

Strengthening City Branding through Smart Economy Based on Local Economic Potential in Belitung Regency

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Abstract. *Belitung Regency possesses considerable local economic potential, supported by tourism, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), the creative economy, and the fisheries sector. However, these potentials have not been fully realized as part of a strong regional identity in city branding. This study aims to analyze the role of the smart economy in strengthening city branding based on local economic potential in Belitung Regency. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed using a survey of 50 respondents, comprising MSME actors, creative economy practitioners, and tourism business operators. Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics, indicator ranking, and SWOT analysis. The results indicate that the implementation of the Smart Economy is at a moderate level, with an average score of 3.47. Innovative spirit (3.85), entrepreneurship (3.72), and economic opportunity (3.51) emerged as the dominant factors supporting local economic development. Meanwhile, city branding also remains at a moderate level, with an average score of 3.28, and is still largely characterized by a tourism-oriented image. Local economic potential, such as MSMEs, the creative economy, traditional culinary products, and fisheries products, has not yet developed into a primary representation of regional identity. The findings reveal that the smart economy does not directly lead to strong city branding. Its contribution depends on the region's ability to integrate innovation, digital transformation, and local flagship products into a consistent territorial identity. This study highlights the importance of an economic branding approach to strengthen the identity and competitiveness of Belitung Regency sustainably.*

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INTRODUCTION

Regional competition to attract investment, tourism, and economic activity has intensified due to the rapid expansion of the digital economy and greater global market integration. In the face of economic uncertainty stemming from commodity price volatility, evolving consumer behavior, technological progress, and heightened competition among destinations, local governments must develop strategies that foster economic growth while reinforcing regional identity and competitiveness (Muis, 2023). In this context, city branding has become a strategic tool widely used by local governments to cultivate a positive image, attract investment, expand market opportunities for local products, and improve regional positioning within national and

international economic networks. City branding has traditionally been viewed as a promotional strategy centered on tourism destinations, using visual identity, slogans, and place-marketing campaigns (Sofie & Pangaribowo, 2025). Recent research, however, indicates that effective city branding depends not only on promotional activities but also on a region's capacity to establish a robust, innovative, and sustainable economic base. Regional identity is shaped by economic activities, cultural values, and local resources, and the ability of communities to produce value-added products, goods, and services. As a result, enhancing local economic potential is now recognized as a critical prerequisite for developing authentic and sustainable city branding (Zahrah, 2023).

An emerging approach to strengthening regional economies is to implement the Smart Economy as a central component of the Smart City framework. The Smart Economy prioritizes entrepreneurship, innovation, productivity, digital transformation, e-business development, and economic sustainability through the application of information and communication technologies. This strategy enables regions to increase economic efficiency, broaden market access, encourage collaboration among business stakeholders, and develop adaptive economic ecosystems responsive to global changes. In the digital era, the capacity to advance Smart Economy initiatives has become a significant determinant of regional competitiveness and economic identity (Bruneckienė et al., 2023). Belitung Regency is a region in Indonesia endowed with diverse and strategically significant local economic resources (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Beyond its status as a prominent national tourism destination, Belitung demonstrates considerable strengths in tourism, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), the creative economy, fisheries, local culinary industries, and natural-resource-based sectors. The recognition as a UNESCO Global Geopark further enhances the region's comparative advantages and international appeal. These assets present substantial opportunities to develop a city branding strategy rooted not only in natural beauty but also in local economic strengths that embody the region's distinctive characteristics and identity (Mohammadi & Rafieian, 2022).

In recent years, the Government of Belitung Regency has implemented a range of Smart City initiatives, with particular emphasis on the Smart Economy dimension. Studies indicate that the Smart Economy has become a regional development priority, achieving an implementation score of 76.25%, which surpasses several other Smart City dimensions. The innovative spirit indicator attained the highest score of 94, while productivity reached 76. Additionally, 1,501 MSMEs have participated in training and mentoring programs to facilitate digital business transformation through digital platforms and online marketplaces. These developments indicate significant progress in the digitalization of the local economy and highlight its potential as a key driver of regional economic competitiveness. The evidence suggests that Belitung not only possesses substantial economic resources but is also establishing the institutional and technological capacities required to advance the Smart Economy (Robby et al., 2025). Despite these achievements, local economic potential has not yet been fully integrated into the region's city branding strategy. Belitung's image remains predominantly associated with marine tourism and its geopark identity. In contrast, the contributions of MSMEs, the creative economy, fisheries products, local culinary specialties, and digital innovation remain relatively limited in shaping the region's overall identity (Ermawati & Utami, 2025). However, sustainable city branding requires integrating local economic potential, innovation, culture, and territorial characteristics to create a distinctive identity that sets a region apart from competitors. In other words, effective city branding must be supported by productive, innovative economic sectors to ensure that the image being promoted is grounded in tangible, sustainable regional strengths.

Existing research has extensively explored the Smart Economy in relation to MSME digitalization, productivity improvement, and Smart City implementation. Similarly, studies on city branding have largely concentrated on tourism promotion and place marketing strategies. However, there is a notable lack of research examining the Smart Economy as a mechanism for shaping city branding, especially in island regions with tourism-based economies and unique

local resources, such as Belitung Regency. This research gap underscores the necessity for further investigation. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze how the Smart Economy can enhance Belitung Regency's city branding by leveraging local economic potential. The research is significant in its effort to position the Smart Economy not only as a means of improving economic performance but also as a foundation for constructing regional identity and competitiveness. The findings are anticipated to contribute to the theoretical advancement of smart economy and city branding scholarship and to offer practical recommendations for local governments to formulate sustainable economic development strategies that reinforce regional identity (Asshagab, 2024).

METHODS

Research Approach

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using a survey method to analyze the role of the smart economy in strengthening City Branding based on local economic potential in Belitung Regency. A quantitative approach was selected because it enables the systematic measurement of smart economy implementation and its contribution to regional identity and competitiveness (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023).

The study was conducted in Belitung Regency, Bangka Belitung Islands Province, Indonesia. Belitung was selected as the study area due to its diverse local economic potential, supported by the tourism, creative economy, fisheries, and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) sectors, as well as its commitment to Smart City development, with a particular focus on the Smart Economy dimension.

The study population consisted of local economic actors involved in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), creative economy activities, and tourism-related businesses in Belitung Regency. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling according to three criteria: ownership or management of a business operating for at least one year, active participation in local economic activities, and use of digital technology in business operations. The final sample comprised 50 respondents: 25 MSME owners, 15 creative economy practitioners, and 10 tourism business operators. Respondents were identified via local MSME networks, creative economy communities, and tourism stakeholder associations in Belitung Regency. The sample size was deemed sufficient for descriptive exploratory research, as the primary aim was to capture perceptions of Smart Economy implementation and City Branding development rather than to generate statistical generalizations for the entire population. Comparable exploratory studies on local economic development and city branding typically utilize sample sizes between 30 and 100 respondents.

In this study, digital technology use refers to the regular utilization of at least two digital business tools, including online marketplaces, social media marketing platforms, digital payment systems, e-commerce applications, online advertising, or digital communication tools. Respondents were required to have actively used these technologies for business purposes during the previous six months.

Data Collection

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to respondents using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

The questionnaire comprised 28 statements, with 16 items assessing Smart Economy and 12 items evaluating City Branding. The instrument was constructed using indicators identified in prior research on Smart Economy and City Branding. Before data collection, three experts in public administration, regional development, and urban branding reviewed the questionnaire to ensure content validity. A pilot test with 15 respondents was conducted to assess the clarity and consistency of the items. Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha indicated acceptable internal

consistency, with coefficients exceeding 0.70 for both Smart Economy and City Branding variables. Therefore, the questionnaire was considered reliable for data collection.

Secondary data were obtained from the Smart City documents of Belitung Regency, publications issued by the Statistics Indonesia Agency (BPS), regional development planning documents, tourism and MSME sector reports, and relevant scientific literature. The research instrument was developed based on two principal variables: Smart Economy and City Branding. The operational definitions of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Operational Variables of the Study

Variable	Indicators	Parameters
Smart Economy	Entrepreneurship	Ability to create new businesses, develop products, and expand markets
	Innovative Spirit	Ability to generate innovations in products, services, and marketing strategies
	Productivity	Improvement in revenue, production output, and business efficiency
	Transformative Capacity	Adaptation to digital technology and market changes
	Welfare	Contribution of business activities to income growth and well-being
	Economic Opportunity	Ability to utilize market opportunities and business networks
	E-Business	Utilization of marketplaces, social media, digital payment systems, and online promotion
	Sustainability	Ability of businesses to survive and grow sustainably
City Branding	Regional Identity	Local products reflect the distinctive characteristics of Belitung Regency
	Local Product Uniqueness	Products possess unique characteristics that distinguish them from those of other regions
	Tourism Attractiveness	Contribution of local economic activities to increasing tourist arrivals
	Investment Attractiveness	Ability of local economic sectors to attract investment and business partnerships
	Regional Digital Promotion	Effectiveness of digital media in promoting local products and the region
	Positive Regional Image	Positive public perception of product quality and regional identity

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating the mean score for each research indicator (Briana et al., 2025). The mean value was used to assess the level of Smart Economy implementation and City Branding performance based on respondents' perceptions. In addition, the mean scores were used to identify and rank the most influential factors contributing to the strengthening of City Branding in Belitung Regency.

The mean value was calculated using the following formula:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n X_i}{n} \quad (a)$$

Where:

\bar{X} = mean score of an indicator

X_i = score assigned by respondent i

n = total number of respondents

The mean scores were interpreted using the following classification:

Interval	Category
1.00-1.80	Very Low
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.40	Moderate
3.41-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Very High

Subsequently, a ranking analysis was conducted using the mean scores for each indicator. Indicators with higher mean values were interpreted as making a stronger contribution to enhancing City Branding in Belitung Regency.

To formulate development strategies, the results of the descriptive and ranking analyses were integrated with a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). This analysis was used to identify internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats, associated with the development of a smart economy based on local economic potential (Mohammadi & Rafieian, 2022). The SWOT results served as the foundation for strategic recommendations to strengthen City Branding and enhance the long-term competitiveness and regional identity of Belitung Regency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Smart Economy and the Challenges of Strengthening City Branding in Belitung Regency

A survey of 50 respondents, including MSME owners, creative economy practitioners, and tourism business operators, indicates that the implementation of the smart economy in Belitung Regency is at a moderate level, with an average score of 3.47. This result demonstrates that digitally based economic transformation initiatives have advanced and are contributing to local economic activities. However, these initiatives have not yet established a robust, integrated economic system that supports the development of a distinctive regional identity. As a result, Smart Economy development in Belitung Regency remains in the capacity-building phase and has not yet achieved the maturity required to serve as a primary driver of regional economic development.

Table 2 shows that the Innovative Spirit indicator received the highest score (3.85), indicating that most business actors in Belitung Regency recognize the importance of innovation in product development, marketing strategies, and customer service.

Table 2. Level of Smart Economy Implementation in Belitung Regency

Indicators	Means	Category
Entrepreneurship	3.72	High
Innovative Spirit	3.85	High
Productivity	3.48	High
Transformative Capacity	3.44	High
Welfare	3.18	Moderate
Economic Opportunities	3.51	High
E-Business	3.33	Moderate

Sustainability	3.25	Moderate
Average	3.47	Moderate

The recent expansion of the tourism sector has stimulated the creation of new products and services tailored to the needs of tourists and digital consumers. Likewise, the relatively high scores for Entrepreneurship (3.72) and Economic Opportunities (3.51) suggest that local communities increasingly view the digital economy as an opportunity to establish new businesses and broaden market access.

However, the findings also indicate that the development of the Smart Economy has not resulted in evenly distributed economic benefits. The Welfare indicator scored 3.18, while Sustainability and E-Business scored 3.25 and 3.33, respectively. These outcomes suggest that many business actors face ongoing challenges in sustaining business operations and fully leveraging digital technologies. Interviews revealed that digital technology is primarily used for promotional purposes via social media and messaging applications, whereas adoption of online marketplaces, digital payment systems, data-driven market analysis, and integrated digital marketing strategies remains limited. As a result, the economic benefits of digital transformation have not yet led to significant improvements in productivity or overall welfare.

These results suggest that Smart Economy development in Belitung Regency is primarily marked by technology adoption at the individual business level, rather than the formation of a comprehensive digital economic ecosystem that generates sustainable value. In the Smart Economy framework, success depends not only on technology adoption but also on improvements in productivity, welfare, and long-term economic sustainability. Therefore, despite advancements in digitalization, more systematic efforts are needed to enhance business capacity, expand market access, and foster collaboration among stakeholders.

These conditions are closely linked to the City Branding assessment results in Belitung Regency. The survey shows that City Branding received an average score of 3.28, which is considered moderate. This indicates that while Belitung Regency has developed a recognizable regional image, it has not yet established a distinctive or competitive identity relative to other regions.

Table 3. City Branding Performance in Belitung Regency

Indicators	Means	Category
Regional Identity	3.42	High
Local Product Uniqueness	3.35	Moderate
Tourism Attractiveness	3.78	High
Investment Attractiveness	3.08	Moderate
Regional Digital Promotion	2.95	Moderate
Positive Regional Image	3.10	Moderate
Average	3.28	Moderate

Table 3 indicates that Tourism Attractiveness received the highest score (3.78), demonstrating that Belitung's image is predominantly linked to the tourism sector. Most respondents associate Belitung with marine tourism, the UNESCO Global Geopark, and its unique natural beauty. While the tourism sector has significantly enhanced regional recognition and serves as a key asset for City Branding, this strength has not been matched by the development of a robust local economic identity.

The Local Product Uniqueness indicator scored 3.35, while Regional Digital Promotion received the lowest score at 2.95. These findings indicate that Belitung's leading local products have not yet become central to the region's identity. Interview data show that respondents identified fisheries products, traditional culinary items, creative economy activities, local

handicrafts, and digitally enabled MSMEs as key economic assets. However, these sectors are developing independently and have not been integrated into a unified branding narrative. Consequently, Belitung is primarily recognized for its tourism appeal rather than the strength of its local economic sectors.

The findings further highlight a significant gap between local economic potential and the effectiveness of City Branding in Belitung Regency. Economically, the region possesses considerable assets that could support the development of a distinctive territorial identity based on local products and creative industries. Nevertheless, these assets have not been strategically integrated into regional branding and promotional initiatives. The relatively low scores for Investment Attractiveness (3.08) and Regional Digital Promotion (2.95) suggest that local economic development has yet to generate sufficient investor appeal or effectively enhance recognition of Belitung’s flagship products beyond the regional market. As a result, the region’s economic strengths remain underutilized as key components of its branding strategy.

Comparative Assessment: Smart Economy vs. City Branding in Belitung Regency

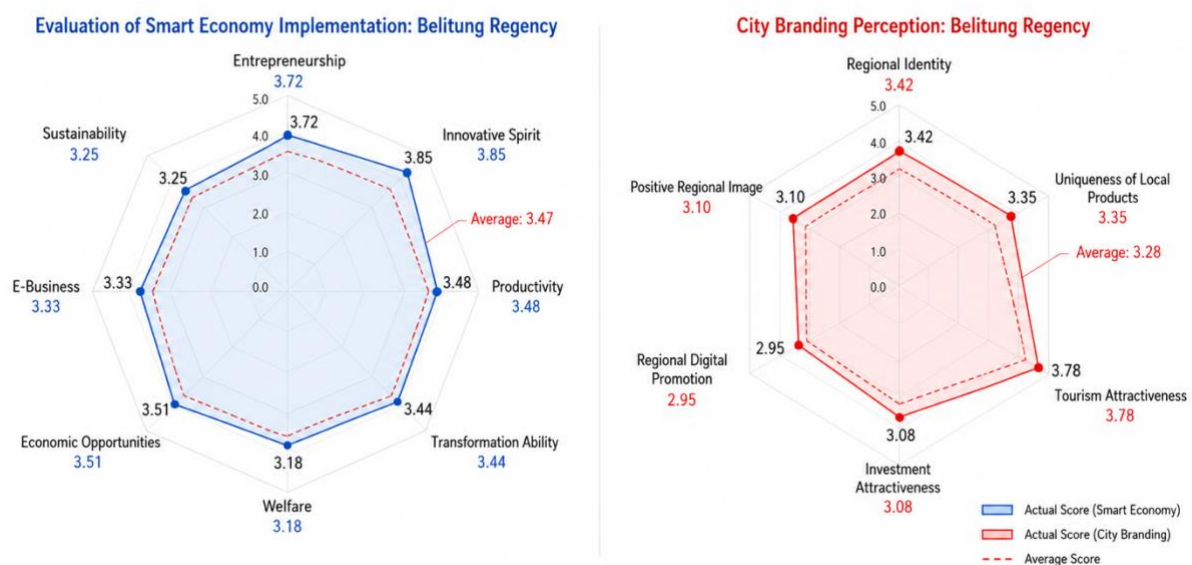


Figure 1. Comparative Assessment of Smart Economy and City Branding in Belitung Regency

Figure 1 provides a comparative assessment of Smart Economy and City Branding in Belitung Regency based on public perceptions in 2025. The analysis reveals a clear gap between the stronger performance of Smart Economy indicators and the more moderate results for City Branding. This suggests that, although local economic potential is developing, it has not yet been effectively translated into a strong and recognizable regional identity.

Table 4. Ranking of Smart Economy Factors Supporting City Branding in Belitung Regency

Rank	Indicators	Mean
1	Innovative Spirit	3.85
2	Entrepreneurship	3.72
3	Economic Opportunities	3.51
4	Productivity	3.48
5	Transformative Capacity	3.44
6	E-Business	3.33
7	Sustainability	3.25
8	Welfare	3.18

The ranking analysis shows that Innovative Spirit, Entrepreneurship, and Economic Opportunities are the most influential factors in strengthening City Branding in Belitung Regency. These results demonstrate that local communities have significant capacity to develop products and economic activities that could represent regional identity. However, the lower scores for Sustainability, Welfare, and E-Business indicate that these capacities have not yet developed into sustainable economic strengths capable of significantly shaping the regional image.

Table 5. SWOT Analysis of Smart Economy-Based City Branding in Belitung Regency

Strengths	Weaknesses
High innovative spirit	Weak digital promotion
Strong entrepreneurship	Moderate e-business adoption
Diverse local economic potential	Weak integration of local products into branding

Opportunities	Threats
Expansion of digital markets	Competition from other tourism destinations
Growth of creative economy	Economic uncertainty
Government Smart City initiatives	Rapid technological changes

In summary, the main challenge for Belitung Regency is not a lack of economic potential but rather insufficient integration between Smart Economy and City Branding (Del Olmo et al., 2025). Current Smart Economy initiatives primarily focus on business capacity and technological adaptation, while City Branding remains centered on tourism. As a result, sectors such as MSMEs, the creative economy, fisheries products, and traditional culinary industries have not yet become central to regional identity. Future City Branding strategies in Belitung Regency should move beyond tourism-focused promotion and adopt a more integrated approach that highlights local economic potential as a core element of territorial identity. This strategy is expected to strengthen regional differentiation and enhance the long-term competitiveness of Belitung Regency at both regional and national levels.

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Smart Economy in Belitung Regency has progressed in innovation, entrepreneurship, and the creation of economic opportunities. However, these developments have not yet translated into a strong City Branding framework. This suggests that the relationship between Smart Economy and City Branding is not automatic. Although local economic activities have shown significant progress, the regional identity that has emerged remains largely dominated by tourism-oriented imagery and has not fully reflected the broader strengths of the local economy (Ebrahimzadeh et al., 2026).

From a Smart Economy perspective, regional competitiveness is driven by the ability to foster innovation, enhance productivity, promote entrepreneurship, and leverage digital technologies to improve economic performance. Nevertheless, the development of a Smart Economy depends not only on technological adoption but also on the ability to connect economic innovation to a recognizable territorial identity that residents, investors, and visitors can perceive (Pasquinelli et al., 2021; Rossi, 2016). Recent studies on smart city branding suggest that successful place branding is determined not merely by the level of digitalization but also by a region's capacity to construct a distinctive local identity through the active involvement of economic actors, government institutions, and local communities.

The results demonstrate that Belitung Regency has established a solid foundation for developing a Smart Economy. The relatively high scores for innovation and entrepreneurship indicate that local business actors can create economically valuable products and services (Feldman, 2014). Despite these strengths, they have not yet made a significant contribution to the formation of a distinctive regional identity (Mohammadi & Rafeian, 2022). This situation highlights a gap between local economic development and the process of place image formation.

Thus, economic success alone does not necessarily lead to strong City Branding, as local economic potential has not yet been effectively translated into a recognizable regional identity.

This finding aligns with recent city branding studies, which contend that while many regions have expanded economic activities, they often struggle to integrate these achievements into a coherent territorial branding narrative (Ma, et al., 2022). Effective City Branding should emphasize not only tourism attractions but also communicate economic characteristics, cultural values, creativity, and local uniqueness that distinguish a region from its competitors (Paskaleva-Shapira, 2007). In Belitung, regional identity remains closely associated with marine tourism and its UNESCO Global Geopark status, whereas sectors such as MSMEs, the creative economy, local culinary products, and fisheries have yet to emerge as prominent symbols of the regional economy (Grębosz, 2021).

The relatively low score for regional digital promotion further supports this argument. The literature on smart branding emphasizes that digital media is essential for linking local identity to broader public perceptions (Petrikova et al., 2019; Ramadhani & Indradjati, 2023). Successful smart branding is typically underpinned by creativity, innovation, stakeholder engagement, and communication strategies that effectively promote local economic strengths as integral elements of a region's image (Eugenio-Vela et al., 2020; Gerlitz et al., 2021; Trinchini et al., 2019). The findings indicate that Belitung continues to face limitations in these areas, resulting in local economic potential developing in isolation rather than being integrated into a unified branding narrative.

The primary contribution of this study is the finding that the Smart Economy does not directly generate strong City Branding. The Smart Economy contributes to City Branding only when innovation, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and local flagship products are effectively translated into a recognizable regional economic identity (Christofi et al., 2021; Vijaygopal et al., 2023). This finding advances previous research, which has often regarded the Smart Economy as a supporting factor for City Branding without clearly articulating the mechanism linking the two concepts. In Belitung Regency, this mechanism involves integrating local economic potential into a coherent narrative of territorial identity. Consequently, strengthening City Branding should not depend solely on tourism promotion but should also adopt an economic branding approach that positions local flagship products, the creative economy, digital MSMEs, and community innovation as central representations of Belitung's regional identity (Ardhanariswari & Probosari, 2024).

The gap between Smart Economy and City Branding appears to be driven by three main factors. First, local economic sectors continue to operate independently without a coordinated branding strategy linking MSMEs, creative industries, fisheries products, and tourism activities. Second, digital promotion remains focused on individual businesses rather than communicating a collective regional identity. Third, institutional coordination among government agencies, business actors, and community organizations remains limited, reducing the ability to transform local economic achievements into a unified territorial narrative. As a result, economic development generates business growth but does not automatically strengthen regional identity.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Smart Economy in Belitung Regency has advanced through improvements in innovation, entrepreneurship, productivity, and economic opportunities. However, these developments have not been matched by a corresponding strengthening of City Branding. The findings indicate that City Branding in Belitung Regency remains moderate and is still dominated by a tourism-oriented image, while various local economic potentials, such as MSMEs, the creative economy, traditional culinary products, and fisheries, have not yet become strong representations of the region's economic identity. The principal finding of this study is that the relationship between the Smart Economy and City Branding is not direct. The success of Smart Economy initiatives does not automatically

result in strong City Branding if local economic potential has not been transformed into a recognizable territorial identity for residents, tourists, and investors. In Belitung Regency, local economic activities have developed substantially, yet they remain fragmented and have not been integrated into a consistent regional branding narrative. This study makes a conceptual contribution by expanding the understanding of the relationship between the Smart Economy and City Branding through the concept of economic branding. This approach positions local flagship products, the creative economy, digital MSMEs, and community innovation as the foundation for regional identity formation. The findings underscore that strengthening City Branding requires more than tourism promotion; it necessitates integrating local economic development, digital transformation, and strategic territorial communication to achieve sustainable regional differentiation. Accordingly, the future development strategy for Belitung Regency should transition from tourism branding to an economic branding approach to enhance competitiveness and strengthen identity over the long term.

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