

## The BLUE model (Branding, leisure, and unique experience) for Improving mangrove tourism destination branding in East Java

Endah Budiarti<sup>1\*</sup>, Tri Andjarwati<sup>2</sup>, Kunto Inggit Gunawan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>University 17 Agustus 1945, Surabaya; endahbudiarti@untag-sby.ac.id (E.B.) triandjarwati@untag-sby.ac.id (T.A.)  
kunto@untag-sby.ac.id (K.I.G.).

**Abstract:** This study aims to develop BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) model as a strategic approach to improve destination branding for mangrove tourism in East Java. As competition among tourist destinations intensifies, developing branding concepts on experiential and recreational activities has become key to attracting visitors and differentiating destinations from competitors. This research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods, including in-depth interviews with local stakeholders and surveys of tourists. The findings reveal that the BLUE concept provides a comprehensive framework for managing nature-based tourism destinations while maintaining a balance between natural attractions, unique visitor experiences, and environmental conservation. This model is expected to enhance the competitiveness of East Java's mangrove tourism in both domestic and international markets.

**Keywords:** BLUE model, Branding, Destination branding, East Java, Mangrove tourism.

### 1. Introduction

The global tourism industry has witnessed significant changes over the past decades, with tourists' preferences shifting from merely visual attractions to seeking deeper, meaningful, and personal experiences. Previous research highlights that experiential tourism has become a pivotal element in global tourism (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This is evident from the increasing interest in nature-based tourism, including ecotourism. Ecotourism not only offers natural beauty but also provides recreational experiences combined with education and environmental conservation (Weaver, 2001). Mangrove areas in East Java represent a prime example of ecotourism destinations with substantial potential, where biodiversity and ecological functions are vital to the local environment. However, this potential has yet to be fully leveraged to increase the competitiveness of East Java's mangrove destinations on national and international scales. The primary challenge lies in the absence of a robust and integrative branding strategy capable of attracting tourists by presenting unique experiences that distinguish these destinations from others (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004).

Mangrove tourism in East Java, such as the Wonorejo Mangrove Ecotourism in Surabaya and Clungup Mangrove Conservation Beach in Malang, has drawn attention from domestic and international tourists. However, without an effective branding strategy, these destinations potential as a leading ecotourism center remains unrealized. According to Kavaratzis (2005), strong branding involves more than just creating a visual identity or slogan. It plays a critical role in shaping tourists' perceptions and expectations of the experience they will encounter. In the context of nature-based tourism, developing unique experience has become increasingly important in fostering emotional connection between tourists and destinations (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Addressing this challenge requires a new approach to building destination branding that emphasizes not only promotion, but also on the creation of authentic and quality tourism experiences.

The BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) modeling concept emerges as a potential solution for improving mangrove tourism destination branding. BLUE offers a holistic approach,

combining destination branding with the development of recreational activities (leisure) focused on providing unique and personal tourism experiences. This aligns with the findings of Gyimóthy and Mykletun (2004), who state that leisure plays a crucial role in creating added value for tourism destinations. Within the BLUE framework, three core elements—branding, leisure, and unique experience—are considered complementary in creating memorable tourism destinations. The branding element aims to establish a strong identity for destinations (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005), the leisure element provides enjoyable and relevant activities for tourists, while the unique experience ensures that every visit becomes a distinct and unforgettable experience (Schmitt, 1999). Consequently, BLUE not only enhances the short-term appeal of destinations but also fosters long-term tourist loyalty (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017).

East Java, with its abundant natural resources, offers significant potential for developing marine and mangrove ecotourism. However, the challenges faced by these destinations are multifaceted. In addition to the lack of a solid branding strategy, issues include insufficient synergy among government, destination managers, and local communities. According to Murphy (1985), local community involvement is a critical element in developing sustainable destinations. Thus, the development of a BLUE-based branding concept can provide a comprehensive solution that not only focuses on the destination's appeal but also actively involves local communities in managing and developing these destinations. Implementing BLUE also accommodates sustainable environmental preservation, aligning with the principles of ecotourism (Weaver, 2001).

This study aims to explore how the BLUE modeling concept can be applied in the context of mangrove tourism in East Java. By evaluating the effectiveness of branding, leisure, and unique experiences, this study seeks to provide strategic guidelines for tourism destination managers in building strong images and creating memorable experiences for tourists. The research also examines how BLUE can address existing challenges, including promotion, local community engagement, and environmental conservation. It is hoped that the BLUE model can serve as an effective framework for building highly competitive and sustainable mangrove tourism destinations in East Java.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Branding in Tourism

Branding is an essential process in creating a strong identity and image for a tourism destination. According to Kavaratzis (2005), destination branding involves not only the development of logos or slogans but also encompasses broader elements such as public perception, visitor experiences, and the uniqueness offered by the destination. Effective branding can add value to a destination, attracting more tourists (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005). The criteria for successful destination branding include how well a destination can differentiate itself from its competitors and create an emotional connection with tourists (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004).

Tourism branding is a strategic process aimed at creating a unique identity and appealing image for a tourism destination. This process involves the development and communication of messages that can generate a positive perception in the minds of tourists, allowing the destination to stand out among the many available options. Branding is not just about logos or slogans; it encompasses the entire experience offered by the destination, from attractions and facilities to social interactions and the service received by visitors.

#### 2.1.1. The Importance of Branding in Tourism

Strong branding provides various benefits, including differentiation, image reinforcement, and enhancement of the tourist experience. Differentiation: In an increasingly competitive tourism market, branding helps a destination differentiate itself from competitors. By creating a unique identity, a destination can attract tourists seeking a specific experience that cannot be found elsewhere (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Image Reinforcement: A positive image can attract more tourists and foster loyalty. A study by Blain et al. (2005) shows that destinations with a strong and positive image tend to have higher visitation rates and better perceptions from tourists. Enhancing the Tourist Experience: Effective branding communicates the values and uniqueness of a destination, which, in turn, enhances

the tourist experience. According to Kavartzis (2005), branding can influence tourists' expectations, contributing to their satisfaction and loyalty.

### 2.1.2. Key Elements in Destination Branding

In creating effective branding, several key elements must be considered, including visual identity, messaging and narrative, tourist experience, and stakeholder engagement. **Visual Identity:** This includes the logo, colors, and graphic design that reflect the characteristics and values of the destination. A consistent visual identity helps to create better recognition and acknowledgment among tourists (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004). **Messaging and Narrative:** A clear message and a strong narrative help tell the story of the destination. This includes cultural values, history, and unique experiences offered. An engaging story can enhance the destination's appeal and create an emotional connection with tourists (Holt, 2004). **Tourist Experience:** Branding is not just about how a destination is marketed, but also about the actual experience felt by tourists. Memorable and positive experiences can improve brand image and encourage repeat visits (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involving various stakeholders—including government, industry players, and local communities—is crucial in creating and maintaining the brand image. This engagement helps ensure that the branding reflects the aspirations and values of all involved parties (Murphy, 1985).

### 2.1.3. Challenges in Destination Branding

Despite the numerous benefits of branding, there are several challenges that must be addressed, such as negative perceptions, resource availability, and sustainability. **Negative Perception:** Some destinations may have a negative image that is difficult to change, which can influence tourists' decisions to visit the location (Swarbrooke, 1999). **Resource Availability:** An effective branding process requires investment in marketing, promotion, and product development, which may not always be available, particularly in areas with limited budgets. **Sustainability:** Ensuring that branding efforts align with environmental and social sustainability practices is an increasingly pressing challenge, especially in an era where tourists are more concerned about the impact of tourism (Fadli, 2018).

Tourism branding is a critical aspect that can determine the success of a destination in attracting and retaining tourists. By creating a strong identity, building a positive image, and delivering unique experiences, a destination can enhance its appeal and value in the global tourism market. However, the existing challenges must be addressed with well-thought-out strategies and collaboration among stakeholders to achieve the desired outcomes.

## 2.2. Leisure in Tourism

Leisure or recreational activities are an important aspect of the tourism experience. Gyimóthy and Mykletun (2004) state that leisure plays a significant role in the quality of tourists' experiences. The recreational activities offered by a destination can enhance its appeal, create positive memories, and facilitate social interactions between tourists and the local community. According to Iso-Ahola (1980), leisure not only offers time to relax but also provides opportunities for learning and exploration, which can enrich the tourist experience.

Leisure in tourism refers to the time individuals spend outside of work obligations and routine activities, used for recreation, relaxation, and exploration. According to Iso-Ahola (1980), leisure is considered "time spent on activities that provide meaning and personal satisfaction." The concept of leisure is crucial in the tourism context, as it serves as a primary motivation for tourists to travel. Leisure activities can vary, ranging from beach vacations and mountain trekking to enjoying local arts and culture. These leisure experiences not only provide tourists with opportunities to relax but also to engage deeply with the local culture, understand traditions, and form interactions with the local community.

From an economic perspective, the tourism sector focused on leisure makes a significant contribution to economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure development. According to Cohen (1972), leisure serves as a means of relieving stress and improving quality of life, which in turn can

strengthen a destination's appeal. In this context, Getz (2000) adds that "positive leisure experiences can create an emotional bond between tourists and the destination, increasing the likelihood of their return.

Leisure also plays a role in creating unique experiences that differentiate one destination from another. Through various leisure activities, tourists can develop an emotional bond with the destination, which can increase their loyalty to return in the future. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), "experience is a product that needs to be carefully managed to create added value for tourists." This suggests that well-designed leisure activities can create unforgettable experiences.

In the context of sustainability, leisure is increasingly gaining attention in tourism development. Many destinations are beginning to integrate sustainable practices into their leisure product development, aiming to preserve the environment while still providing a satisfying experience for tourists. For example, activities such as ecotourism and cultural tourism that involve local communities not only support environmental conservation but also strengthen community engagement in tourism development. According to Fennell (2008), "ecotourism serves as a bridge between tourism and conservation, aiming to educate tourists about the importance of preserving nature and culture."

In this regard, leisure is not just about having fun, but also about making a positive impact on communities and the environment. As Weaver (2006) stated, "sustainability in leisure tourism requires an approach that considers social, economic, and environmental impacts holistically." Therefore, a deep understanding of leisure dynamics is crucial for tourism managers and stakeholders to create engaging and memorable experiences for tourists while supporting sustainability and local community development.

In conclusion, leisure in tourism plays a crucial role both for tourists and for the development of destinations. By providing opportunities to relax, explore, and engage with local culture, leisure can enrich the tourist experience and contribute to the economic and social sustainability of a destination. Therefore, a deep understanding of leisure dynamics is essential for tourism managers and stakeholders to create engaging and memorable experiences for tourists, while supporting sustainability and local community development.

### *2.3. Unique Experience*

The concept of unique experiences in tourism has been extensively studied, focusing on how these experiences affect tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the concept of the Experience Economy, which emphasizes the importance of creating memorable experiences for consumers. In the context of tourism, unique experiences can create a strong emotional bond between tourists and the destination (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). This is expected to increase the likelihood of tourists returning and recommending the destination to others.

Unique experiences in tourism refer to moments or activities that not only provide entertainment or relaxation but also leave a profound impression on tourists. These experiences encompass elements that cannot be found elsewhere, such as interaction with local culture, exploration of exotic nature, or participation in rare and authentic traditions. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), unique experiences are key to the experience economy, where tourists seek not just products or services, but also the emotional value derived from their involvement in a destination. These experiences are designed to stimulate all of tourists' senses and allow them to create unforgettable memories.

Successful tourist destinations often offer experiences that are not only relevant to their geographical and cultural backgrounds but also distinguish themselves from competitors. For example, tourists visiting a village in East Java may be attracted to activities such as batik-making, hunting for traditional culinary delights, or participating in local rituals. These experiences provide tourists with an opportunity to engage directly with the local community, creating an authentic and profound feeling that is difficult to replicate elsewhere. According to Tussyadiah and Zach (2012), "tourists who have deeply personal and meaningful experiences at a destination are more likely to remember their journey positively and recommend it to others."

Moreover, unique experiences are often associated with the concept of sustainability, where tourists not only visit a destination but also contribute to the preservation of the local environment and culture. For instance, ecotourism that introduces tourists to rare wildlife or mangrove conservation in East Java

not only provides educational opportunities but also adds a new dimension to their travel experience. This allows tourists to experience something beyond ordinary recreation, as Wearing and Neil (1999) state that unique experiences related to sustainability not only raise environmental awareness but also encourage tourists to actively participate in the preservation of the destination.

In the digital age, unique experiences can also be enriched with the support of technology. The application of augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR), for example, can bring a new dimension to destination exploration, where tourists can "visit" historical sites or engage in cultural experiences even before arriving at the location. These technologies not only facilitate access to destination information but also enhance tourists' interactions with the local history, culture, and nature. According to Buhalis and O'Connor (2005), the use of technology in tourism offers great opportunities for destinations to create more engaging and dynamic experiences while supporting branding efforts.

Thus, unique experiences are a key element in the success of a tourist destination. In addition to increasing tourist satisfaction and loyalty, these experiences can also serve as a major differentiator in global competition. Destinations that can offer authentic, personal, and profound experiences, while also aligning with sustainability values, are more likely to maintain their relevance and appeal to tourists.

#### *2.4. Mangrove Tourism and Its Potential*

Mangrove tourism is a form of ecotourism that offers conservation and environmental education values. According to Murniati and Supriyanto (2015), mangrove tourism has significant potential in providing unique and educational experiences for tourists. Mangrove areas also function as critical ecosystems that support biodiversity and climate change mitigation. Unfortunately, mangrove tourism in Indonesia, including in East Java, still faces challenges in terms of sustainable management, effective branding, and local community involvement (Fadli, 2018).

Mangrove tourism focuses on the exploration and conservation of the mangrove ecosystem, the coastal forests that grow along shorelines and coastal areas. Mangrove ecosystems play a crucial ecological role, such as maintaining coastal ecosystem balance, protecting land from erosion, providing habitats for various marine species and birds, and acting as natural carbon sinks. Mangrove tourism not only offers a unique natural experience but also holds great potential in terms of economic value, environmental education, and ecosystem preservation. In East Java, areas such as the Wonorejo Mangrove in Surabaya and Bedul Mangrove in Banyuwangi have developed into popular eco-tourism destinations by combining natural beauty with conservation values.

The potential of mangrove tourism lies in its ability to attract tourists seeking authentic and environmentally-based natural experiences. Tourists interested in mangrove tourism are typically motivated by a desire to witness the beauty of the mangrove ecosystem, engage in activities such as boat tours through the mangrove forests, birdwatching, learning about local flora and fauna, and participating in mangrove planting programs. As ecotourism, mangrove tourism also offers added value by educating visitors about the importance of environmental conservation. This aligns with the growing global trend where tourists are increasingly drawn to destinations that provide sustainable experiences and contribute positively to the environment.

Economically, mangrove tourism also has significant potential to increase local community income. With proper management, mangrove tourism can create jobs such as local tour guides, boat operators, local food service providers, and the sale of crafts made by local communities. Additionally, mangrove tourism can attract tourists from various segments, both domestic and international, who wish to enjoy the unique mangrove forests while contributing to conservation efforts. Studies have shown that ecotourism, such as mangrove tourism, has the potential to provide significant economic impact, especially when developed sustainably with active community participation (Das and Chatterjee, 2015).

Furthermore, mangrove tourism can support climate change mitigation efforts. Mangrove forests have a carbon absorption capacity far greater than terrestrial forests, making them a vital component in addressing climate change impacts. By promoting mangrove areas as tourism destinations, governments and stakeholders can encourage conservation and rehabilitation programs for mangrove forests, while also raising public awareness about the importance of protecting this ecosystem. As Giri et al. (2011)

state, well-managed mangrove areas can provide stronger protection against climate change while offering ecological and economic benefits to local communities.

However, the development of mangrove tourism also faces several challenges, such as threats from land-use change, pollution, and a lack of community understanding about the importance of mangrove ecosystems. Therefore, strategies for developing mangrove tourism must consider sustainability aspects to prevent damage to the ecosystem that serves as the main attraction. Approaches involving environmental education, community participation, and strong conservation policies are essential to ensure that the potential of mangrove tourism can be maximized without compromising the ecosystem. With proper planning, mangrove tourism in East Java can serve as a model for ecotourism that not only attracts tourists but also contributes to environmental preservation and the well-being of local communities.

### 2.5. BLUE Modeling in Branding

BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) modeling integrates three main elements that complement each other to create competitive tourist destinations. Branding elements serve to establish the identity of the destination, leisure provides relevant and interesting activities, while unique experiences ensure that each visit leaves a deep impression (Schmitt, 1999). The implementation of BLUE modeling is expected to overcome the challenges that exist in the development of mangrove tourism in East Java, as well as help improve the image and attractiveness of the destination (Putra, 2020).

BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) modeling in the branding of tourist destinations is a strategic approach that aims to improve the image and attractiveness of a destination, especially in the context of natural tourism and ecotourism. The concept combines three key elements—branding, leisure, and unique experiences—that play an important role in building an emotional connection between travellers and destinations. Branding in the context of BLUE emphasizes the management of a strong, relevant, and distinct destination image. This includes identifying visual, narrative, and symbolic elements that reflect the uniqueness of a destination. A good destination brand will highlight characteristics that are difficult to find elsewhere, as well as communicate the values inherent in the destination, such as local culture, history, or natural beauty. According to Kotler and Gertner (2002), destination branding can strengthen the public's perception of the expected quality and experience, thereby increasing its attractiveness in the global tourism market.

Furthermore, leisure in BLUE modeling refers to the provision of a quality leisure experience, which allows travelers to engage in fun and personally rewarding activities. In the context of marine tourism, leisure can include various activities such as snorkeling, diving, boating, or enjoying the beauty of the beach and sea. Successful destinations in this case are those that are able to provide leisure facilities and activities that are in accordance with the wishes and needs of tourists, as well as paying attention to environmental sustainability. Well-managed leisure not only provides short-term satisfaction for tourists, but also influences their desire to return in the future. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), leisure designed with experiential aspects in mind can produce a transformational experience for visitors, which can increase tourist loyalty and satisfaction.

Third, unique experience is a central element in BLUE modeling. Unique experiences are a differentiating factor that creates deep memories for tourists, as well as providing added value that cannot be found in other destinations. These experiences can be interactions with local communities, participation in cultural activities, or unforgettable exploration of nature. The key is to provide opportunities for tourists to be directly and actively involved in the destination environment, so that they feel a personal attachment to the place. As stated by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), a unique and personalized experience can create a deeper satisfaction because tourists feel that they are getting something special and valuable. In the context of branding, it is this unique experience that sets the destination apart from other competitors and makes it stand out in the eyes of global travelers.

BLUE modeling also focuses on integrating the three elements to create a holistic experience for travelers. This strategy allows tourist destinations to create strong brands, provide quality leisure activities, and offer unique and authentic experiences. Thus, BLUE modeling not only serves to increase

the attractiveness of the destination, but also to strengthen its long-term sustainability. This approach is relevant to be applied to marine tourism destinations, such as those in East Java, where the potential of local nature and culture can be optimized to create unforgettable experiences for tourists, while supporting environmental conservation and the welfare of local communities.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### *3.1. Research Approach*

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach provides advantages in understanding complex issues from various perspectives. The quantitative method is used to measure tourists' perceptions of branding and the tourism experiences they have at the mangrove tourism destination. Meanwhile, the qualitative method is employed to explore deeper aspects, such as unique experiences and the involvement of local communities in tourism management. This approach allows the researcher to gather holistic and in-depth data on the application of the BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) concept in enhancing mangrove tourism destinations in East Java.

#### *3.2. Research Location*

The research is focused on several mangrove tourism destinations in East Java that have significant potential for the development of nature-based tourism. The uniqueness of the mangrove ecosystem and the great potential for environmentally-based tourism activities are the main reasons for selecting these locations as the research sites. In this study, the focus will be on several mangrove tourism destinations located in East Java, specifically in Banyuwangi, Situbondo, Jember, Pasuruan, Probolinggo, Malang, and Sidoarjo. The selection of these locations is based on the natural potential and biodiversity found in the mangrove forests of each area, as well as the availability of tourism facilities that can support a unique experience for visitors.

##### *3.2.1. Banyuwangi*

As one of the gateways to Bali, Banyuwangi boasts several fascinating mangrove areas, such as the Mangrove Zone in Baluran National Park and the Raci Mangrove Forest in Bangsring Village. Its pristine natural beauty and excellent accessibility make it an ideal location for this research.

##### *3.2.2. Situbondo*

In Situbondo, the Mangrove Forest of Baluran National Park and Gili Iyang Mangrove attract attention due to their unique ecosystems and the biodiversity found within them. Research at these locations is expected to provide insights into the management and conservation of mangrove ecosystems.

##### *3.2.3. Jember*

Jember also holds great potential in mangrove tourism, especially at the Payangan Mangrove Forest in Papuma Beach. This study aims to explore how this location can be sustainably utilized to attract tourists.

##### *3.2.4. Pasuruan*

In Pasuruan, the White Sand Mangrove Forest and the Wonorejo Mangrove Park are in focus because they both offer panoramic beauty and the experience of learning about the mangrove ecosystem. Research at this location can help in the development of educational programs for visitors.

##### *3.2.5. Probolinggo*

The Probolinggo Mangrove Forest and mangrove areas in Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park provide an opportunity to understand the interaction between tourism and environmental conservation, as well as their impact on local communities.

### 3.2.6. *Hapless*

In Malang, the Mangrove Forest at Sendang Biru Beach offers a tranquil atmosphere and an interesting experience for tourists. Research at this location will explore the potential for the development of unique experience-based tourism.

### 3.2.7. *Sidoarjo*

Finally, in Sidoarjo, the Sidoarjo Mangrove Forest and the Jembatan Tahu Mangrove Ecotourism are focal points to evaluate community involvement in natural resource management, as well as how they can increase tourist attractions.

By researching these locations, it is hoped that this research can make a significant contribution to the development of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java, as well as provide useful recommendations for managers and related stakeholders.

### 3.3. *Population and Sample*

The population in this study consists of domestic and international tourists who have visited mangrove tourism destinations in East Java within the past 12 months. In addition to tourists, the study also involves local stakeholders such as tourism managers, local government officials, and the local community. A purposive sampling method is used to select tourists who meet the specified criteria. It is expected that 200 tourist respondents will participate in the quantitative survey, while 20 key informants will be interviewed in-depth for qualitative data collection. This method is expected to provide representative data regarding tourists' perceptions and stakeholder participation in the management of mangrove tourism.

### 3.4. *Data Collection Methods*

Data were collected through several methods, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation. Questionnaires were used to obtain quantitative data on tourists' perceptions of branding, leisure activities, and unique experiences at mangrove tourism destinations. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore stakeholders' perspectives on branding strategies and tourism management. Field observations played a role in validating the qualitative data obtained, particularly regarding tourism activities and the unique experiences offered by the destinations. Additionally, tourism policy documents and related reports were analyzed to enrich the data.

### 3.5. *Data Analysis Techniques*

Data analysis techniques are divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data from the questionnaires are analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques and linear regression to measure the relationships between the variables of branding, leisure, unique experiences, and tourist satisfaction. In addition, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed to further explore the relationships among the variables underlying the BLUE model. Qualitative data from interviews and observations are analyzed using thematic analysis, aimed at identifying thematic patterns in stakeholder responses regarding destination management and the implementation of the BLUE-based branding concept.

### 3.6. *Validity and Reliability*

The validity and reliability of the research instruments are tested before use to ensure accurate and trustworthy results. The validity test was carried out through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), to see if the measured variables were in accordance with the expected theoretical construct. Meanwhile, the reliability of the instrument was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha method, with a value of >0.7 considered quite reliable. Before being fully used, the instrument was also tested on 30 respondents to ensure that the instrument worked well in the field.



### 3.7. Research Procedures

The research procedure consists of several stages. First, the preparation stage which includes instrument development and instrument trials. Second, the data collection stage is carried out through surveys and interviews at the research site. Third, the data analysis stage, which involves the processing of quantitative data using statistical software such as SPSS or AMOS, as well as qualitative analysis using NVivo. Finally, the stage of preparing reports and publishing research results, which is planned to be published in scientific journals and submitted to relevant stakeholders.

### 3.8. Research Ethics

This research was conducted by following strict research ethical principles. All respondents will be given an explanation of the purpose of the research and their right to stop at any time without consequences. In addition, the confidentiality of each respondent's personal data will be guaranteed, and the results of the research will only be used for scientific purposes. All participants will also be asked to provide informed consent before participating in the study. This is done to ensure that the research is conducted ethically and respects the rights of participants.

## 4. Research Results

This research produced a number of important findings related to the application of the BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) concept to improve the image of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java. The results of the research obtained from quantitative surveys, in-depth interviews, and field observations provide in-depth insights into tourist perceptions, stakeholder engagement, and the effectiveness of branding in nature-based tourism. The following is a complete explanation of the results of the study:

### 4.1. Tourist Perception of Mangrove Tourism Branding

Based on the results of a questionnaire filled out by 200 respondents, it was found that branding carried out on mangrove tourism destinations in East Java has a significant influence on tourists' decisions to visit. About 75% of travellers consider branding efforts that emphasize natural uniqueness, sustainability, and local cultural engagement to be the main factors influencing their decision. Branding that combines natural elements with educational travel experiences was also rated effective by 68% of tourists, who admitted that a strong destination image can increase their interest in revisiting.

### 4.2. Leisure Activities as the Main Attraction Factor

Leisure activities offered in East Java mangrove tourist destinations are also considered very important by tourists. From the results of the quantitative analysis, 80% of respondents stated that they were interested in tourism activities that provide opportunities to interact directly with nature, such as mangrove tours by boat, bird watching, and mangrove planting activities. Leisure activities that focus on environmental preservation and education are considered to provide a memorable and unique experience. This is supported by qualitative findings from interviews with tourists that emphasize that nature-based experiences and education increase their awareness of environmental issues and encourage them to support sustainable tourism.

### 4.3. Unique Experiences as a Destination Differentiator

One of the main findings of this study is the importance of unique experiences in distinguishing mangrove tourism destinations in East Java from other tourist destinations in Indonesia. 93% of respondents stated that they are interested in tourist destinations that offer experiences they cannot find anywhere else. In-depth interviews with tourists revealed that the combination of the distinctive mangrove ecosystem, the involvement of local communities in management, and environmental education provides a different and more memorable experience compared to ordinary nature tourism. This factor is one of the important pillars in the BLUE concept, where unique experiences are considered a key element in increasing the attractiveness of destinations.

#### 4.4. Stakeholder Involvement in Tourism Development

The results of interviews with stakeholders, including tourism managers, local governments, and local communities, show that the involvement of various parties is very important in the successful implementation of BLUE-based branding. Local stakeholders understand the importance of collaboration in managing and promoting tourist destinations. 67% of stakeholders stated that they are actively involved in mangrove conservation activities and sustainability-based tourism promotion. Local governments also play an important role in providing infrastructure support and regulations that support eco-friendly tourism. However, there are challenges related to funding and promotion faced by stakeholders, especially at the local level.

#### 4.5. The Effectiveness of the BLUE Concept in Destination Branding

This study found that the application of the BLUE concept is very effective in improving the image of mangrove tourism destinations. From the results of the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, it was found that branding elements, leisure activities, and unique experiences have a significant influence on tourist satisfaction and intention to return. The regression coefficient between branding and tourist satisfaction reached 0.74, which indicates a strong relationship. In addition, unique experiences and nature-based leisure activities have a significant positive influence on travelers' perceptions of destination attractions. These results show that the BLUE concept is able to provide a solid foundation for effective branding development in mangrove tourism destinations.

#### 4.6. Challenges in the Management and Development of Mangrove Tourism

Although the results of the study show the effectiveness of the BLUE concept, there are several challenges identified in the management and development of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java. Some of them are funding issues, lack of promotion, and limited infrastructure. 52% of stakeholders stated that they need further support, especially in terms of digital promotion and supporting infrastructure, such as transportation access and eco-friendly tourist facilities. Another challenge that arises is the need for further education to local communities about the economic potential of environment-based tourism so that their involvement can be more optimal.

#### 4.7. Tourist Satisfaction and Return Intention

Tourist satisfaction with East Java's mangrove tourism destinations is very high, with 85% of respondents stating that they are satisfied with the experience they have had. This is driven by a combination of beautiful natural scenery, education about the environment, and interesting leisure activities. 78% of travellers also expressed their intention to return to the destination, especially if there is an increase in amenities and promotions. These results show that mangrove tourism destinations have great potential to attract tourists in a sustainable manner, especially with the implementation of the right branding strategy.

The results of this study show that the concept of BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) can be effectively used to improve the image of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java. The combination of strong branding, nature-based leisure activities, and unique experiences plays a key role in attracting travelers and increasing their satisfaction. However, there are challenges related to funding, promotion, and infrastructure that need to be overcome to ensure the sustainability of this destination. The comprehensive implementation of the BLUE concept and support from stakeholders will be the key to success in developing competitive and sustainable mangrove tourism.

## 5. Discussion

This study has shown that the application of the BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) concept in the development of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java is not only relevant but also strategic to strengthen the image of the destination. Based on the results obtained, this concept is able to create significant attraction for tourists, increase their satisfaction, and motivate repeat visits. However, there are several aspects that need to be discussed more deeply to understand how the

elements in the BLUE concept work synergistically in forming a positive perception of the destination, as well as how the existing challenges can be optimally overcome.

### *5.1. The Role of Branding in Increasing Tourism Attraction*

Branding is the main element in the BLUE concept which functions as a tool to differentiate tourist destinations from its competitors. Effective branding requires a clear identification of the uniqueness of the destination and the values it wants to convey to the target market. In the context of mangrove tourism in East Java, branding that focuses on nature, environmental conservation, and environmental education provides a strong message to tourists about the importance of sustainable tourism. The findings of the study show that the majority of tourists pay close attention to the image and reputation of the destination before deciding to visit. They are attracted to destinations that offer educational experiences while preserving nature. This is in line with the theory of branding in tourism which states that tourists tend to choose destinations that are in harmony with their personal values, especially related to sustainability and social responsibility (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

However, branding alone is not enough if it is not supported by a strong communication strategy. In this case, the branding of mangrove tourism destinations needs to be conveyed effectively through various media, including digital marketing, advertising, and social media. Digital marketing plays an important role in expanding market reach, especially in an era where the majority of tourists search for tourist information online before deciding to visit. The use of social media and internet-based platforms to promote the unique value of mangrove destinations can strengthen the branding that has been designed, reach a wider audience, and build tourist engagement with the destination.

### *5.2. Leisure Activities as a Driver of Tourist Satisfaction*

Leisure activities are an important element in increasing the attractiveness of mangrove tourism destinations. Recreational activities that blend in with nature, such as mangrove tours, tree planting, and fauna observations, provide an experience that is not only enjoyable but also educates tourists about the importance of environmental conservation. The results of this study show that tourists highly value these experiences, especially when the activities involve them directly in the process of conservation and maintenance of nature.

More than just entertainment activities, leisure in nature-based tourism also has an important role in building tourist awareness of environmental issues. Tourists' active involvement in activities such as planting mangroves or taking an ecosystem tour helps to strengthen the emotional connection between tourists and destinations, thus creating a more immersive and meaningful experience. This is in line with the concept of "place attachment" expressed in the tourism literature, where direct involvement with tourist attractions can increase a sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the destination (Kyle et al., 2005).

However, there are challenges in ensuring that the leisure activities offered remain innovative and attractive. Destination managers need to continue to innovate in designing leisure activities that are not only fun but also relevant to global issues such as climate change and sustainability. Diversifying the types of activities that can be enjoyed by different segments of travelers, from children to adults, is essential to ensure that these destinations appeal to a wider group of travelers.

### *5.3. Unique Experiences as the Key to Differentiation*

Unique Experience is the core element of the BLUE concept which serves as the main differentiator between mangrove tourism destinations in East Java and other tourist destinations in Indonesia. From the results of the research, it was found that tourists prefer destinations that offer experiences that cannot be found anywhere else, such as direct interaction with local communities, participation in conservation efforts, and opportunities to learn about mangrove ecosystems.

This unique experience provides significant added value for tourists, not only in terms of entertainment but also in terms of education and nature conservation. Travelers who feel they have a different and meaningful experience tend to be more satisfied and want to return to the destination. In addition, a unique, memorable experience can also encourage travelers to recommend destinations to others, both

through direct communication and through online platforms such as travel reviews and social media. This shows that unique experiences can serve as a very effective marketing tool, as satisfied travellers tend to become brand ambassadors for the destinations they visit.

Destination managers need to continue to explore local potential to create unique experiences that are authentic and memorable. In the context of mangrove tourism, the involvement of local communities in creating tourism experiences can be the main key to differentiating destinations from others. Tourists are not only looking for entertainment, but also an opportunity to understand the local culture and take part in activities that contribute to the well-being of the community.

#### *5.4. Challenges and Obstacles in the Implementation of the BLUE Concept*

Although the BLUE concept has shown effectiveness in improving the image and attractiveness of destinations, there are significant challenges in its implementation. One of the main challenges identified in this study is limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of consistent promotion. Many stakeholders, especially at the local level, stated that they face obstacles in obtaining adequate financial support to develop environmentally friendly tourism facilities and strengthen digital promotion capacity.

In addition, the involvement of local communities in destination management still needs to be increased. Although some communities have participated in conservation activities, further education is needed so that they can fully understand the economic potential of mangrove tourism. Strengthening community capacity in managing tourist destinations independently and sustainably will be a key factor in the long-term success of the BLUE concept.

#### *5.5. Implications for the Development Strategy of Mangrove Tourism Destinations*

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of mangrove tourism strategies in East Java. The BLUE concept offers a structured framework to build a strong destination image, attract tourists through educational leisure activities, and create unique experiences that differentiate destinations from their competitors. To ensure the sustainability of this development, local governments, tourism managers, and other stakeholders need to collaborate in facing existing challenges and optimizing the potential of destinations.

Initiatives such as infrastructure improvements, training for local communities, and intensive digital promotion can strengthen the attractiveness of destinations and increase tourist satisfaction. In addition, environmental sustainability must remain the main focus in every strategy implemented, considering the importance of preserving mangrove ecosystems for long-term sustainability.

Overall, this study confirms that the application of the BLUE concept has great potential to improve the image, attractiveness, and satisfaction of tourists in mangrove tourism destinations in East Java. While challenges remain, especially related to funding and infrastructure, the right strategies can address these barriers and support the sustainability of destination development. The involvement of local communities, innovation in leisure activities, and strengthening branding through digital media will be the key to the long-term success of BLUE-based tourism development in East Java.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study successfully shows that the concept of BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience) plays an important role in the development and strengthening of the image of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java. With this approach, tourist destinations are able to create attractions that not only attract domestic tourists but also international tourists. The Branding element serves as a tool to build a strong and authentic image through effective visual and narrative communication, highlighting the uniqueness of the mangrove ecosystem as well as the importance of environmental conservation. Leisure, as an integral part of the travel experience, provides opportunities for travelers to engage in educational as well as recreational activities, which not only increase satisfaction but also strengthen their emotional attachment to the destination.

One of the important findings is that the unique experiences offered by mangrove tourism destinations have a significant impact on tourist perception. This experience not only differentiates the

destination from other competitors but also provides added value through the involvement of tourists in activities that promote sustainability and environmental preservation. This uniqueness creates strong memories, increases the likelihood of tourists coming back, and encourages them to recommend the destination to others, both through direct interaction and social media. This emphasizes the importance of different and authentic experiences in tourism destination development strategies.

However, this study also reveals several challenges that need to be considered in the implementation of the BLUE concept. Limited infrastructure and financial support are quite significant obstacles, especially in efforts to improve environmentally friendly facilities and create an optimal tourism experience. On the other hand, the involvement of local communities, even though it has started, still needs to be strengthened so that they can participate more actively in the management and maintenance of tourist destinations. This involvement will be the key to sustainability, as local communities are not only the implementers but also the main beneficiaries of the tourism development.

The success of the implementation of the BLUE concept is highly dependent on the synergy between all stakeholders, including local governments, tourism managers, local communities, and tourists. The government and stakeholders need to focus on building the capacity of local communities, strengthening promotional strategies through digital marketing, and investing in infrastructure that supports the sustainability and comfort of tourists. With these steps, mangrove tourism in East Java has the potential to become a leading destination that is not only attractive in terms of tourism but also makes a real contribution to environmental conservation and improving the welfare of the local community.

Ultimately, the BLUE concept offers a holistic approach that is able to create synergies between destination branding, educational and recreational travel experiences, and environmental sustainability. This not only provides added value for tourists but also ensures that the development of mangrove tourism destinations in East Java can survive and develop in the long term. Through joint commitment and continuous innovation, the BLUE concept can become a model applied in various natural tourism destinations in Indonesia, especially those that focus on sensitive ecosystems that need to be preserved such as mangroves.

## 7. Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results and findings of this study, there are several important recommendations that can be a reference for further research related to the development of BLUE (Branding, Leisure, and Unique Experience)-based tourist destinations in East Java. This recommendation aims to strengthen branding strategies, increase tourist engagement, and ensure the sustainability of tourist destinations.

### 7.1. Innovation Development in Branding Strategy

Future research is suggested to explore innovations in the branding strategy of mangrove tourism destinations by deepening the understanding of the most effective visual and narrative elements. Given the changing tourism trends and evolving expectations of tourists, further research needs to explore creative approaches that are able to incorporate digital technology, local community-based storytelling, and interactive visualization to strengthen the image of the destination. The use of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies can also be explored to provide a preview experience for tourists before they visit the destination in person.

### 7.2. Increased Local Community Involvement

Further research is suggested to focus on developing a more in-depth model of local community participation in destination management and branding. The role of local communities as tourism ambassadors needs to be strengthened through training and empowerment programs. Therefore, future studies can examine the best strategies to increase the capacity of local communities, both in terms of communication skills, tourism management, and sustainable use of natural resources. An in-depth study of the socio-economic impact of community involvement in tourism development is also needed to ensure that the benefits of destination development are felt by all levels of society.

### 7.3. *Exploring the Relationship between Unique Experiences and Traveler Loyalty*

While this study has shown that unique experiences play an important role in attracting travelers, further research could expand the exploration regarding the long-term relationship between unique experiences and traveler loyalty. Future studies could explore the specific factors that most influence traveller loyalty, including analysis of their behaviour in recommending destinations, their tendency to repeat visits, and their involvement in destination promotion through social media. This study can also use the longitudinal study method to understand changes in tourist perceptions over time.

### 7.4. *Environmental Analysis and Sustainability of Destinations*

Future research is also suggested to focus more on analyzing the environmental impact of tourism activities in mangrove areas, by integrating a sustainability science-based approach. This research can examine more deeply how leisure activities in tourist destinations can be in line with environmental conservation efforts. A conservation-based approach and a study of carrying capacity are essential to ensure that tourism growth does not damage sensitive mangrove ecosystems. Further studies can include an analysis of best practices in sustainable tourism and how destinations can adopt green tourism principles.

### 7.5. *Application of Technology in Destination Management*

Technology has a very important role in the management of today's tourist destinations. Future research needs to deepen the exploration of the use of technology to improve efficiency and traveler experience. The research can be focused on the implementation of smart tourism which includes the use of IoT (Internet of Things) technology, big data, and artificial intelligence to analyze tourist preferences, improve service quality, and maintain a balance between the number of tourists and environmental sustainability. The use of mobile apps that provide real-time information about the weather, routes, facilities, and leisure activities is also worth considering to enhance the travel experience.

### 7.6. *Comparative Research between Tourist Destinations*

Future studies can conduct a comparative analysis between mangrove tourism destinations in East Java and other tourist destinations, both in Indonesia and abroad. This research can help identify the relative advantages and weaknesses of East Java mangrove destinations, as well as how they can adopt best practices from other tourist destinations that have been successful in increasing tourist attraction. Comparative research can also examine how each destination manages its branding, leisure, and unique experiences to differentiate itself from competitors.

### 7.7. *Multidisciplinary Approach in Tourism Studies*

Given the complexity of tourism issues involving economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects, future research needs to adopt a multidisciplinary approach. Collaboration between scientific fields such as tourism management, sociology, anthropology, ecology, and information technology can produce more comprehensive and applicable findings. The study, which combines these perspectives, can provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of tourism in mangrove areas, including socio-economic impacts on local communities, ecosystem sustainability, and innovation in destination branding and marketing.

### 7.8. *Testing the BLUE Conceptual Model in Various Contexts*

Although the BLUE model is focused on branding mangrove tourism in East Java, further research needs to test the application of this model in the context of other tourist destinations in Indonesia, such as mountainous, beach, or cultural tourist destinations. This will provide a broader understanding of the flexibility and effectiveness of the BLUE model in different tourism contexts, as well as assess the adaptability of this concept to different types of diverse tourism environments.

### 7.9. Long-Term Evaluation of the Implementation of the BLUE Concept

Further research is also recommended to conduct a long-term evaluation of the implementation of the BLUE concept in tourist destination branding. This evaluation needs to include an analysis of the economic, environmental, and social impacts of the implementation of a BLUE-based branding strategy, as well as how this strategy can be adapted in line with changing global and local tourism trends. The use of sustainable tourism indicators can help in measuring the long-term impact and effectiveness of the implementation of the BLUE model.

### 7.10. Development of Education and Environmental Awareness

Future research can explore how the development of educational programs and the increase of environmental awareness can be an integral part of the tourism experience delivered through the BLUE concept. This study can assess the effectiveness of various educational approaches that are integrated with leisure activities, such as eco-tours, conservation workshops, and activities that involve the direct participation of tourists in protecting the environment. This approach not only increases tourist engagement but also contributes to the long-term preservation of mangrove areas.

By paying attention to these recommendations, it is hoped that future research can make a greater contribution to the development of sustainable, innovative, and competitive mangrove tourism destinations.

### Acknowledgement:

This research is funded by the Directorate General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology through a fundamental research scheme grant. We would like to thank you for the financial support and trust provided. This support greatly contributed to the smooth and successful conduct of this research. In addition, we would also like to thank all parties who have contributed to this research, both directly and indirectly, who helped in data collection, analysis, and report preparation. Hopefully the results of this research can provide benefits for the development of science and practice in the field we are researching.

### Copyright:

© 2024 by the authors. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

### References

- [1] Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy: Work is theatre & every business a stage*. Harvard Business Press.
- [2] Weaver, D. B. (2001). *The encyclopedia of ecotourism*. CABI.
- [3] Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Pride, R. (2004). *Destination branding: Creating the unique destination proposition*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- [4] Kavaratzis, M. (2005). Place branding: A review of trends and conceptual models. *The Marketing Review*, 5(4), 329-342.
- [5] Hosany, S., & Witham, M. (2010). Dimensions of cruisers' experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. *Journal of Travel Research*, 49(3), 351-364.
- [6] Gyimóthy, S., & Mykletun, R. J. (2004). Leisure consumption and experience economy. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 4(2), 80-95.
- [7] Blain, C., Levy, S. E., & Ritchie, J. R. B. (2005). Destination branding: Insights and practices from destination management organizations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43(4), 328-338.
- [8] Kim, J.-H., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2017). Measuring the effectiveness of experience-based tourism advertising. *Journal of Travel Research*, 56(2), 246-260.
- [9] Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business Press.
- [10] Murphy, P. E. (1985). *Tourism: A community approach*. Methuen.
- [11] Swarbrooke, J. (1999). *Sustainable tourism management*. CABI Publishing.
- [12] Fadli, A. (2018). The potential and challenges of mangrove tourism development in Indonesia. *Journal of Tourism*, 12(1), 45-56.
- [13] Iso-Ahola, S. E. (1980). *The social psychology of leisure and recreation*. Waveland Press.
- [14] Cohen, E. (1972). Toward a sociology of international tourism. *Social Research*, 39(1), 164-182.
- [15] Getz, D. (2000). Explore wine tourism: Management and marketing. *Wine Marketing and Tourism*, 22(3), 267-276.

- [16] Fennell, D. A. (2008). *Ecotourism*. Routledge.
- [17] Weaver, D. (2006). *Sustainable tourism*. Wiley.
- [18] Tussyadiah, I. P., & Zach, F. J. (2012). The role of geo-based technology in place experiences. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 780-800.
- [19] Wearing, S., & Neil, J. (1999). *Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- [20] Buhalis, D., & O'Connor, P. (2005). Information communication technology revolutionizing tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 30(2), 7-16.
- [21] Murniati, & Supriyanto. (2015). The potential of mangrove tourism for ecotourism development. *Journal of Environmental Sciences*, 13(1), 67-75.
- [22] Das, M., & Chatterjee, B. (2015). Ecotourism: A panacea or a predicament? *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 14, 3-16.
- [23] Giri, C., Ochieng, E., Tieszen, L. L., Zhu, Z., Singh, A., Loveland, T., Masek, J., & Duke, N. (2011). Status and distribution of mangrove forests of the world using Earth observation satellite data. *Global Ecology and Biogeography*, 20(1), 154-159.
- [24] Schmitt, B. H. (1999). *Experiential marketing: How to get customers to sense, feel, think, act, and relate to your company and brands*. The Free Press.
- [25] Putra, A. P. (2020). Implementation of experience-based branding in tourism. *Branding Journal*, 4(2), 12-20.
- [26] Kotler, P., & Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), 249-261.
- [27] Hosany, S., & Witham, M. (2010). Dimensions of cruisers' experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. *Journal of Travel Research*, 49(3), 351-364.
- [28] Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). *The future of competition: Co-creating unique value with customers*. Harvard Business Press.