

Constructing the Tourism Identity of East Flores Through the Fantastic East Flores Program

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Abstract

Modern tourism competition requires destinations to develop clear and distinctive identities. East Flores Regency has long been recognized as a religious tourism destination, particularly through the annual Semana Santa celebration, which attracts large numbers of domestic and international visitors. This study adopts a constructivist qualitative approach using a case study design, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, field and social media observations, and document analysis. It examines the processes of formulation, production, institutionalization, and internalization of East Flores' identity as a cultural center of the Lamaholot community, alongside its distinctive maritime attractions promoted through the Fantastic East Flores program. The findings show that "Fantastic East Flores" functions as an expansion rather than a replacement of the established religious identity. However, the branding strategy relies more on internal potential mapping than on systematic market analysis. As a result, the implementation of cultural and maritime identity remains inconsistent and continues to be dominated by religious narratives. Although the program has been incorporated into regional policy, its adoption across institutions remains non-binding. Consequently, the new identity has not yet been fully internalized in tourists' perceptions.

Keywords: *Destination Branding, Cultural and Marine Tourism, Fantastic East Flores.*



A. INTRODUCTION

Destination branding has become a key strategy in tourism development to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of destinations. Recent studies emphasize that destination branding plays a crucial role in shaping destination image, communicating a distinctive identity, and differentiating destinations in an increasingly competitive global tourism market (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Moreover, destination branding enables local governments to establish strong positioning and attract tourist flows by strengthening place identity and integrating tourism resources. In this context, it also allows regions to reinforce or redefine their identity by leveraging diverse tourism potentials, particularly when attempting to expand beyond previously established tourism images (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, destination branding has been widely adopted by local governments. One notable example is Labuan Bajo in West Manggarai Regency, which has experienced rapid tourism growth. The region recorded 92,237 tourist arrivals between January and April 2024, exceeding the total annual visits during the same period in most other regencies in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Province, including Manggarai, East Manggarai, Nagekeo, Sikka, East Flores, and Lembata. In contrast, East Flores recorded only 9,086 tourist visits during the same period (Department of

Tourism and Creative Economy of NTT Province, 2025). The success of West Manggarai is closely associated with the “Enchanting Labuan Bajo” branding, introduced in 2018 to position the region as a wildlife tourism destination centered on the Komodo dragon (VoxNtt, 2017). A similar approach can be observed in Banyuwangi, East Java, through the slogan “The Sunrise of Java,” which integrates natural and cultural tourism promotion supported by event-based strategies. This approach has significantly increased tourist arrivals, reaching 3,405,145 visitors in 2024, a 7% increase compared to the previous year (Detikjatim, 2025).

Both West Manggarai and Banyuwangi have successfully attracted large numbers of tourists by establishing clear tourism identities (Benu et al., 2020; Subagyo, 2019). Tourism identity extends beyond slogans or logos; it encompasses positioning, identity narratives, integrated communication, and the consistency of tourism experiences (Amani & Chao, 2023). In West Manggarai, branding is managed collaboratively among stakeholders (VoxNtt, 2017), while in Banyuwangi, event-based tourism has transformed public perception of the region into a “Festival City.” These examples demonstrate that destination branding functions as an effective communication strategy in regional tourism development.

East Flores Regency is widely recognized as a religious tourism destination, primarily due to the annual *Semana Santa* celebration held in Larantuka, the capital of East Flores. *Semana Santa* is a series of religious rituals honoring Tuan Ma (Mother Mary) and Tuan Ana (Jesus), conducted from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. This centuries-old tradition continues to be preserved (Kompas, 2023). Its popularity has shaped Larantuka’s identity as a religious city, earning titles such as Kota Reinha Rosari, Beranda Vatikan, Kota Ziarah, and Nazaret di Ujung Timur Flores (Antara News, 2009; Detikbali, 2024). This event is unique not only for its religious ceremonies but also for its integration of local traditions, including both land and sea processions. As a result, it consistently attracts tens of thousands of domestic and international visitors each year. However, the concentration of visits during *Semana Santa* leads to a seasonal tourism pattern, with most tourists visiting only once annually, creating an imbalance between visits during the event and other periods.

Despite its strong religious identity (with eight religious tourism sites), East Flores also possesses 16 cultural tourism sites and 26 marine tourism destinations (Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, 2025). However, Nawastuti & Lewoema (2020) note that tourism development remains heavily focused on *Semana Santa*, while cultural and marine destinations are not yet optimally managed, particularly in terms of infrastructure, promotion, and community involvement. In response, the Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency (Disparbud) introduced the Fantastic East Flores (FEF) program in 2019, which was implemented in 2020. This initiative was also influenced by East Flores’ inclusion under the Labuan Bajo Authority as part of Indonesia’s Super Priority Tourism Destinations (Presidential Regulation No. 32/2018).

The FEF program, which also serves as the region’s tourism tagline, aims to position East Flores as the cultural center of the Lamaholot community, characterized

by its coastal landscapes and small islands such as Adonara and Solor. The program promotes Lamaholot culture alongside year-round natural attractions. Kampung Adat Lewokluok has been designated as the cultural tourism icon, while Pasir Timbul Meko serves as the marine tourism icon. The program is implemented collaboratively with stakeholders, including hotel owners, travel agents, MSMEs, local communities, and media actors. Through this strategy, the local government set a target of 200,000 tourist arrivals in 2020, with incremental annual increases. Lewokluok and Meko were each assigned a target of 75,000 visitors per year (Disparbud, 2025).

The construction of cultural and marine identity has also been pursued through social media platforms such as Instagram (@fantasticeastflores), Facebook (Disparbud Flores Timur), and TikTok (DISPARBUD FLOTIM). In contemporary tourism development, social media functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a strategic instrument for building destination awareness and shaping image (de las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020). Although the FEF program has been implemented for five years (2020–2024), the cultural and marine identity of East Flores has yet to be fully established. This is reflected in the failure to meet annual tourist visit targets. Both domestic and international tourists continue to concentrate primarily on the Semana Santa celebration. Furthermore, visits to key destinations remain below expected targets, as illustrated in table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparison of Tourist Visits Iconic Destinations and Semana Santa Event (2020-2024)

Year	Local	Nusantara	International	Lewokluok	Meko	Semana Santa	Total
2020	10,120	3,100	247	1,839	314	6,314	13,494
2021	44,001	511	48	10,819	7,163	20,899	44,560
2022	18,540	25,870	1,939	7,451	3,061	26,137	46,349
2023	33,602	7,890	612	5,675	3,335	30,657	42,104
2024	40,890	8,700	386	356	7,198	29,063	49,976

Source: Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, 2025

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that East Flores continues to be perceived primarily as a religious tourism destination. This suggests that tourists have yet to recognize the region as a center of Lamaholot culture or as a competitive nature-based destination. Based on that fact, this study seeks to analyze destination branding in East Flores through the Fantastic East Flores (FEF) program, with particular emphasis on the efforts of Disparbud to expand the region's identity into a cultural and marine destination without displacing its historically established religious identity. This research is significant in understanding how government communication strategies construct, shape, and negotiate emerging destination identities.

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks: destination branding theory and the Social Construction of Reality. Destination branding theory posits that tourism identity is formed through a long-term communication process encompassing strategic, communicative, and experiential dimensions aimed at achieving differentiation and positioning in a competitive tourism market. In this

sense, branding requires consistency between the communicated identity and the actual experience perceived by tourists. The destination branding process generally consists of five stages: (1) investigation and market analysis to identify destination characteristics, audience perceptions, and differentiation opportunities; (2) brand identity development to establish core values, vision, and destination personality; (3) brand launch through integrated communication strategies; (4) brand implementation across all tourism experiences to ensure alignment between projected identity and on-site reality; and (5) monitoring and evaluation to assess effectiveness and enable continuous improvement (Morgan et al., 2004).

The second framework, the Social Construction of Reality, views reality as socially constructed rather than objectively given. From this perspective, destination branding can be understood as a process of constructing reality namely, a strategic effort to shape, institutionalize, and disseminate particular meanings about a destination through planning, communication, and evaluation. Thus, destination branding extends beyond a marketing strategy and becomes a social process through which a destination's identity is constructed and internalized as a shared social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

These two frameworks are used to interpret the formulation of identity and the strategic direction of destination branding, the production and representation of cultural and maritime identity, the institutionalization and objectification of branding, and the dynamics of internalization and identity negotiation. Previous studies have primarily focused on strategic challenges, policy implementation, and promotional effectiveness in destination branding. For example, Bire et al. (2022) identified key challenges in East Nusa Tenggara, including tourist safety, attraction development, community involvement, social media utilization, and the need for expert collaboration. Their study also proposed strategic preferences for regional governments in addressing these challenges at the provincial level.

Similarly, Potapovs (2024) examined the role of government in place branding, emphasizing how public institutions design, coordinate, and implement branding strategies as part of broader public policy to shape regional image and competitiveness. Other studies, such as Tran & Rudolf (2022), have highlighted the role of social media in destination branding, particularly its effectiveness in enhancing visibility and audience engagement through platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Based on the discussion above, the novelty of this study lies in its examination of the FEF program as a process of social construction of tourism reality in East Flores Regency. Rather than treating destination branding merely as a promotional tool, this study conceptualizes it as a process of identity formation and expansion from a seasonal religious destination to a year-round cultural and maritime destination. Furthermore, the study explores the dynamics of identity construction within an archipelagic context characterized by structural challenges. In doing so, it contributes to destination branding scholarship by offering insights into how regions attempt to construct new identities under the dominance of a historically established image.

The researcher's positionality as an insider from East Flores provides valuable contextual insight while also necessitating methodological rigor. To address this, reflexivity was maintained through field notes, source triangulation, and verification of findings with informants to ensure analytical objectivity (Sugiyono, 2019).

B. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, defined as research procedures that generate descriptive data in the form of written texts, spoken words, and observed behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Given these characteristics, a qualitative approach is well suited to examining the process of identity formation in East Flores as a socially constructed phenomenon. Within this framework, the researcher employs a case study design to provide a detailed, in-depth, and context-rich understanding of a real-life phenomenon. The use of a case study is further justified by the need to comprehensively examine the implementation of a specific program (Yin, 2018).

This study utilizes an observer as participant approach with varying levels of involvement. Field observations were conducted at the Disparbud Office, Kampung Adat Lewokluok, and Pasir Timbul Meko, where the researcher was present in the setting but engaged in limited interaction with participants (Spradley, 1980). In contrast, observations of social media platforms including Instagram (@fantasticeastflores), Facebook (Disparbud Flores Timur), and TikTok (DISPARBUD FLOTIM) were categorized as complete observation, as the researcher analyzed content without direct interaction (Spradley, 1980). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five informants: the Head of the Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, the Head of the Tourism Marketing and Partnership Division, the FEF Social Media Manager, a local visitor, and an international tourist. Document analysis was also carried out using both printed and digital materials, including planning and policy documents, program reports, promotional media, event documentation, and statistical data.

Data were analyzed using the cyclical model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992), which includes data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was conducted iteratively and continuously until data saturation was reached. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process to minimize potential bias, particularly given the researcher's positionality as an insider from East Flores. To ensure data validity, source triangulation was applied by cross-checking information obtained from multiple informants. Each informant was interviewed twice at different times to ensure consistency, clarify responses, and enable deeper exploration of the data (Sugiyono, 2019).

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Formulation of Identity and Direction of Destination Branding

For a long time, tourism in East Flores has been dominated by a religious narrative. This condition was explicitly acknowledged by Silvester Suban Toa Kabelen, Head of the Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency.

“Long before the Fantastic East Flores program was established and implemented, East Flores was recognized as a religious tourism destination, with Semana Santa as its main icon, celebrated annually and attracting large numbers of visitors during that period. While we appreciate this recognition, we are also concerned that our cultural and coastal attractions remain underrepresented.” (interview, 07 January 2026).

This religious identity has undergone a process of objectification, becoming a taken-for-granted and institutionalized social reality in public perception (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). At the same time, there is growing institutional awareness of a gap between this established identity and the region’s broader tourism potential, which has not yet been fully articulated. In response, the Fantastic East Flores (FEF) program emerged as an effort to construct an additional identity not to replace the religious narrative, but to expand the range of meanings associated with the destination. This reflects a strategic attempt to reshape tourists’ perceptions by leveraging the region’s cultural and natural assets.

The utilization of local potential, particularly unique cultural and natural attractions, has been shown to enhance destination differentiation and strengthen brand image. A study in Kupang, NTT Province, found that natural beauty, culinary diversity, and distinctive cultural practices play a key role in shaping destination image, with tourists perceiving Kupang as an exotic and culturally rich city based on their experiences (Da Lopez et al., 2024). These findings support the FEF branding strategy, as Lewokluok and Meko have the potential to reinforce East Flores’ cultural and natural identity.



Figure 1. FEF Book and Iconic Destination Imagery

Source: Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, 2025.

Figure 1 illustrates the FEF book, which documents various destinations, including Lewokluok and Meko. However, the compilation process was conducted

without prior market research or analysis of tourist perceptions, segmentation, and motivation. This approach contrasts with established destination branding principles, which emphasize the importance of understanding tourist expectations and motivations for effective positioning and differentiation (Morgan et al., 2004). While the book highlights local potential, the absence of market-oriented analysis limits its strategic effectiveness.

From the perspective of social construction theory, this branding process can be understood as externalization the projection of particular meanings and realities into the public sphere (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Through FEF, Disparbud articulates a new vision of regional tourism by positioning East Flores not only as a seasonal religious destination but also as a year-round cultural and marine destination. This reflects a shift in the temporal pattern of tourism, expanding from event-based visitation to continuous engagement with cultural traditions, maritime landscapes, and everyday community life. This strategic shift is further explained by Silvester Suban Toa Kabelen:

“Tourist arrivals peak during the Semana Santa celebration. After participating in the rituals, visitors typically continue their journey to West Flores, visiting destinations such as Kelimutu Lake, Bena Traditional Village, Wae Rebo, and Labuan Bajo before returning home. We aim to change this pattern, as East Flores offers comparable attractions. Therefore, we introduced the Bale Nagi Festival in Larantuka to extend tourists’ length of stay. However, over the past five years, visitor numbers have still been dominated by local tourists with relatively limited purchasing power. We have also organized the Lewokluok Festival and Meko Festival, although only once each.” (interview, 07 January 2026).

This statement suggests that FEF branding is not merely symbolic, but also a response to patterns of tourist mobility. Previous studies indicate that event-based tourism can effectively increase destination awareness, strengthen image, and extend tourists’ length of stay (Dianawat & Nugrahan, 2020). However, inconsistent implementation and limited event distribution have reduced the effectiveness of these initiatives in attracting external visitors.

In addition, tourism infrastructure in Lewokluok and Meko remains insufficient to support extended stays by non-local visitors. This limitation partly explains why the Bale Nagi Festival has not been organized in these locations. Furthermore, geographical constraints particularly Meko’s location on Adonara Island pose logistical challenges, as inter-island transportation requires more complex management.

2. Production of Cultural and Marine Identity

The production of cultural and marine identity involves communicating these identities through various promotional channels, including events, social media, and stakeholder collaboration. The use of diverse communication platforms plays a significant role in strengthening destination image and increasing awareness (Morgan

et al., 2004). This process is described by Cyprianus Josef Fernandez, FEF's social media manager:

"We use both conventional and digital communication tools, including logos, color schemes, taglines, events, stakeholder collaboration, social media, and the website. These efforts are carried out collaboratively, as tourism development in East Flores requires the involvement of government, industry, and the community. We consistently highlight Lamaholot culture and the region's coastal identity. For example, the logo incorporates visual elements from Lewokluok weaving and the Meko Sandbar, representing cultural and marine identity. The logo is applied across various platforms to strengthen public recognition and association with the brand." (interview, 08 January 2026).

These branding instruments function not only as promotional tools but also as mechanisms for constructing the cultural and natural image of East Flores. Social media, in particular, enhances destination visibility and engagement through visual storytelling and user-generated content (Kliskey et al., 2021). Similarly, logos contribute to shaping perception and influencing visit intention (Li & Ma, 2023), while stakeholder collaboration strengthens collective positioning (Perkins et al., 2020).



Figure 2. Logo FEF as Visual Representation of Cultural and Marine Identity

Source: Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, 2025.

The FEF logo (Figure 2) serves as a symbolic marker reinforcing the cultural and marine identity of East Flores. However, religious elements particularly those associated with *Semana Santa* remain visually dominant. This reflects a strategic decision, as explained by Fernandez:

"We maintain the prominence of religious elements because East Flores already has an established market associated with that identity. Changing public perception requires time, so we gradually introduce cultural and marine elements based on audience response." (interview, 08 January 2026).

The interview illustrates that, although maintaining a strong focus on religious tourism provides a stable market foundation, it also entails several risks. Iliev (2020)

argues that prioritizing religious tourism may limit market diversification, thereby reducing the destination's responsiveness to other tourist segments, such as those seeking cultural or natural experiences. In this context, his findings suggest that brand perception may remain narrow, as non-religious visitors may not perceive East Flores as relevant to their interests, thereby slowing the repositioning of its cultural and maritime identities.

The researcher's observations at Lewokluok Traditional Village and the Meko Sandbar indicate that, although basic infrastructure is relatively adequate, it is not supported by consistent management and maintenance. Lewokluok benefits from good road access, internet connectivity, accommodation facilities, and a government-built Tourist Information Centre (TIC). Similarly, Meko is accessible via sea transportation and is supported by facilities such as homestays and a TIC. However, the physical condition of both destinations reflects inadequate maintenance, including overgrown areas, malfunctioning facilities, and the limited presence of Fantastic East Flores branding and visual identity on site. Tourism infrastructure represents the translation of a destination's brand promise into visitors' actual experiences (Morgan et al., 2004). In this regard, inadequate facilities in Lewokluok and Meko may weaken the perception of the cultural and natural identities that the branding strategy seeks to promote.

Local communities and *pokdarwis* (tourism awareness groups) in both destinations initially demonstrated strong participation and even received the Anugerah Pesona Indonesia Award. Nevertheless, the sustainability of destination management has since faced several challenges, including declining tourist visits and reduced motivation among some *pokdarwis* members. In Lewokluok, promotional efforts tend to focus on annual rituals rather than everyday cultural practices such as weaving and traditional life. Meanwhile, in Meko, the limited availability of interpretive materials and bilingual information highlights a gap between infrastructure development and the effective communication of marine tourism identity (Sieras, 2024).

3. Institutionalization and Objectification of Branding

Destination branding in East Flores needs to undergo a process of institutionalization to ensure that cultural and maritime identities move beyond the discursive level and are genuinely internalized by stakeholders. This process involves integrating these identities into policy frameworks, adopting them across institutions, and implementing them among stakeholders to sustain the destination's positioning over the long term (Garanti et al., 2024). Document analysis indicates that the FEF narrative has been incorporated into the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPDA) through the integration of spiritual, cultural, and maritime potentials. This suggests that FEF branding is not merely a standalone slogan, but is embedded within the strategic direction of regional tourism development.

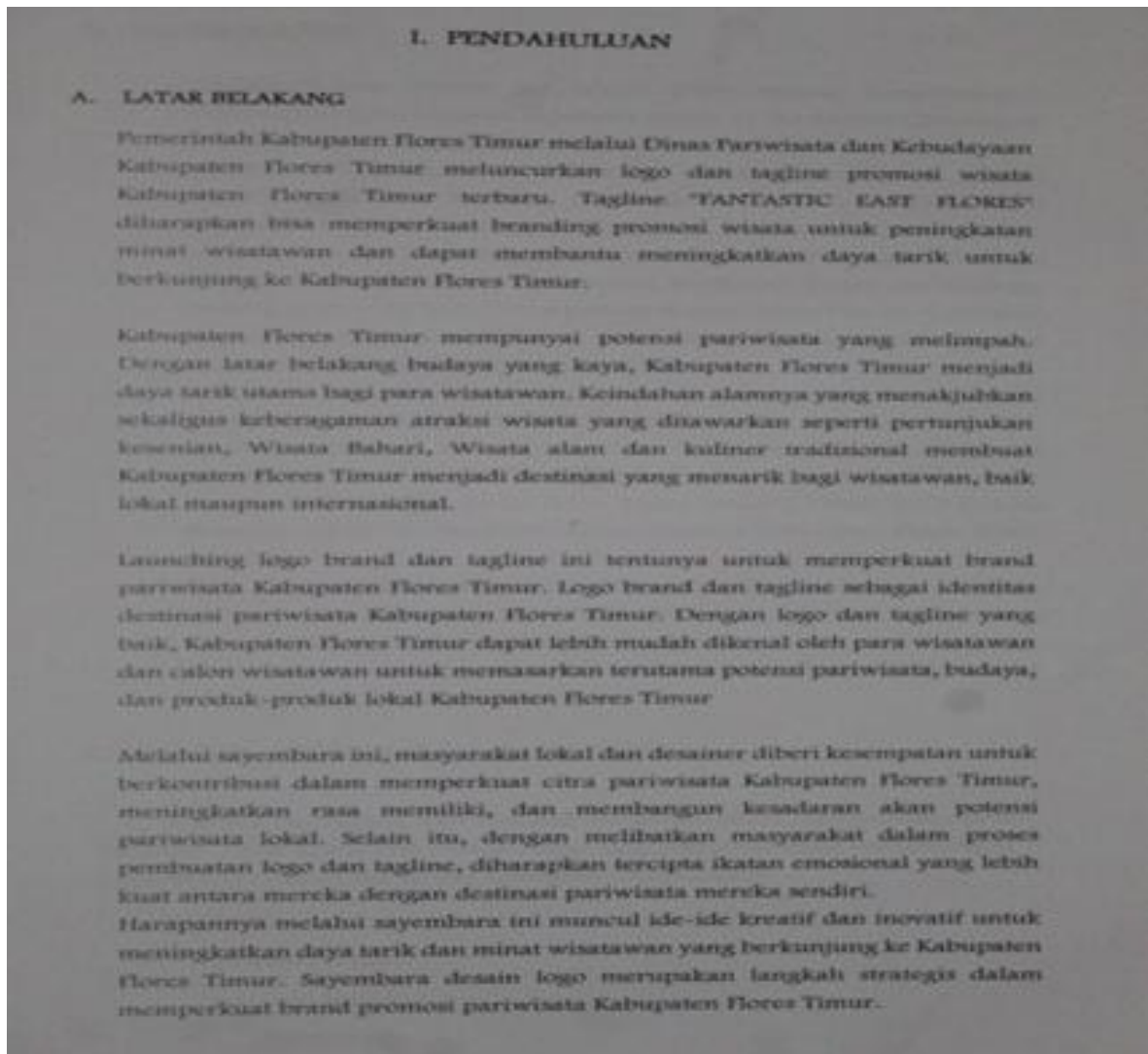


Figure 3. Integration of the FEF Branding Narrative in RIPPDA

Source: Department of Tourism and Culture of East Flores Regency, 2025

Figure 3 demonstrates policy coherence, as FEF is reflected not only in promotional materials but also in long-term tourism planning documents. This finding aligns with Alhaddar & Kummitha (2025), who emphasize that integrating branding into tourism development policy enables destination branding to function as a strategic framework guiding tourism experiences and shaping destination image in the minds of visitors. However, the pattern of integration still reflects a predominantly top-down approach, as illustrated by the statement of John Wilbert, Head of the Tourism Marketing and Partnership Division.

“We encourage all regional government agencies (OPD), particularly Public Relations, the Office of Cooperatives and MSMEs, the Office of Communication and Information, and the Office of Education, to use the logo and hashtags #fantasticeastflores or #ayokeflorestimur, while integrating the FEF spirit into their respective programs. However, implementation remains limited because it is not supported by formal regulations that mandate it. The integration of FEF visual elements typically occurs only when agencies initiate specific programs and we encourage them to adopt it.” (interview, 13 January 2026).

This statement indicates that efforts to institutionalize FEF branding have been initiated through cross-agency coordination mechanisms. However, the approach remains largely persuasive and normative, relying on appeals rather than binding regulations such as incorporating branding indicators into institutional performance metrics thereby making implementation dependent on the initiative of individual agencies.

The institutionalization of FEF branding is also evident at the level of industry stakeholders, including hotel owners, travel agents, and MSME actors. At this stage, institutionalization is less about formal regulation and more about the reproduction of cultural and maritime meanings in everyday economic practices (Perkins et al., 2020). Branding can be considered to have reached a deeper level of institutionalization when industry actors voluntarily integrate the FEF narrative into their products and services. However, this process of meaning-making and integration continues to face several challenges, as reflected in the following statement by John Wilbert.

“We involved hotel owners, travel agents, and MSME actors in formulating the FEF program. We encouraged them to promote East Flores’ cultural and marine identity through their communication channels, both word-of-mouth and digital platforms. While some have adopted the official logo and hashtags, many continue to promote independently. We did not establish formal agreements or regulations, so implementation ultimately depends on stakeholders’ commitment to our shared understanding.” (interview, 13 January 2026).

Based on these findings, it can be inferred that the institutionalization of destination branding at the stakeholder level remains largely voluntaristic. The absence of formal regulations, partnership agreements, and incentive mechanisms results in brand adoption that depends heavily on the commitment of individual industry actors.

The implementation of FEF branding therefore requires stronger coordination among OPD and stakeholders. FEF branding should not be viewed solely as a program of Disparbud, but as a strategic framework for destination development integrated into cross-sectoral policies. Accordingly, incorporating branding indicators into the performance metrics of government agencies and stakeholders represents a critical step toward strengthening the consistency of branding implementation at the destination level.

4. Dynamics of Internalization and Identity Negotiation

Internalization represents the most critical stage in the construction of destination identity. In this study, it occurs when cultural and maritime identities are accepted, interpreted, and reproduced by both local communities and tourists as authentic representations of East Flores. At this stage, the Fantastic East Flores (FEF) program is no longer perceived merely as a slogan or initiative, but as a lived social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). However, FEF has not yet reached this level, as evidenced by social media observations.



Figure 4. Instagram Post from the FEF Account Highlighting Cultural and Marine Content

Source: Instagram @fantasticeastflores, 2025

Figure 4 presents two posts from the FEF Instagram account featuring Kampung Adat Lewokluok and Pasir Timbul Meko. Social media observations indicate that posts related to these flagship destinations are generally not presented in bilingual formats and tend to generate low engagement. In the context of digital tourism communication, interaction metrics such as likes, comments, shares, and user-generated narratives serve as key indicators of the extent to which branding messages generate symbolic resonance among audiences (Mariani et al., 2021). The management of social media within the branding process is further explained by Cyprianus Josef Fernandez:

“Our team cannot speak English fluently, which makes it difficult to create monologue videos in a foreign language. Although this could potentially be addressed using artificial intelligence, our main limitation lies in the lack of adequate content production equipment. Currently, we rely on mobile phones to manage FEF’s social media, which restricts our ability to produce high-quality visual content.” (interview, 15 January 2026).

This statement indicates that the effectiveness of social media branding is influenced not only by conceptual strategy but also by human resource capacity and technical support for content production. Competencies in visual content creation and digital communication are essential in destination management, as they significantly affect the effectiveness of online destination communication (Silva et al., 2025). Consequently, limited foreign language proficiency may constrain the expansion of global audiences. This issue is reflected in the statement of Benny Mansour, an

international tourist who attended the Semana Santa celebration: *"I came here mainly for Semana Santa. I received very little information about other destinations, such as cultural villages or beaches, prior to my visit."* (interview, 21 January 2026). This finding suggests that the communication of cultural and maritime identity has not yet effectively reached international audiences, particularly in terms of content quality, accessibility, and audience orientation—factors that significantly influence user engagement and information processing in digital environments (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

At the local level, the internalization of cultural and maritime identity also remains relatively weak. This is reflected in the statement of Yones Ekaputra Lamuri, a local tourist: *"I have visited Kampung Adat Lewokluok and Pasir Timbul Meko, but when people talk about East Flores, what comes to mind is still Semana Santa. That is the main attraction."* (interview, 19 January 2026). Local audiences continue to associate East Flores primarily with its established religious identity. Pande et al. (2022) argue that destination image formation is strongly shaped by long-standing and repeatedly reinforced representations, which tend to persist even when new branding initiatives are introduced. The continued dominance of Semana Santa as the core reference point indicates that the internalization of cultural and maritime identity remains at an early stage. Therefore, more consistent communication strategies, stronger experiential reinforcement, and sustained symbolic reproduction are required across both local and external audiences to support the successful internalization of the new destination identity.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the construction of East Flores' tourism identity is a gradual social process encompassing the stages of formulation, production, institutionalization, and internalization. Disparbud seeks to create differentiation by emphasizing Lamaholot culture and marine resources through the Fantastic East Flores program. This identity is communicated through various channels, including logos, festivals, social media, and stakeholder collaboration. However, the findings suggest that this communication strategy continues to face several challenges, such as the absence of systematic market identification, limited local community empowerment, inconsistencies in event implementation, the lack of sustainable digital content production, limited human resource capacity, and inadequate infrastructure availability and maintenance.

At the stages of institutionalization and internalization, destination branding has begun to be integrated into regional tourism development policy documents and promoted through cross-sectoral coordination and the involvement of tourism industry actors. Nevertheless, this institutionalization remains largely normative, as it is not yet supported by formal regulations or incentive mechanisms that ensure consistent adoption of the brand across stakeholders. At the same time, the internalization of cultural and marine identities among the public remains incomplete, as religious narratives continue to dominate tourists' perceptions. Therefore, destination branding in East Flores through the Fantastic East Flores program requires

stronger research-based market mapping, enhanced local community empowerment, and more targeted and consistent brand communication. These efforts should be supported by the establishment of formal regulations at both governmental and stakeholder levels. Such measures are expected to facilitate the internalization of destination identity in tourists' perceptions, positioning East Flores as a center of Lamaholot culture and a distinctive island-based coastal destination.

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