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Author : Ahmad Naufal Maheswara Puspito, dkk
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Globalizing Surabaya's Thematic Villages: A Digital Approach to Cultural Diplomacy and Creative Economy

Ahmad Naufal Maheswara Puspito[1], Fandrian Makarim[2,] Afif Pramudya Alriandi[3], Probo Darono Yakti[4]

[1,2,4]*Department of International Relations Faculty of Social and Political Sciences Universitas Ailangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*
[3]*Department of Psychology Faculty of Psychology Universitas Ailangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

ahmad.naufal.maheswara-2023@fisip.unair.ac.id, vian.makarim26@gmail.com, aveev.vram05@gmail.com

Abstract

Surabaya's thematic villages hold significant potential as sustainable tourism destinations and centers for creative economic activities. However, limited exposure and marketing have hindered their growth. Many local artisans struggle to reach broader markets, restricting economic opportunities within these communities. Developing a website serves as a strategic solution to promote thematic villages and facilitate the sale of locally crafted products. Leveraging digital platforms enhances the visibility of Surabaya's cultural heritage while fostering economic sustainability. Integrating creative economy principles into tourism development aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in promoting inclusive economic growth and innovation. Showcasing Surabaya's local identity to a global audience strengthens cultural diplomacy and encourages international collaboration in sustainable tourism. This study employs a systematic literature review to analyze various academic journals, books, and publications related to the topic, forming a comprehensive conceptual framework. Based on the findings, the research implements an agile software development approach to construct a website that effectively showcases Surabaya's thematic villages. Agile methodology is chosen for its flexibility in structuring software features, allowing iterative improvements to align with user needs. Additionally, the study measures the website's effectiveness through a one-group pre-test and post-test design as experimental study to evaluate its impact on user engagement and accessibility. As such, we seek to develop a medium in which these cultural wonders of ours will be able to bloom. A well-designed website that will serve as a bridge for visitors, introducing them to Surabaya's magnificent and culturally rich thematic villages in a detailed yet informative manner that will ensure fitting first impressions. Locations of each thematic village will certainly be provided as well as what each of them may offer to the visitors of the website, in order to provide a complete and easy experience in navigation. In conclusion, the development of this website significantly enhances the visibility of Surabaya's thematic villages, broadens market access for local artisans, and supports sustainable tourism. Utilizing agile methodology allows for a dynamic and adaptive platform tailored to the evolving needs of both communities and visitors. Beyond functioning as a promotional tool, the website plays a crucial role in cultural diplomacy and tourism innovation based on local wisdom. Align with sustainable development principles.

Keywords: Thematic Villages; Sustainable Tourism; Digital Platform; Creative Economy; Cultural Diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Surabaya, the second largest metropolitan city in Indonesia, has long been recognized for its progressive governance, urban resilience, and dedication to sustainable development. Over the past decade, the city has increasingly positioned itself as a pioneer in integrating local innovation into urban policy, particularly through initiatives that combine cultural preservation with economic empowerment. Among its most notable programs is the development of "thematic villages" community based urban areas designed around distinctive cultural, historical, culinary, and ecological themes. This initiative not only revitalizes local neighborhoods but also serves as a strategic instrument to promote tourism, foster community engagement, and support the creative economy. As of late 2024, the Surabaya City Government has transformed at least 44 villages into thematic hubs, classified into three major types: Featured Villages, Tourism Villages, and Ecological Villages [1] [2]. Each type emphasizes a different dimension of local character and development potential. Kampung Semanggi in Benowo, for instance, showcases its

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signature culinary product semanggi (tamarind leaf salad); Kampung Kue in Rungkut is a center for traditional Javanese snacks; while Kampung Lawas Maspati in Bubutan highlights colonial-era architecture and rich historical narratives. These examples reveal the diversity and cultural depth embedded within Surabaya's urban fabric. The villages not only reflect the city's socio-cultural capital but also act as living museum of heritage, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

The emergence of thematic villages has significantly influenced the grassroots creative economy by enabling artisans, micro enterprises, and youth led innovations to thrive within their local contexts. Residents gain opportunities to commercialize traditional knowledge, develop niche tourism products, and engage in community based branding. However, despite this dynamic local engagement, most thematic villages remain relatively unknown outside their immediate surroundings. This is largely due to inadequate digital infrastructure, weak branding strategies, and fragmented promotional efforts. As a result, these communities often face barriers in accessing larger domestic or international markets, limiting the scale of their economic and cultural impact. Today's digital era, technological integration is no longer optional, it is essential. The tourism and cultural sectors worldwide are increasingly shaped by digital storytelling, data driven marketing, and web based engagement. Digital technologies enable even small scale communities to participate in global cultural flows, enhance destination competitiveness, and innovate their outreach through multimedia platforms. Without digital intervention, traditional promotion methods are often insufficient to attract modern, tech savvy travelers or international partners [3]. Thematic villages in Surabaya, rich in heritage and creativity, are ideal candidates for digital elevation through storytelling, branding, and online visibility.

A dedicated digital platform in the form of an integrated and user-friendly website can serve as a game changing solution to these limitations. It not only enhances public access to information about each thematic village but also acts as a marketing tool, a cultural archive, and an e-commerce outlet for locally produced goods. Features such as interactive maps, multimedia content, and product catalogs, such a website can transform how thematic villages are perceived and accessed by global audiences. Digital approach also aligns closely with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), reinforcing Surabaya's commitment to inclusive and innovative urban development. Thus, this study aims to bridge the gap between local cultural assets and global tourism markets through digital innovation. Applying agile software development methods, the research team proposes the creation of a centralized digital portal that amplifies the visibility, accessibility, and sustainability of Surabaya's thematic villages. More than just a promotional platform, the website is envisioned as a tool of cultural diplomacy, enhancing international understanding and appreciation of Indonesia's urban diversity and community led creativity. As thematic villages embody the spirit of localized progress, their success through digital empowerment could serve as a replicable model for other cities in Southeast Asia and beyond.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Thematic Villages and Urban Tourism

Tourism has always been the main reason behind why people ventured out to places they have never been, may it be to visit a certain place they saw online or reasons as simple as a break from their duties. Indonesia in particular, has always been known as the country where the infamous city of Bali is located, a city rich in cultural heritance and a safe haven for foreigners who adore tropical environments. Such qualities can also be found all throughout Indonesia's islands, some might not offer the extravagance of Bali but they are rich in culture nonetheless. Thematic villages are one of a kind in the field of Indonesia's tourism, essentially villages you could visit which are all unique in their own special ways. These villages often adopt different themes, in Surabaya, thematic villages are based off of other countries. Distincting themselves to one another by representing foreign cultures as main attraction points while putting their own regional specialties into the mix, such as serving hybrid foods inspired from Indonesian and Japanese cuisine. Effectively improving the local economy whilst serving as mediums in which people from all over the world may visit and learn a thing or two about local and foreign cultures, an educative getaway of sorts.

2.2 Creative Economy and Local Empowerment

The concept of thematic villages under the scope of the tourism economy may be alien to a select group of people. A place where known and the unknown goes to collaborate might not seem too synchronized at surface level, and yet it works nonetheless. Such a concept may be defined as a form of creative economy, an ever-evolving concept which mainly built its foundations on human creativity, intellectual property, and technology [4]. Simply put, a creative economy aims to use and utilize arts and creativity into the acts of economy such as trading, labour, and even production. Its commercial value lies in what it has to offer, making it a sector of dynamicity which provides new opportunities in areas of the world economy [4]. That being said, thematic villages continue to grow in popularity amongst local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). MSMEs are often considered as the backbone of Indonesia's economy, contributing over more than 60% to gross domestic product (GDP) as well as absorbing 97% of the total workforce [5]. Even so, taking Indonesia's geological vastness and size into consideration, challenges faced such as isolation, poor access to finance or e-commerce platforms are easily found all across Indonesia's

archipelago.

By developing thematic villages that concentrate on specific industries, communities are empowered to strengthen local supply chains, enhance bargaining power over raw materials, and build shared marketing platforms that promote collective village branding. These thematic approaches foster cooperation among micro-entrepreneurs, enabling them to scale their businesses more efficiently and access broader markets. Importantly, these villages are often centered around unique cultural, historical, or artisanal themes that naturally draw the interest of both domestic and international tourists. As a result, they serve not only as production hubs but also as tourism destinations, blending commerce with cultural experience [6]. One compelling example is Kampung Batik Laweyan in Surakarta, which exemplifies the revitalizing power of the thematic village model. Previously a fading textile district with limited economic activity, Kampung Batik Laweyan was reimagined as a batik-themed tourism destination. Through targeted support and community-driven branding efforts, it has since evolved into a thriving center for small and medium enterprises focused on batik production, retail, and heritage-based tourism. Visitors now explore its preserved architecture, engage with artisans, and contribute directly to the village economy. This transformation illustrates how thematic villages can elevate marginalized communities and integrate them into the national MSME landscape through innovation rooted in cultural identity [7].

2.3 Digital Platforms in Tourism Promotion

Ever since the internet's upbringing a decade or so prior, we've seen tremendous developments in online commerciality which encompasses the beginning of an advanced global world in the digital space. Tourism is no stranger to this phenomenon, the internet has been teeming with countless parties aiming to promote whatever they have to offer in the media and websites. Even going as far as to let consumers or clients rate what they have gotten or participated in, in the hope of gaining a sense of guarantee from future or possible clients. Applications such as Traveloka dan Tiket.com offer a commercial bridge between thematic villages and urban tourists, by providing necessary accommodations for the sake of easy navigation and usage. These applications are also able to redirect you into official tourism websites which act as digital brochures, offering future or potential visitors some insight on specific details. Digital resources such as these have become crucial in planning trips, especially for international visitors who will rely heavily on structured and detailed guides [8]. Amongst the various mediums or platforms in the internet for promotion, social media has proved to be one if not the most powerful tools for such an activity.

Social media applications such as Instagram uses intriguing and fun hashtags as well as influencer content in order to provoke curiosity amongst users to discover new destinations, making sure to brand their destinations desirably. The concept of city branding has become an integral element in promoting tourism, especially in destinations striving to balance modernization with local identity. "Shining Batu" city branding was an active initiative in East Java, focusing on how the Tourist Village Program has contributed to this campaign. Their study emphasizes that tourist villages, with their thematic and community-based approaches, are not only preserving local culture but also actively redefining the urban tourism landscape. These villages serve as living experiences of Batu's identity, integrating agro-tourism, art, and heritage into accessible tourism packages. The city branding effort utilizes modern promotional strategies, including digital campaigns, signage, and cultural festivals, reinforcing Batu's image as a clean, creative, and community-oriented destination. The research underscores the synergy between branding and grassroots tourism development, where community participation in designing tourist activities enhances authenticity and sustainability. Most importantly, the study shows that tourist villages have helped Batu reposition itself as a modern city rooted in tradition appealing to a wide spectrum of travelers, from eco-conscious millennials to family tourists. The success of the "Shining Batu" initiative demonstrates how effective branding, aligned with community tourism, can stimulate regional development [9].

2.4 Cultural Diplomacy through Local Identity

Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural expressions such as art, heritage, language and lifestyle as a strategic instrument in foreign policy, in order to promote mutual understanding and interest amongst nations. Research done further elaborates that culture becomes a vehicle in which a nation narrates its history, bridging global differences and strengthening its image abroad [10]. In a globalized yet fragmented world, where identity and authenticity are increasingly valued, cultural diplomacy emerges as a potent form of soft power [11]. It helps nations forge partnerships, attract tourism, and influence international discourse through admiration rather than coercion. Indonesia, rich in ethnic, linguistic, and artistic diversity, possesses a unique asset in this field. Through thematic villages designed as environments that celebrate and commercialize local culture, Indonesia has found a powerful tool to present its plural identity and creative economy to global audiences. These villages embody heritage, entrepreneurship, and storytelling, forming a bridge between local identity and international perception. Especially in the digital era, where culture can be mediated globally through visuals and virtual presence, thematic villages have become ambassadors of Indonesia's cultural richness and creative resilience.

Thematic villages in Indonesia represent a powerful convergence of cultural preservation and economic innovation. Rooted in the concept of community-based tourism, they allow local people to maintain their traditions while adapting them for modern visitors. Villages like Kampung Batik Laweyan isn't a mere attraction; it's an interactive space where local identity is both preserved and performed. Spaces such as this thrive on the participation of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs),

offering locally-made crafts, traditional foods, and culturally-infused experiences. Moreover, these villages counteract the erasure of local traditions by situating them within economically viable structures. Architecture, festivals, cuisine, and even language use are intentionally curated to create authenticity. Rather than relegating culture to museums, thematic villages embed it in the daily economic life of a community. They give Indonesian MSMEs access to niche tourism markets, increase income sources, and elevate the value of traditional skills. In doing so, they become living testimonials of Indonesian heritage, making them powerful sites of identity articulation and cultural pride.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with an exploratory and participatory method. This approach was chosen as it is considered the most suitable to deeply explore the social and cultural realities occurring within thematic villages in Surabaya. The main focus of this research is to explore how these villages can gain wider recognition, particularly through digitalization that elevates their local potential to a higher level, both economically and culturally. Therefore, the study does not stop at data collection, but also includes the design of a digital platform based on the real needs of the local community.

3.2 Time and Place of Research

The research was conducted over two months, both online and offline, in Surabaya. This city was chosen due to its high concentration of active and developing thematic villages. Among the villages selected for observation and data collection were Kampung Semanggi, Kampung Kue, and Kampung Lawas. Data was collected in stages, as outlined in the following schedule:

Table 1. Research Schedule

No	Activity Type	Month		Person in Charge
		1	2	
1	Literature Review			Fandrian Makarim
2	Abstract Writing			Ahmad Naufal Maheswara P.
3	Data Collection Preparation			Afif Pramudya Alriandi
4	Data Collection			Afif Pramudya Alriandi
5	Data Processing and Analysis			Ahmad Naufal Maheswara P.
6	Full Paper Writing			Fandrian Makarim

Source: Researcher Processed Data

3.3 Research Tools and Materials

The following tools and materials were used in the research:

Table 2. Tools/Materials Needed

No	Tools/Materials Needed	No	Tools/Materials Needed
1	Research Guidelines	5	Smartphone Camera
2	Voice Recorder	6	Internet Access
3	Notebooks and Stationery	7	Laptop
4	Atlas.ti Software	8	Canva

Source: Researcher Processed Data

3.4 Data Sources and Collection Techniques

The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with local entrepreneurs, village managers, and visitors. These interviews were designed to be open, allowing respondents to share their experiences and perspectives on the potential and challenges of digitalizing their village. In addition, direct observation was conducted at the research sites, focusing on economic activities, social interactions, and how the villages present themselves to tourists and online audiences. Secondary data was gathered through literature review of various sources, such as government policy documents, academic journals, institutional reports, and official websites related to thematic village development, creative economy, and city branding. This combination of primary and secondary data provided a comprehensive foundation to analyze challenges, potentials, and opportunities for digital development in Surabaya's thematic villages.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analyzed using a thematic approach, aiming to identify patterns, meanings, and core themes in the qualitative data. The process began with transcription of interviews and organization of field observation notes. Coding was conducted using Atlas.ti software to categorize key quotes into relevant themes such as cultural potential, technological barriers, promotional strategies, and community needs for a digital platform. Once key themes were identified, the researcher interpreted their relationships and the underlying socio-cultural context. These findings were used as the foundation for designing the structure and features of the digital platform prototype. To ensure validity, source triangulation and member checks were carried out with key informants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

3.6 Prototype Design Method

The digital platform was developed using a combination of Agile Development and User-Centered Design (UCD) approaches. These methods allowed for a flexible and user-responsive design process. The first step was to identify user needs based on interviews and observations. User personas and journey maps were created to better understand user behaviors and expectations including local MSME actors, village administrators, and tourists.

A low-fidelity wireframe was then created using Figma, representing the basic navigation structure and key content components, such as village profile pages, multimedia galleries, product catalogs, interactive maps, cultural calendars, and social media integration. The initial prototype underwent alpha testing with a small group of users to evaluate usability and navigation flow. Technical development employed HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, with possible use of WordPress or React depending on functionality needs. The website was also designed to include basic e-commerce elements to facilitate broader product access. Iterative development continued until the design was deemed ready for limited implementation and future scaling.

3.7 Research Stages

The study began with a pre-field phase, including literature review, policy analysis, and the preparation of interview and observation instruments. This phase built foundational knowledge about thematic villages and community-based tourism digitalization strategies. It was followed by field data collection through interviews and observations in selected villages. The collected data was analyzed thematically to formulate key findings regarding community needs and digital development potential. Based on these findings, a prototype website was designed and developed following user-centered principles. After testing and revisions, the final prototype was completed as a concrete research output. This final result not only describes on-the-ground conditions, but also offers an applicable and replicable solution.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Strategy to Increase the Global Visibility of Surabaya's Thematic Villages through Digital Presence

Surabaya's thematic villages' global visibility remains limited despite their cultural uniqueness and formidable tourism potential. This challenge stems from inadequate digital infrastructure, fragmented or incomplete marketing, and a lack of cohesive branding strategies. To address said issues, this study proposes a comprehensive digital approach centered on the development of a centralized and user-friendly platform which functions as both a promotional hub and a shortcut to get in touch with these wonderful locations. This strategy focuses on content-rich village profiles, interactive maps, and even galleries which highlight each village's identity through stunning photos and videos. These tools aim to enhance discoverability and desirability among global audiences, particularly tech-savvy audiences seeking an authentic travel experience. The integration of an optimized search engine with a multilingual interface and social media synchronization ensures that these thematic villages will transcend local boundaries and compete in a saturated global tourism space. By telling immersive stories rooted in local heritage and daily life, this platform invites users to explore the diversity of Surabaya's cultural landscape. As digital storytelling becomes increasingly central in modern tourism, this strategy transforms thematic villages from local villages into globally visible heritage sites. Effectively strengthening Surabaya's branding, positioning it as a modern yet a culturally rich and grounded city while amplifying the city's soft power through cultural diplomacy.

4.2 Expanding to Global Market Access for Local Artisans through Digital Platforms

Surabaya's thematic villages are home to vibrant networks of local artists and MSMEs that produce a wide range of culturally rich products. Ranging from traditional snacks, textiles, crafts, and heritage-based souvenirs. Despite these however, many artisans face significant barriers to accessing broader markets due to logistical limitations, lack of exposure, and insufficient digital knowledge or skills. This study addresses these barriers by advocating for the inclusion of e-commerce functionalities within the proposed digital platform. This platform features a curated digital catalog where artisans are able to showcase their products in high-resolution images, exciting and informative descriptions, pricing, and direct contact information. These listings will be optimized for international access with multilingual support and potentially integrated digital payment gateways for seamless and spotless global transactions. The visibility provided by this system not only increases the artisan's sales potential but also fosters cross-cultural appreciation by connecting global customers. Nevertheless, beyond economic benefits, this platform empowers local MSMEs with new digital competencies which encourage long-term sustainability and resilience. It bridges the local-global divide, transforming local artisans into cultural ambassadors on a digital world stage.

4.3 The Role of Integrated Digital Platforms in Promoting Sustainable Tourism in Surabaya's Thematic Villages

This study confirms that an integrated digital platform plays a strategic role in promoting sustainable tourism in Surabaya's thematic villages. Despite their unique cultural and economic potential, limited digital visibility, marketing capacity, and market access remain key barriers. A digital approach is needed to elevate these potentials in a sustainable and far-reaching manner. The platform was designed using a user-centered design and agile development method, involving community members from the outset. The goal was to build a system that is not only visually engaging but also functional and user-friendly for both locals and tourists. The result was an interactive website integrating seven key features. These include: (1) a Village Profile, presenting a concise narrative of each village's history, character, and tourist appeal; (2) a Multimedia Gallery, providing photos and videos of cultural activities, products, and attractions to strengthen visual engagement; (3) an Interactive Map, helping users navigate the village location, access routes, and nearby attractions; (4) a Local Product Catalog, functioning as a digital storefront for local products, including descriptions and contact details; (5) a Cultural Calendar, listing community events such as festivals, training sessions, or performances to help tourists plan thematic visits; (6) Contact and Social Media Integration, connecting users directly with village administrators; and (7) a Simple Booking Form (Inquiry) for purchasing products, booking tour packages, or participating in local activities.

These features support sustainable tourism through economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Economically, the platform broadens market access for MSMEs and increases income opportunities. Socially, involving community members in content creation and platform management fosters a sense of ownership and local identity. Environmentally, the calendar and mapping tools help manage tourism flow, reduce overcrowding, and promote more responsible visitation. Moreover, the platform serves as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Through compelling digital representation rooted in local narratives, thematic villages can extend their cultural identity globally. These villages are no longer limited to physical space, they become part of a digital ecosystem accessible to international audiences. Overall, this platform addresses the challenges of promotion and market access while contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). With its adaptive, locally responsive design and focus on sustainability, the platform presents a replicable model for other cities seeking to develop community-based cultural tourism.

Figure 4.3 Home Page

Figure 4.3 Travel Agency Service

Figure 4.3 Village Profile

Figure 4.3 Local Product Catalog

5. Conclusions

This research concludes that thematic villages in Surabaya hold significant potential as cultural tourism destinations and drivers of the creative economy. However, their growth has been hindered by inadequate digital exposure, fragmented promotional strategies, and limited access to broader markets. To address these challenges, the study proposes the development of an integrated digital platform that functions as both a promotional tool and an e-commerce outlet. Designed through Agile and User-Centered Design (UCD) approaches, the platform includes various features such as village profiles, multimedia galleries, product catalogs, interactive maps, and booking systems—each tailored to enhance user engagement and village visibility. The implementation of such a platform is not only a means to empower local communities and MSMEs but also a strategic step in positioning Surabaya as a city of cultural richness and innovation. It supports economic empowerment, encourages cultural preservation, and reinforces sustainable tourism practices. Furthermore, the platform serves as a medium for cultural diplomacy, allowing Surabaya to project its local identity on the global stage. In alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 8, 9, and 11, the initiative demonstrates how digital innovation can drive inclusive, community-based development in urban settings.

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