The branding of *Kota Santri* as a da'wah strategy by the Bireuen government in shaping the religious character of the community

Syeh Khaliluddin,[1*] Zainal Arifin,[2] & Rubino[3]

[1,2,3] Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the *"Kota Santri* (*Santri City*)*"* branding strategy initiated by the Government of Bireuen Regency as a cultural da'wah approach to shaping the religious character of society. This research employs a qualitative method with a field study approach, involving in-depth interviews with policymakers, community leaders, and direct observation of socio-religious phenomena. The findings reveal that the *"Kota Santri"* branding is not merely a visual symbol but is internalized through government policies, the religious-oriented culture of civil servants, and increased religious activities within the community. Behavioral transformation is evident in the growing adherence to Islamic norms, the strengthening of religious identity in public life, and the emergence of a social culture aligned with Islamic values. This study offers novelty as initial research that positions religious branding as a form of Islamic communication strategy within the framework of local governance. The findings contribute to the development of contemporary da'wah concepts that integrate symbolic, policy-based, and social movement dimensions.

*****

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi branding "Kota Santri" yang diinisiasi oleh Pemerintah Kabupaten Bireuen sebagai pendekatan dakwah kultural dalam membentuk karakter religius masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi lapangan, melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pemangku kebijakan, tokoh masyarakat, serta observasi fenomena sosial keagamaan di lapangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa branding "Kota Santri" tidak hanya menjadi simbol visual, tetapi juga terinternalisasi dalam kebijakan pemerintahan, budaya ASN, hingga aktivitas keagamaan di masyarakat. Transformasi perilaku masyarakat terlihat dari meningkatnya kepatuhan terhadap norma-norma islami, penguatan identitas religius dalam kehidupan publik, serta terbentuknya kultur sosial yang

*Corresponding author:
Syeh Khaliluddin, email: syeikhtengku@gmail.com, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, Indonesia, Jl. William Iskandar Ps. V, Medan Estate, Kec. Percut Sei Tuan, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, Sumatera Utara 20371.

selaras dengan nilai-nilai keislaman. Penelitian ini memiliki kebaruan *(novelty)* karena menjadi studi awal yang memposisikan branding keagamaan sebagai strategi komunikasi Islam berbasis pemerintahan lokal. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengembangan konsep dakwah kontemporer yang integratif antara simbol, kebijakan, dan gerakan sosial.

INTRODUCTION

City branding is a strategy widely used by local governments to create a positive image and strengthen the identity of a city. Like individual identity, city branding can motivate people to form collective behavior that is consistent with the values they uphold. In the context of Indonesia, the practice of city branding has developed with various approaches, ranging from *Kota Wisata* (a tourist city), *Kota Budaya* (a cultural city), to *Kota Religius* (a religious city). For example, the city of Depok is known for its branding as *Kota BERIMAN* (Clean, Beautiful, and Safe), while Mecca is known globally as the holy city of Muslims (Notoatmodjo, 2013). However, the success of city branding is highly dependent on the brand's ability to reflect local values authentically and internalize them in people's lives.

Bireuen Regency in Aceh Province is an area that has a long history as a center of the struggle for independence. This city was once known as *Kota Juang* (City of Struggle) because it was once a stopover for President Soekarno in 1948 and was a defense base for the struggle (Matang, 2012). However, along with the end of the Aceh conflict and the enactment of Islamic law through the Aceh Government Law (UUPA), there was a shift in the collective identity of the Bireuen community. This city became the first area to carry out caning for violators of Islamic law in 2005 (Egeham, 2021), which then strengthened the religious narrative in the social life of the community.

Bireuen is also known as a center of Islamic education, marked by the high population of *santri* (Islamic religious students) and *dayah* educational institutions *(pesantren)*. In 2022, there were 121,112 *santri* studying in 154 *dayahs* spread across the region (Juli, 2022). The existence of *dayahs* has become an important part of the social and cultural structure of the Bireuen community. This condition prompted the Bireuen Regency Government to formulate a new branding as *"Santri City",* which was officially declared by the Acting Governor of Aceh on the commemoration of National *Santri* Day on October 22, 2020, through Regent's Decree Number 553 of 2020 (Aceh Regional Secretary's Legal Bureau, 2023).

Despite having great potential, the implementation of the *Santri* City branding in Bireuen has not shown optimal results. The still high crime rate, low awareness of implementing the values of the *pesantren,* and weak synergy between stakeholders indicate that this branding has not been fully internalized in people's lives. In addition, the character of urban society, which tends to be heterogeneous, modern, and multi-ethnic (Acehnese, Javanese, Gayo, Chinese), presents its own challenges in uniting religious values in a complex social life.

Previous studies on city branding in Indonesia have focused more on the promotion and tourism sector aspects, such as branding Solo as a Javanese cultural city (Primasari & Muktiyo, 2014) and Yogyakarta as a city of education (Haryono, 2009). Meanwhile, studies on Sharia-based cities such as Banda Aceh generally focus on strengthening Sharia regulations and improving religious image (Amalia & Usman, 2016). However, most of these studies have not examined in depth how religious branding can shape the religious character of society as a whole, especially in multi-ethnic and post-conflict areas such as Bireuen.

Starting from this background, this study aims to analyze the branding strategy of *"Kota Santri"* as a cultural da'wah approach to shape the religious character of the Bireuen community. This study emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach, sociology, anthropology, and communication, to understand the process of internalizing the values of *santri* in local social, cultural, and bureaucratic life. The main focus is directed at four indicators: religious social life, orderly worship behavior, polite social interaction, and Islamic clothing and activities of citizens.

Thus, this study provides a theoretical contribution to the study of religious city branding, while also offering a practical understanding for local governments in formulating policy-based and cultural-based da'wah strategies. The uniqueness of this study lies in the local context of Aceh, which has its legal characteristics (Islamic Sharia), ethnic diversity, and challenges of social integration. This makes Bireuen an important case study in understanding the role of city branding in the religious transformation of urban communities in the special autonomy region.

METHODS

This study uses a field research approach, so that all data is obtained based on real facts and events in the field. The main objective of this study is to analyze the phenomena and dynamics of the *"Kota Santri"* branding strategy by the Bireuen Regency government as an effort to foster the religious character of the community. This research is qualitative with an orientation towards in-depth exploration of meaning, process, and social context (Ratnaningtyas et al., 2023).

The approach used is descriptive-analytical (Sugiyono, 2018), aiming to describe and analyze phenomena according to the reality in the field, with an emphasis on understanding the social and cultural situation of the Bireuen community.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, namely the selection of informants based on certain criteria that are relevant to the focus of the research (Abdullah et al., 2022). The informants consisted of 15 people divided into the following categories, namely: (1) 5 local government officials (including officials from the Islamic Sharia Service, *Dayah* Education Service, and Public Relations Division of the Bireuen Regency Government); (2) 5 Religious Figures and *Dayah* leaders in Bireuen Regency; and (3) 5 representatives of the general public from various ethnic backgrounds and professions.

The research was conducted in Bireuen Regency, Aceh, with interview locations including the Bireuen Regency Government Office, several large dayahs in Bireuen, and public areas. Interviews and observations were conducted between January and March 2024. Data collection techniques were carried out using in-depth interviews using semi-structured interview guidelines, participatory observation of socio-religious activities and daily activities of the community, and documentation studies of official documents such as the Regent's Decree on the City of *Santri*, data on students at the Dayah Office, and local news media.

In this study, the researcher is positioned as an observer-as-participant—the researcher interacts in a limited way with the community to understand the social context without being directly involved in decision-making or formal activities. To maintain data validity, this study uses source triangulation techniques, namely comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation.

The data was analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques, which include three stages, namely: *first,* data reduction: sorting, selecting, and simplifying data from interviews, observations, and documentation. *Second,* data presentation: organizing data in the form of thematic narratives. *Third,* concluding and verification: formulating patterns, relationships, and meanings based on the data that has been analyzed (Ratnaningtyas et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The concept of religious character in Islamic society

Character means a person's nature and disposition. Having character means having a nature that reflects an individual's personality. Peter Salim and Yenny Salim explain that character refers to the innate nature inherent in humans (Salim & Salim,

2002). Character also includes innate, heart, soul, personality, morals, behavior, personality, temperament, and disposition (Zubaedi, 2011). Thus, character can be defined as a disposition or personality that is formed through the internalization of values based on religious norms, culture, law, customs, and ethics. These norms become guidelines in how a person thinks, behaves, and acts in everyday life.

In Islam, the concept of character is inseparable from *al-akhlaq al-karimah*, namely, noble behavior that reflects Islamic values. Etymologically, morals come from Arabic, which means good character, nature, behavior, or basic disposition. According to Jamil Shaliba, morals are the inner nature in a person's soul that drives him to do commendable actions without requiring deep thought or consideration. Morals in Islam are fundamental because they direct humans to achieve harmony between their relationship with Allah (*hablun minallah)* and their relationship with fellow humans and the environment *(hablun minannas)* (Shaliba, 1978).

Furthermore, the word *akhlaq* is correlated with the word *khalq* (creation) and *Khaliq* (Creator). This confirms that *akhlaq* has a transcendental dimension that shows the relationship between creatures and the Creator. Therefore, *akhlaq* in the Islamic perspective is not only oriented towards horizontal relationships between humans but also towards vertical relationships with Allah. Good morals are a reflection of a person's faith in Allah and the application of His teachings in everyday life (Shaliba, 1978).

Religious character in Islam refers to behavior that is based on Islamic values that originate from the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. This character includes moral, spiritual, and social dimensions that are integrated into *al-akhlak al-karimah. Al-akhlaq al-karimah* is noble behavior that reflects a harmonious relationship with Allah, fellow human beings, and the environment. In everyday life, this religious character is manifested through attitudes such as honesty, fairness, patience, responsibility, and mutual respect (Kirana & Haq, 2022; Shobirin, 2018).

The application of religious character in Islamic society aims to create social harmony based on Islamic values. In Islamic society, religious character is the main pillar that shapes community life, both in individual and collective aspects. Individuals who have a religious character are not only oriented towards worldly interests but also make the afterlife the goal of life. This is reflected in behavior that is always based on Islamic law, such as upholding prayer, maintaining trust, and upholding justice (Rangkuti, 2017).

In addition, the religious character of Islamic society is also reflected in a more Islamic social culture. This culture includes polite, orderly, and harmonious social interactions. Religious societies tend to prioritize good values in every aspect of life, including in family relationships, neighbours, and the wider community. The atmosphere of Islamic life formed from this religious character can ultimately create a conducive

environment for worship, interaction, and living life according to Islamic guidance (Luthfi, 2016).

Religious character also plays an important role in building collective awareness in society to maintain religious values amidst the challenges of modernity. In an era of globalization full of foreign information and culture, religious character becomes a shield for Islamic society to remain steadfast in its Islamic identity. Islamic values that are internalized in the character of society will be a guide in facing the changing times without losing the essence of religion as a guideline for life (Muhtarudin & Muhsin, 2019).

Thus, the concept of religious character in Islamic society not only functions as an individual guideline but also as a foundation in building a more harmonious, just, and prosperous social order. Religious character rooted in *al-akhlaq al-karimah* is a real manifestation of Islamic teachings that teach balance between relationships with Allah, fellow human beings, and the environment. The implementation of this religious character is the main solution in forming a society that is not only intellectually and materially advanced, but also morally and spiritually noble.

The success of the character formation pattern of humans by the Prophet in changing the character of *jahiliyah* (a period of ignorance or ignorance in Islamic history, especially the period before Islam came) to Islamic character is recorded as the most brilliant achievement that has ever happened in human history. The description of his success as expressed by Sofyan Sauri is that the Prophet succeeded in building the character of his companions into a quality society, so that they long for the truth, are enthusiastic about seeking knowledge, feel noble with Islam, and are simple in their attitude (Sauri, 2011).

It is very reasonable that the character formation pattern of the Prophet Muhammad SAW is very important. Abuddin Nata stated that among the reasons are as follows: *first,* that the Prophet Muhammad SAW is confirmed directly in the Qur'an as a good role model for believers. *Second,* the era of the Prophet was an era full of challenges, but succeeded in giving birth to a generation that had excellence in the fields of morals, religious attitudes, personality, intellectuals, and social. *Third,* in the Qur'an and Hadith, the Prophet is stated as an educator of morals (QS Al-Baqarah, 2:129). Fourth, that the presence of the Prophet on this earth was to perfect noble morals for humans (Nata, 2005).

Concept and practical steps to realize city branding

City branding is a strategic effort to create a strong and unique identity for a city, so that it can attract the attention of the wider community, both local residents, tourists,

and investors. Sugiarsono said that four important criteria must be considered in formulating a city's branding. *First,* city attributes, where the city's atmosphere is able to reflect its unique character. This involves physical aspects, culture, and the distinctive life of the community. *Second,* a message, which is a message that is able to describe the city's story in a smart, fun, and memorable way. This message must be able to build an emotional appeal that makes the city memorable. *Third,* differentiation, which is the uniqueness that makes a city different from other cities. This differentiation is important for building an exclusive city identity. Finally, ambassadorship which is the city's ability to inspire visitors so that they want to come, enjoy the city's atmosphere, and even settle there (Padang et al., 2022).

The main motivation in implementing city branding is to create strategic benefits for stakeholders, both in terms of economic, social, and cultural. Four main objectives form the basis for implementing city branding. First, to introduce the city more deeply. A city that has a brand will be better known through the embedding of a certain identity that reflects its unique character. This allows the city to show its potential in various sectors, such as culture, tourism, and education. Second, to form a positive image. The implementation of city branding accompanied by positive values can comprehensively help improve the city's reputation in the eyes of the public. Third, to differentiate it from other cities. City branding gives the city a uniqueness or characteristic that makes it stand out from other cities. This uniqueness is the main attraction in attracting tourists and investors. Fourth, to attract investors. With strong branding, the city can utilize its population as potential consumers, thereby increasing the appeal for business actors to invest (Mihardja, 2019).

In the process of building a city brand, Mike Moser mentioned that five practical steps can be taken. The first step is to identify core values. Cities must understand the values they want to represent and how these values reflect the identity and aspirations of their community. The second step is to involve the local community. The community is an integral part of city branding. Involving them in this process not only ensures that the identity raised is relevant but also encourages a sense of ownership of the brand created. The third step is the development of visual elements and attractive messages. Cities need visual elements, such as logos or slogans, that reflect their identity. The messages conveyed must be strong, simple, and able to describe the unique story of the city. The fourth step is the implementation of an effective marketing strategy. City branding must be socialized through various communication channels, such as mass media, social media, and city events, to reach a wider audience. The last step is evaluation and adaptation. City branding is not something static. Cities must continue to monitor the effectiveness of the

branding implemented and be willing to make changes if necessary to keep up with the times and the needs of the community (Megantari, 2018; Mihardja, 2019).

City branding is a complex process and requires a holistic approach. A city that wants to succeed in branding must be able to align various aspects, from resource potential, culture, to future vision. With strategic steps and good collaboration between the government, society, and other stakeholders, city branding can have a significant positive impact on city growth, both in terms of economy, social, and culture. Successful city branding not only makes the city widely known but also builds a strong identity and becomes a source of pride for its people.

Creating core brand values

These core values are the basis for determining the direction of city branding. This step is taken as the initial foundation for branding a city. Because the core brand value is the identity of the city, the potential values of the city that can answer the three main questions are (1) which values are closely associated with the city, and if removed, it will feel like something is missing from the city; (2) which values are held tightly by stakeholders in facing various obstacles and maintained in various conditions, and (3) which values have become the culture of the city's people and are characteristic of the city (Hikmah & Anugrah, 2020).

To be able to ensure the representative core brand value of the city, a survey or observation by internal stakeholders is needed regarding urban socio-culture including social phenomena, social structures of society, and cultural tendencies of society in cultural life in the city. From the survey results, it can be seen the representative brand typology for the city, such as religious cities, tourist cities, business cities and so on.

Creating core brand messages

Core brand messages are core messages that will be communicated by internal stakeholders in the context of this research, namely the government, to external stakeholders or the community. In socializing the city's core brand message, the most important thing to note is the strategy for conveying a message. The content of the message because content of the message is the soul of communication, which will be able to influence the target communicator to act and behave following the core message conveyed.

Determining city brand personality

Basically, personality is a characteristic of an individual human being, and in the context of city branding is associated with becoming a brand that differentiates it from other cities. In relation to this, the city is like a human being who is conveying a message to introduce his/her identity with an authentic personality. From the way he/she speaks and appears, people will be able to know the personality of this city (Sukmaraga & Nirwana, 2016).

The personality of a city can be determined by the personality of internal stakeholders, which in this context is the government as the organizer of the city government and the residents of the city. Although not entirely, the personality of the government and the community will influence the image of the city because they are representatives of the real city. However, it is very possible to avoid setting an ideal personality that can be carried away to be unrealistic because it will give a negative value when the personality is not realized correctly and sincerely, and will give the impression of being manipulated to influence visitors and only appear at certain moments.

Determining brand icons

A brand icon is something unique that can be seen with the eye and becomes a typical image of a city's brand. Brand icons can be divided into five forms, namely:

a. Visual icon: determining the visual icon of a brand can be made in the form of a logo, color impression, typography, visual techniques, and unique architecture that marks the brand value
b. Sound icon: sound icons are typical sounds such as music, regional songs, typical regional music sounds, and other types of sounds that impress the uniqueness of the city
c. Touch icon: touch icons can be marked with the shape, texture, temperature and climate of the city such as cold, hot, and so on which can be a characteristic of the city and have a selling point to attract visitors
d. Aroma icon: the aroma icon can present a distinctive aroma to a product that is branded even though it has the same type as other manufacturers
e. Taste icon: a certain taste that distinguishes it from others, such as there are food or beverage products with a distinctive taste that distinguishes them from food products of the same type in other places (Megantari, 2018).

Determining the brand roadmap

Formulating and establishing a brand roadmap is the final step that must be taken to become a concrete guide and direction for stakeholders to be consistent with the city branding carried out and to be able to achieve the expected targets (Mihardja, 2019).

Kavaratziz stated that city branding in relation to communication is the focus of image management, where stakeholders make integrated policies as strategic steps in creating and managing the city's image. And by itself, city branding plays a role in becoming the city's identity. Kavaratziz views city branding in the context of communication to form an image that is related to three stages of communication: Primary communication, Secondary communication and tertiary communication (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Bireuen government's strategy to form the religious character of society through the *Kota Santri* branding

The branding of *"Bireuen Santri City"* is a strategic initiative of the Bireuen Regency Government to instill religious values in the life of society. This strategy not only aims to build the image of the city, but also to form the collective character of society based on Islamic values. In the theory of city branding, according to Kavaratzis (2004), city branding is effective if it is able to integrate communication, infrastructure, and community behavior (Kavaratzis, 2004). Therefore, Bireuen branding does not only rely on promotion, but also on social and institutional change.

Campaign and socialization to stakeholders

The Bireuen government involves various parties, such as the Dayah Ulama Association (HUDA) and community organizations, to strengthen the legitimacy of this branding. The Dakwah Cadre Training Program (TDK) in all sub-districts proves that there are efforts to build agents of change at the local level. The visual approach through the installation of the *"Bireuen City of Santri"* signboard and *Asmaul Husna* on the sidewalk creates a strong place identity according to the symbolic branding concept (Nugraha et al., 2017).

However, critically, not all levels of society accept this branding homogeneously. Some urban youth who are familiar with popular culture feel that this branding is too normative and limits the space for expression. This challenge shows the importance of considering audience diversity in city branding, as Zenker & Braun (2010) remind us that city residents are "internal stakeholders" whose differences must be understood (Sukmaraga & Nirwana, 2016).

Formulation of the roadmap and internal ASN (civil servant) policy

Another strategic step is the formulation of the branding roadmap *"Bireuen Kota Santri,"* which involves various elements of society, including the government, academics, activists, and community leaders. The workshop on December 14, 2022, became an important momentum to formulate the ideal format and target for achieving this branding. Through this roadmap, the government has clear guidelines to direct consistent and measurable policies (Bireuen Communication and Information Service, 2022).

In addition, the government also creates a religious nuance in the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) environment. The Regent of Bireuen issued a policy regarding the uniform that is the icon of *santri.* On Fridays, male ASN are required to wear a white *koko* shirt, black *peci,* and sarong, while female ASN wear a *kurung* shirt and white jilbab. This is stated in Circular Letter numbered 451/975/2020 issued on October 27, 2020 (Dani, 2020). This step creates a visual identity that reflects the values of *santri* among government employees. Regular religious studies every Friday morning at the regent's office prayer room and Thursday night religious studies at the regent's hall strengthen this effort. This activity not only increases religious understanding among employees but also strengthens the synergy between the government and the community in realizing the vision of a *santri* city.

Subuh Safari program and optimization of wilayatul hisbah

The *Subuh Safari* program is one of the important innovations launched by the Regent of Bireuen. This activity involves visits to mosques throughout the district every Friday. The aim is to strengthen the relationship between the government and the community through a religious approach. This program is also a medium to convey important messages about Islamic values that are the guidelines for life in the city of *santri* (Interview with Bireuen Figure, H. Sofyan Ali).

The implementation of branding the city of *santri* also involves optimizing the role of Wilayatul Hisbah (WH), an institution tasked with monitoring, fostering, and taking action against violations of Islamic law. WH has an important role in maintaining the image of the city of *santri* by monitoring community behavior, such as ensuring compliance with Islamic dress, prohibiting activities during Maghrib prayer times, and preventing other violations. This step confirms that branding the city of *santri* is not only a symbol, but also includes enforcing rules that support religious values (Interview with Bireuen Ulama, Waled H. Nuruzzahri).

Public education and communication

The Bireuen Regency Government also uses an education and public communication approach to disseminate the message of the city of *santri.* Regular religious studies, circulars, and appeals to business owners, such as cafes and coffee shops, are part of this strategy. For example, a circular requesting that visitors not sit at the same table between men and women unless they are family or mahram aims to maintain Islamic norms in social interactions (Interview with Acting Regent of Bireuen, Aulia Sofyan).

The branding of *"Bireuen City of Santri"* has had a significant impact in shaping the personality of a religious city. The city is not only known as an administrative and economic center, but also as an area that upholds religious values. This image is a strong differentiator compared to other cities, thus emphasizing Bireuen's identity as a city that prioritizes harmony between modernity and spirituality.

Analysis of Kota Santri's strategy and image

The branding strategy of *"Bireuen Kota Santri"* shows a holistic and sustainable effort in creating a city identity based on religious values. The approach involving the community, government, and religious institutions reflects a solid synergy in realizing the vision of a *santri* city. However, for the sustainability of this program, periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies that have been implemented is needed. The government also needs to ensure that this branding is not only a symbolic identity, but is also able to take root in people's lives.

In the context of a modern city, the biggest challenge is to maintain religious values amidst the currents of globalization and modernization. Therefore, the government needs to continue to develop innovations in communication strategies and the implementation of Islamic values. In addition, collaboration with various parties, such as the education, economic, and cultural sectors, can strengthen Bireuen's position as a city of *santri* that is an example for other regions. The branding *of "Bireuen Kota Santri"* is a strategic, visionary step in shaping the religious character of the community. With a structured approach, community support, and consistent government policies, this vision can become a deep-rooted reality and provide long-term positive impacts for Bireuen Regency.

When compared to the branding of *"Serambi Mekah"* in Banda Aceh, Bireuen's efforts are still at the stage of forming a basic identity. Banda Aceh combines a religious image with the development of halal tourism and international Islamic education, thus expanding its appeal. Bireuen is still focused on strengthening its internal identity, so the

challenge ahead is how to integrate these religious values with the development of the economy and sharia tourism so that branding is more sustainable.

The role of media and digital campaigns

In the dissemination of branding, local media such as RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia) Bireuen and online media (local news portals) play an important role in strengthening the narrative of *"Kota Santri".* However, critically, there has been no massive digital campaign through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, which are widely accessed by the younger generation. In fact, based on modern place marketing theory, digital presence is key to expanding the resonance of a city brand (Wibawanto, 1970). The government needs to develop a digital campaign strategy, such as creative content with the theme *"Kota Santri",* collaboration with local influencers, and digital storytelling about Bireuen's Islamic history. Without adaptation to digital media, branding has the potential to be strong only among the older generation, but weak among millennials and Gen Z.

The branding strategy of *"Bireuen Kota Santri"* reflects a comprehensive approach that involves the community, bureaucracy, and visualization of urban space. However, challenges in implementation, such as resistance from some community groups and limitations of digital campaigns, need to be anticipated. By strengthening inclusivity, adaptation to social change, and cross-sector collaboration, this branding can develop from a mere symbolic identity into a sustainable cultural force that adds value to Bireuen's development.

CONCLUSION

The branding strategy of *"Bireuen Kota Santri"* initiated by the Bireuen Regency Government applies a holistic approach in building a city identity based on Islamic values. This effort involves internalizing values through programs such as the Dakwah Cadre Training (TDK), *Subuh Safari,* and the use of religious symbols such as Islamic clothing for ASN and Islamic-themed nameplates. This study offers a novelty in the form of a religiosity-based city branding model that is not merely symbolic, but integrated with systemic social and cultural policies.

The academic contribution of this study enriches the study of religion-based city branding at the local level by emphasizing the importance of synergy between the government, clerics, and the community. The policy implications that can be drawn are the importance of strengthening digital branding, expanding cross-sector synergy, such as education and halal tourism, and ensuring the sustainability of the cadreship of Islamic values in the younger generation. As a recommendation, the Bireuen Regency

Government is advised to increase digital campaigns based on religious values, develop creative community-based programs, and conduct benchmarking with other regions that have successfully implemented similar branding. With consistent implementation and involvement of all elements of society, the branding of *"Bireuen Kota Santri"* has the potential to become a model for developing a sustainable religious city identity in Indonesia.

REFERENCES

Abdullah, K., Jannah, M., Aiman, U., Hasda, S., Fadilla, Z., Ns. Taqwin, M., Ardiawan, K.N., & Sari, M.E. (2022). *Metodologi penelitian kuantitatif*. Yayasan Penerbit Muhammad Zaini.

Amalia, R., & Usman, S. (2016). Upaya Wilayatul Hisbah (WH) Kota Banda Aceh dalam meningkatkan kesadaran bersyariat Islam bagi remaja di Kota Banda Aceh. *Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan*, *1*(1), 61–71.

Biro Hukum Sekda Aceh. (2023). *Keputusan Bupati Bireuen Nomor 553 Tahun 2020 tentang Penetapan Kabupaten Bireuen Sebagai Kota Santri*. https://jdih.bireuenkab.go.id/dih/detail/9a58d630-02a2-4980-a823-4657d74975b8.

Dani. (2020, November 20). *ASN di Bireuen diwajibkan pakai sarung dan peci*. Popularitas. https://popularitas.com/berita/asn-di-bireuen-diwajibkan-pakai-sarung-dan-peci/.

Diskominfo Bireuen. (2022). *Pemkab Bireuen gelar lokakarya road map Kota Santri*. Pemerintah Kabupaten Bireuen. https://bireuenkab.go.id/berita/kategori/agamapendidikan/pemkab-bireuen-gelar-lokakarya-road-map-kota-santri.

Egeham, L. (2021, June 24). *24 Juni 2005: Eksekusi hukuman cambuk pertama di Indonesia*. Liputan6. https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4589559/24-juni-2005-eksekusi-hukuman-cambuk-pertama-di-indonesia.

Haryono, S. (2009). Analisis brand image Yogyakarta sebagai Kota Pelajar. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, *7*(3), 301–309. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501365287.280.

Hikmah, N. Y., & Anugrah, D. (2020). City branding melalui aplikasi Sampurasun. *Reputation: Jurnal Ilmu Hubungan Masyarakat*, *5*(1), 15–38. https://doi.org/10.15575/reputation.vxix.xxxx.

Juli. M. (2022, December 15). *Jumlah santri di Bireuen 121 ribu orang*. Komparatif.id. https://komparatif.id/jumlah-santri-di-bireuen-121-ribu-orang/.

Kavaratzis, M. (2004). From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands. *Place Branding*, *1*(1), 58–73. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990005.

Kirana, Z. C., & Haq, D.D. (2022). Pembentukan karakter religius santri di Pondok Pesantren Fathul Ulum Kwagean Kediri melalui kegiatan mujahadah. *Jurnal Kependidikan Islam*, *12*(2), 225–241.

Luthfi, K. M. (2016). Islam Nusantara: Relasi Islam dan budaya lokal. *Shahih: Journal of Islamicate Multidisciplinary*, *1*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.22515/shahih.v1i1.53.

Matang, P. (2012). *Penyerangan Belanda ke Kuta Gle*. Pikiran Merdeka. https://www.pikiranmerdeka.co/news/penyerangan-belanda-ke-kuta-gle/.

Megantari, K. (2018). Penerapan strategi city branding Kabupaten Ponorogo "Ethnic Art of Java." *Aristo*, *7*(1), 130. https://doi.org/10.24269/ars.v7i1.1385.

Mihardja, E.J. (2019). *Strategic city branding*. Penerbit Universitas Bakrie.

Muhtarudin, H., & Muhsin, A. (2019). Nilai-nilai pendidikan Islam dalam kitab al- Mawāʿiẓ al-ʿUṣfūriyyah. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, *3*(2), 311–330. http://journal.unipdu.ac.id:8080/index.php/jpi/article/view/2004.

Nata, A. (2005). *Pendidikan dalam perspektif hadis*. UIN Jakarta Press.

Notoatmodjo. (2013). *Makkah Al-Mukarramah : Kota yang suci dan mulia bagi umat Islam sedunia*. Pyjamas Books.

Nugraha, A. R., Yustikasari, & Koswara, A. (2017). Branding Kota Bandung di era smartcity. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, *8*(1), 1–16.

Padang, F., Husna, A., & Fahrimal, Y. (2022). Penerapan strategi city branding dalam mewujudkan Subulussalam sebagai Kota Santri. *Jurnal Common*, *5*(2), 165–177. https://doi.org/10.34010/common.v5i2.6342.

Primasari, I., & Muktiyo, W. K. (2014). City branding Solo sebagai Kota Wisata Budaya Jawa (Studi deskriptif kualitatif tentang city branding Solo sebagai Kota Wisata Budaya Jawa oleh Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata kota Solo). *Komunikasi Massa*, *1*(0), 1–20.

Rangkuti, A. (2017). Keadilan dalam perspektif Islam. *Journal TAZKIYA*, *1*(2), 115–143. https://doi.org/10.33853/istighna.v1i2.6.

Ratnaningtyas, E.M., Ramli., Saputra, S.E., Desi, S., Nugroho, B.T.A., Karimuddin., Aminy, M.H., Saputra, N., Khaidir., & Jahja, A. S. (2023). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif*. Yayasan Penerbit Muhammad Zaini.

Salim , P., & Salim, Y. (2002). *Kamus bahasa Indonesia kontemporer*. Modern English Press.

Sauri, S. (2011). *Filsafat dan teosofat akhlak*. Rizqi Press.

Shaliba, J. (1978). *Al-Mu'jam al-falsafi, Juz 1*. Dar al-Kitab al-Misri.

Shobirin, M. (2018). Pembelajaran tahfidz Al Qur'an dalam penanaman karakter islami. *Quality*, *6*(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.21043/quality.v6i1.5966.

Sukmaraga, A. A., & Nirwana, A. (2016). City branding : Sebuah tinjauan metodologis dengan pendekatan elaboratif, praktis, dan ilmiah. *Journal of Art, Design, Art Education & Culture Studies*, *1*(1), 1–19.

Sugiyono. (2018). *Metode penelitian kuantitatif, kualitatif dan kombinasi (mixed methods)* (Cet 10). Alfabeta.

Wibawanto, S. (1970). Pendekatan konseptual place marketing dan place branding dalam destination branding. *Fokus Bisnis : Media Pengkajian Manajemen Dan Akuntansi*, *14*(2), 42–59. https://doi.org/10.32639/fokusbisnis.v14i2.47.

Zubaedi. (2011). *Desain pendidikan karakter*. Kencana.