al. (2023) also demonstrate that cultural structures influence the spatial organization of mountain settlements. This indicates that cultural values are reflected in the physical arrangement, architecture, and social organization of local communities. In the hotel context, Tambunan et al. (2025) report that local wisdom can be incorporated into hospitality operations through services, culinary products, interior design, employee training, and partnerships with local communities. This study confirms that hotels have several operational channels through which local culture can be communicated to guests. Nevertheless, studies focusing on tourism and settlement development do not specifically investigate hotel service encounters, while hospitality studies have generally emphasized operational sustainability without fully explaining how hotel-based cultural experiences generate associations with the broader destination brand.

The branding and strategic management literature provides several concepts that can be used to examine this relationship. Aaker (2020) argues that distinctive associations are central to the creation of a strong brand identity, while Pike (2008) emphasizes the importance of coherent identity and positioning in destination communication. From a managerial perspective, David et al. (2021) associate competitive advantage with the alignment of strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Kotler et al. (2022) further explain that value propositions and service encounters influence customer perceptions and responses in hospitality and service industries. These perspectives indicate that destination branding cannot depend exclusively on external promotional communication. It must also be supported by organizational practices and service experiences that consistently communicate the promised identity of the destination.

Nevertheless, existing strategic management and branding frameworks have not sufficiently positioned local culture as a co-produced strategic resource involving hotels, employees, guests, communities, and local tourism stakeholders. Hotels have also not been adequately examined as long-duration cultural touchpoints within the destination-branding process. Compared with short visits to tourism attractions, hotel stays involve repeated interactions in which visitors encounter service behaviour, culinary products, physical design, information, and social communication. These repeated encounters may influence how tourists interpret and remember the cultural identity of the destination. Despite the findings of previous studies, limited research has specifically examined how local wisdom is strategically integrated into hotel management practices to strengthen destination branding, particularly in the context of Tanah Karo tourism (Mahendra, 2024; Sihombing, 2024). Most previous studies have examined destination management, cultural tourism, hotel competitiveness, local wisdom, or destination branding separately. Consequently, there remains a research gap concerning the process through which local wisdom is transformed from a cultural asset into a strategic management resource within hotel operations and how this process contributes to the destination branding of a culturally rich tourism area.

The present study addresses this research gap by examining how Karo cultural values are translated into hotel planning, employee behaviour, service delivery, culinary products, spatial and interior cues, marketing communication, cultural attractions, and collaboration with local communities. Rather than viewing local wisdom merely as a symbolic cultural element, this study positions it as a strategic resource that can be incorporated into the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of hotel management practices. The study also examines how these cultural touchpoints create authentic visitor experiences and strengthen associations with Tanah Karo as a tourism destination. Sibayak Berastagi Hotel represents a relevant case for investigating this issue. As one of the prominent hotels in Berastagi, the hotel has incorporated various elements of Karo

culture into its operational activities, including hospitality practices, culinary services, interior design, cultural attractions, and relationships with local communities. These initiatives provide an empirical context for examining how cultural elements are planned, implemented, and communicated through hotel management. The case also provides an opportunity to analyse whether the integration of local wisdom functions merely as an aesthetic or promotional element or has developed into a coherent management strategy that contributes to the branding of Tanah Karo tourism.

This study is based on the proposition that integrating Karo local wisdom into hotel management practices can strengthen the destination branding of Tanah Karo tourism. Local wisdom functions as a strategic resource that influences hotel planning, service behaviour, operational activities, human resource development, marketing communication, product development, and stakeholder collaboration. Its implementation through traditional hospitality values, local culinary products, ethnic interior design, cultural performances, local storytelling, and partnerships with communities is expected to create culturally authentic tourism experiences.

Authentic hotel experiences can subsequently contribute to the development of a positive destination image, stronger cultural associations, destination differentiation, visitor satisfaction, loyalty, revisit intentions, and positive word-of-mouth communication. Through this process, local wisdom-based hotel management becomes a strategic mechanism that connects cultural preservation with hospitality management and destination development. Hotels can reinforce the identity communicated by the destination while simultaneously enhancing their own competitiveness through culturally distinctive services. Therefore, the relationship between hotel management and destination branding is viewed as an experience-based process in which the destination's cultural meaning is produced and reinforced through repeated interactions between hotels, guests, employees, and local communities.

Based on this background, the study aims to analyse the implementation of local wisdom-based hotel management strategies at Sibayak Berastagi Hotel and examine their contribution to strengthening the destination branding of Tanah Karo tourism. The analysis focuses on the manner in which Karo cultural values are integrated into hotel management practices and communicated through various guest touchpoints. It also seeks to identify the managerial conditions, stakeholder relationships, and cultural practices that support or constrain the implementation of such strategies.

This study is expected to contribute to hospitality and tourism management literature by extending the discussion of local wisdom beyond its conventional position as a cultural or tourism asset. It positions cultural values as strategic management resources that can shape hotel operations, service differentiation, and stakeholder collaboration. Furthermore, the study explains how local wisdom-based hotel management can contribute to destination branding through authentic visitor experiences, distinctive cultural associations, and consistent communication of destination identity.

Unlike previous studies that predominantly examine local wisdom, cultural tourism, hotel management, or destination branding as separate subjects, this research connects these areas within a single analytical framework. The study introduces the perspective that local wisdom-based hotel management can function not only as a mechanism for cultural preservation but also as a strategic instrument for competitive differentiation, destination branding, and sustainable tourism development. Practically, the findings are expected to provide recommendations for hotel managers, tourism stakeholders, local communities, and government institutions regarding the systematic integration of Karo culture into hospitality services. Such integration is expected to enhance the competitiveness of hotel businesses while strengthening the identity and sustainable development of Tanah Karo as a culturally distinctive tourism destination.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an interpretive qualitative single-case-study design. The analytical case was Sibayak Berastagi Hotel, selected because the hotel represents an accommodation business that incorporates Karo cultural elements into services, cuisine, interior design, events, and community relationships. The unit of analysis was the process through which Karo local wisdom was translated into hotel-management practices and connected to the destination identity of Tanah Karo.

The study involved 18 role-based informants consisting of three hotel managers (M1–M3), five operational employees from the front office, food and beverage, housekeeping, and marketing divisions (E1–E5), six domestic and international guests who had stayed for at least one night and experienced at least two cultural touchpoints (G1–G6), one representative of the Karo Regency tourism office (T1), one Karo cultural leader (C1), and two local micro-enterprise or cultural-performance partners (L1–L2). Informants were selected purposively based on decision-making authority, direct operational involvement, experience of the hotel product, cultural knowledge, or an active partnership with the hotel. Semi-structured interviews were designed to last 35–60 minutes and covered cultural meanings, planning, implementation, guest responses, collaboration, and implementation constraints. Observation focused on greetings, menus, ornaments, staff–guest interactions, cultural performances, and local-product displays. Documentary materials included promotional media, service guidelines, menus, and program records.

Data analysis followed four stages. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Second, open coding produced initial labels such as ‘mehamat in greeting,’ ‘local menu,’ ‘Karo ornament,’ ‘community supplier,’ and ‘inconsistent cultural knowledge.’ Third, axial coding connected these labels into the categories of service culture, cultural products, community collaboration, destination-branding outcomes, and implementation constraints. Fourth, selective coding integrated the categories into the Cultural Hospitality–Destination Branding pathway. Coding was conducted manually using a codebook and evidence matrix. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation, a coding audit trail, attention to negative cases, role-based anonymization, and thick contextual description. The research protocol included voluntary participation, provision of study information, permission to record interviews, the right to withdraw, and confidential use of informant codes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The thematic analysis produced six interrelated themes. Table 1 presents the analytical categories together with representative verbatim statements from managers (M), employees (E), guests (G), and local partners or cultural leaders (L). The quotations are used as direct empirical evidence, while the interpretation column explains the analytical meaning assigned through the coding process.

Table 1. Thematic findings and representative direct quotations

Theme	Subtheme / codes	Representative evidence	Interpretation
Cultural strategic orientation	Planning; differentiation; evaluation	<i>“Karo identity is not added only for events; it guides the service concept and the products we choose.” (M1)</i>	Culture is positioned as a strategic resource.
Mehamat-based service	Respect; warmth; attentive greeting	<i>“Guests should feel respected, not merely served. That is how we interpret mehamat at the front desk.” (E1)</i>	A local value is translated into repeatable employee behaviour.
Cultural products and space	Cuisine; ornaments; performance	<i>“The food and Karo details made the stay feel connected to Berastagi, not like a generic hotel.” (G3)</i>	Tangible cues strengthen authenticity and memorability.
Community collaboration	UMKM; artisans; performers	<i>“The hotel gives us a market, but we also help explain which cultural elements are appropriate.” (L1)</i>	Partnership supports economic value and cultural legitimacy.
Destination-brand effect	Identity; differentiation; word of mouth	<i>“After staying here, I associated Tanah Karo more strongly with hospitality and living culture.” (G5)</i>	Hotel touchpoints become associations with the destination.
Implementation constraints	Training; consistency; modernization	<i>“New staff can follow procedures, but understanding the cultural meaning takes more time.” (M2)</i>	Cultural competence determines the consistency of delivery.

Source: Interview data processed by the researchers

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The coding process linked the open codes ‘culture in planning,’ ‘service differentiation,’ and ‘program evaluation’ to the axial category of cultural strategic orientation. One manager explained, ‘Karo identity is discussed when we plan services, menus, and events; it is not treated as

decoration added at the end' (M1). Another manager emphasized evaluation: 'Guest responses tell us which cultural elements are understood and which still need explanation' (M3). These accounts indicate alignment among strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

A contrasting employee account showed that strategic intent was not always understood equally: 'I know the greeting standard, but I cannot always explain the cultural background when guests ask' (E4). This negative case indicates that management commitment needs to be supported by cultural learning rather than operational instructions alone. The findings indicate that Sibayak Berastagi Hotel has systematically integrated Karo cultural values into its management strategy through planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. The planning stage emphasizes Karo culture as the hotel's core identity, which serves as the foundation for service design, product development, marketing activities, and stakeholder collaboration. This strategic orientation enables the hotel to differentiate itself from competitors through cultural authenticity.

At the implementation stage, local wisdom is translated into operational activities across various departments. Hotel services emphasize the Karo value of *mehamat*, which reflects hospitality, respect, and warmth toward guests. Cultural elements are also incorporated into food and beverage services, interior design, promotional activities, and cultural events (Wadhi, 2026). Furthermore, continuous evaluation is conducted through guest feedback, program assessments, and stakeholder consultations to ensure consistency between strategic objectives and operational practices. These findings support strategic management theory, which emphasizes the alignment of organizational vision, implementation mechanisms, and evaluation processes in achieving competitive advantage (David, 2021).

Integration of Local Wisdom in Hotel Operations

Three operational categories emerged from the analysis. In relation to service culture, an employee stated, 'Guests should feel respected, not merely served; that is how we interpret *mehamat* at the front desk' (E1). Regarding cultural products, a guest observed, 'The local dishes and Karo ornaments made the hotel feel connected to Berastagi rather than interchangeable with another hotel' (G3). In relation to collaboration, a local partner noted, 'We supply products and cultural input, while the hotel provides access to visitors' (L1). These accounts show that authenticity is produced through service behaviour, material cultural cues, and community participation. The integration of local wisdom is reflected in three major dimensions: service culture, cultural products, and community collaboration. First, the value of *mehamat* is implemented as a service standard that shapes employee behavior and guest interactions. This cultural value creates an authentic hospitality experience and distinguishes the hotel from conventional accommodation providers (Grice Tambunan et al., 2024).

Second, local wisdom is embedded in hotel products and services through traditional Karo cuisine, ethnic interior design, traditional ornaments, and cultural performances. Traditional culinary offerings allow visitors to experience local gastronomy, while architectural and decorative elements reinforce the visual identity of Karo culture (Sugiarto, 2022; Nuraini et al., 2023). Cultural performances further enrich tourist experiences and strengthen cultural interpretation within the hospitality setting. Third, collaboration with local communities plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural integration. Partnerships with local micro-enterprises, artisans, and cultural performers contribute to economic empowerment while preserving local traditions. Such collaboration demonstrates that local wisdom-based hospitality can generate both cultural and economic benefits (Siregar et al., 2023).

Cross-study Comparison and Scientific Novelty

Comparison with ten previous studies shows both convergence and extension. The findings support Vitasurya (2016) and Siregar et al. (2023) regarding community participation; Richards (2018) concerning experience-based cultural tourism; Tambunan et al. (2025) regarding the operational integration of culture; Aaker (2020) and Pike (2008) concerning identity and differentiation; David et al. (2021) regarding strategic alignment; Kotler et al. (2022) concerning service touchpoints; Nuraini et al. (2023) regarding material-spatial expressions of culture; and Xue et al. (2017) concerning the risk of identity distortion. The extension offered by this study lies in its

analytical integration: local values, managerial translation, hospitality touchpoints, guest meaning, and destination-brand outcomes are connected in a single process model.

Contribution to Destination Branding

Guest accounts connected the hotel experience with destination meaning. One guest stated, 'After staying here, I associated Tanah Karo more strongly with hospitality and living culture' (G5), while another explained, 'I would mention the Karo food and atmosphere when recommending Berastagi to friends' (G2). The tourism representative added, 'Hotels can reinforce the destination narrative because visitors experience them for many hours, not only during a short attraction visit' (T1). These accounts illustrate how repeated hospitality touchpoints can generate associations of authenticity, differentiation, and positive word of mouth.

The study reveals that local wisdom-based hotel management significantly contributes to strengthening the destination branding of Tanah Karo Tourism. Tourists perceive the hotel not merely as accommodation but also as a representation of Karo culture. Through cultural experiences provided during their stay, visitors develop positive perceptions of the destination and associate Tanah Karo with authenticity, hospitality, and cultural richness (Putra, 2021).

(Surya et al, 2024Richards, 2018The findings show that a local wisdom-based hotel strategy can be understood as a process linking culture, management, guest experience, and destination branding. Karo values become strategically meaningful when translated into planning, service behaviour, culinary products, spatial cues, cultural programming, and community partnerships. These elements form recurring hospitality touchpoints through which guests interpret Tanah Karo as authentic, hospitable, and culturally distinctive.

(Wisnawa, 2025Bachri, 2023). The study's novelty is the Cultural Hospitality–Destination Branding pathway. Unlike approaches that discuss local wisdom, hotel competitiveness, or destination promotion separately, the pathway connects community values, organizational translation, guest meaning, and destination-brand outcomes in one framework. The theoretical implication is that culturally embedded hotel operations can mediate between local cultural resources and destination-brand associations. Practically, hotel managers should develop culturally grounded service standards, strengthen employee cultural competence, involve legitimate cultural actors in product design, and monitor whether guests correctly understand the intended meanings. Tourism authorities can facilitate local-supplier networks, cultural interpretation guidance, and coordinated destination narratives. The framework also warns that cultural representation loses credibility when it becomes decorative, inconsistent, or detached from community participation.

This study is limited by its single-case design, which restricts the transferability of the findings to hotels with different organizational and cultural contexts. Future research should involve recorded and consented interviews, preserve an auditable coding trail, compare several hotels, examine possible cultural commodification, and test whether perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between local-wisdom-based hotel practices and destination image, loyalty, and word of mouth. The selective-coding stage produced the following pathway:

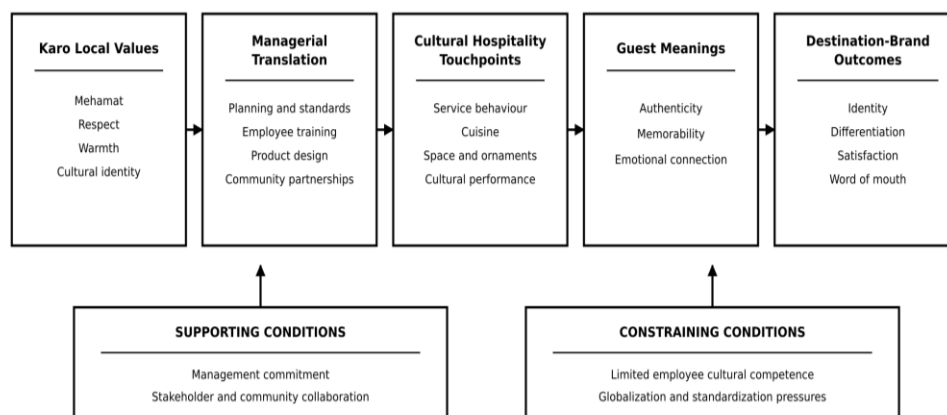


Figure 1. Cultural hospitality–destination branding pathway

The evidence identified management commitment, cultural richness, and stakeholder participation as supporting conditions. Conversely, uneven employee knowledge and pressure to conform to standardized hospitality trends weakened consistency. A cultural leader cautioned, 'Modern presentation is acceptable, but the meaning and proper use of symbols should be discussed with cultural actors' (C1). Manager M2 similarly noted that new employees could learn procedures more quickly than cultural interpretation. These findings explain why training, cultural consultation, and monitoring are necessary safeguards against superficial cultural display. Several supporting factors contribute to the successful implementation of local wisdom-based hotel management. These include strong management commitment, the richness of Karo cultural heritage, and collaboration among tourism stakeholders. Management support ensures the allocation of resources and organizational commitment required for cultural integration, while stakeholder collaboration strengthens destination development efforts (Tambunan, 2025; David, 2021). However, several challenges remain. Limited human resource capacity, insufficient cultural understanding among some employees, and globalization pressures represent major obstacles. The findings indicate that not all employees possess adequate knowledge of Karo culture, creating inconsistencies in service delivery. Additionally, the influence of global hospitality trends may threaten the preservation of local cultural identity if not managed carefully (Xue et al, 2017). Therefore, continuous cultural training and balanced adaptation between tradition and modernity are necessary to sustain the effectiveness of local wisdom-based strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the implementation of a local wisdom-based hotel management strategy at Sibayak Berastagi Hotel and its contribution to strengthening the destination branding of Tanah Karo Tourism. The findings demonstrate that Karo cultural values have been systematically integrated into hotel management through planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. The integration is reflected in service delivery, traditional culinary offerings, ethnic interior design, cultural performances, and stakeholder collaboration.

The study further reveals that local wisdom serves as a strategic resource for creating authentic tourist experiences and differentiating the destination from competing tourism destinations. The implementation of the Karo cultural value of *mehamat* in hospitality services, combined with cultural products and community involvement, strengthens the destination image and enhances visitor satisfaction. In addition, the study confirms that local wisdom-based hotel management contributes positively to destination branding by promoting cultural authenticity, strengthening destination identity, increasing tourist loyalty, and encouraging positive word-of-mouth promotion. The findings also indicate that management commitment, cultural richness, and stakeholder collaboration are essential supporting factors, whereas limited human resource capacity, insufficient cultural understanding, and globalization pressures remain major challenges. Overall, the study concludes that local wisdom-based hotel management represents an effective strategy for strengthening destination branding while supporting sustainable tourism development in Tanah Karo.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focuses on a single case study of Sibayak Berastagi Hotel. Future studies are encouraged to examine multiple hotels across different tourism destinations to enhance the generalizability of findings. Quantitative approaches may also be employed to measure the relationship between local wisdom-based hotel management, tourist satisfaction, destination image, and visitor loyalty. Furthermore, comparative studies involving different cultural destinations in Indonesia may provide broader insights into the role of local wisdom in strengthening destination branding and hospitality competitiveness.

Managerial and Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several managerial implications for hotel managers, tourism stakeholders, and local governments. First, hotel management should continuously strengthen employee training programs related to Karo cultural values and local hospitality

practices. Such initiatives will ensure consistency in service delivery and enhance employees' ability to communicate local culture effectively to guests.

Second, hotels should expand the development of local wisdom-based products and experiences, including traditional culinary programs, cultural performances, cultural interpretation activities, and heritage-based tourism packages. These initiatives can create stronger destination differentiation and improve visitor experiences. Third, collaboration between hotels and local communities should be institutionalized through partnerships with local micro-enterprises, artisans, cultural performers, and tourism organizations. Such collaboration will contribute to economic empowerment while preserving cultural heritage.

Fourth, local governments should encourage and facilitate the integration of local wisdom into hospitality operations by providing policy support, promotional programs, and capacity-building initiatives. Strong collaboration among tourism stakeholders can enhance the overall effectiveness of destination branding efforts. Finally, hotel managers should balance modernization and cultural preservation. While adapting to global hospitality trends is necessary, maintaining cultural authenticity remains essential for sustaining competitive advantage and strengthening the long-term branding of Tanah Karo Tourism.

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