

THE BRAND IMAGE OF TEBING TINGGI CITY ON GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS' SOCIAL MEDIA: EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN ITS STATUS AS THE "CITY OF LEMANG"

Ainisa Putri^{a*)}, Hasan Sazali^{a)}

^{a)} State Islamic University of North Sumatra, Medan, Indonesia

^{*)}Corresponding Author: ainisa0603212042@uinsu.ac.id

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Abstract. Tebing Tinggi City in North Sumatra has a close history with the Padang Kingdom and Datuk Bandar Kajum, which later developed into a city with a distinctive culinary identity, namely lemang. Since being introduced by the Minangkabau ethnic group in 1947, lemang has become a widely known city icon, even getting the nickname "Lemang City" since 1958. This study aims to analyze the communication strategy implemented by the Tebing Tinggi City Government Public Relations in building and maintaining the city's image through social media. With a qualitative descriptive approach, this study examines the effectiveness of digital strategies that include creating visual content, storytelling, and interacting with the community. The results of the study show that branding efforts through social media and culinary festivals have succeeded in increasing the appeal of lemang as a culinary icon and strengthening Tebing Tinggi's identity as a gastronomic tourism destination. However, challenges such as content competition and managing public perception remain the main concerns in building a sustainable city brand image.

Keywords: Tebing Tinggi City, lemang, brand image, communication strategy, social media

I. INTRODUCTION

Tebing Tinggi City in North Sumatra has a historical background linked to the Padang Kingdom and Datuk Bandar Kajum, which was once an autonomous region under the Deli Sultanate. The center of this kingdom was located in Bandar Sakti Village, now known as Kelurahan Bandar Sakti in the Rambutan District, which in the past served as a river port and trade hub. A European-style administrative building from the era, now functioning as the headquarters of Military Command Post 013 on KF Tandean Street, stands as silent evidence of its existence. The name "Tebing Tinggi" is believed to originate from the elevated riverbank settlement established by Datuk Bandar Kajum along the banks of the Padang River, which began to be inhabited around 1864. According to the paper *"Working Paper on the Key Ideas Regarding the Establishment Day of the Level II Regional Municipality of Tebing Tinggi,"* written by community leaders in 1987 and later formalized through a regional regulation, it was established that Tebing Tinggi City was officially founded on July 1, 1917.

Lemang has become the culinary icon of Tebing Tinggi, which has even been nicknamed the "City of Lemang" since 1958. The history of lemang in Tebing Tinggi began around 1947, introduced by the Minangkabau ethnic group and initially sold at terminals, train stations, and markets. The lemang business expanded significantly, particularly after Hj.

Siti Akmar Tanjung (known as Nenek Haji) started producing *lemang batok* on Tjong A Fie Street in 1958. The strategic location in the city center contributed to the business's success, which has now been passed down to the third generation. Among various lemang preparations, *lemang batok*—which uses coconut shells as fuel—has become a distinctive culinary specialty favored by tourists. This unique method has made Tebing Tinggi's lemang well-known even internationally, reaching countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, China, and South Korea.



Figure 1. Lemang Batok Culinary
Source: Personal Documentation

In today's digital era, social media has become an effective tool for building a region's brand image (Abbasi et

al., 2024). Establishing a strong brand requires a well-thought-out approach, as a brand undergoes several phases to reach a balanced identity. The process of brand building includes essential steps such as increasing brand awareness, shaping brand image, and providing direct brand experiences. In addition, brand loyalty and brand connection play vital roles in developing a loyal customer base (Hasian & Pramuditha, 2022). In the traditional culinary industry, branding serves as a critical element by allowing businesses to differentiate themselves and become more visible in the market. Creating a city's brand image is essential to attract the desired target market (Dash, Kiefer, & Paul, 2021).

City branding theory involves the creation of a city's brand through identifying, developing, and promoting a specific image, aiming to make the city attractive to stakeholders, memorable, and distinct from others by highlighting its unique benefits (Nogueira & Carvalho, 2024). The goal of city branding initiatives is to assist communities in effectively presenting their city to target audiences such as investors, tourists, talented individuals, event organizers, and economic analysts. This is achieved by conveying a clear vision and mission along with elements such as taglines, logos, slogans, icons, unique community culture, and other forms of media (SARA, MALIK, & ANANTA, 2021). As described: "As cities compete globally to attract tourism, investment, and talent, as well as to achieve many other objectives" city branding becomes a strategic necessity (Saari, 2023).

In this context, the Public Relations Division of the Tebing Tinggi City Government is required to promote the city's brand image through various approaches aimed at building the city's digital identity and increasing community participation in preserving local cultural heritage (Hariyati & Sovianti, 2021). This includes the ability to manage social media effectively to ensure that information related to the government is well communicated. The Tebing Tinggi City Government, through its public relations team, utilizes platforms such as its official website, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate information about *lemang* as the city's culinary icon (Ramadhan, Sudirman, Saidin, & Susilawaty, 2020). Through social media, government PR can share content regarding the history, preparation process, and uniqueness of *lemang*, as well as promote events or festivals related to this local specialty. This initiative aims to increase public awareness of Tebing Tinggi's identity while strengthening its image as a leading culinary destination.

Although social media is an effective tool for shaping a city's image, there are several challenges to overcome. One major challenge is the increasing competition in social media content. With a vast amount of information circulating, government PR must produce content that is not only engaging but also relevant and interactive (Băcilă, Ciornea, Souca, & Drule, 2022). Moreover, they must respond promptly to feedback, criticism, or negative issues that may arise from the public. If not managed properly, the city's established image can be negatively affected by public perception on social media (Athilinga Senjith, 2022). Therefore, public relations teams must develop more adaptive

and innovative communication strategies to maintain public trust in the brand image of Tebing Tinggi City.

No previous research has specifically addressed the topic of *"Tebing Tinggi City's Brand Image on Government Public Relations Social Media: Efforts to Maintain Its Status as the City of Lemang."* To support the research process, the author refers to and compares this study with several related studies:

First, a study by Eka Surya Herlita, Rini Darmastuti, and Dian Novita Kristiyani from Satya Wacana Christian University in 2021, titled *"City Branding of Solo Through Sayur Lodeh,"* highlights branding strategies used by the Solo Government to preserve and promote local culture as a way to enhance and maintain the city's image in alignment with its vision, "Spirit of Java." These efforts are strongly supported by the government's awareness-raising campaigns, positioning *sayur lodeh* as a branding tool for Solo. Strengthening this awareness requires collaboration between the government and stakeholders involved in the city's development and branding strategy. A city's brand image is reflected in its achievements and recognitions (Leite, Binotto, Padilha, & Hoeckel, 2023).

Second, a study by Arian Chan and Dadan Suryadipura from Padjadjaran University in 2021, titled *"City Image: City Branding Strategy and City Identity,"* demonstrates how branding strategies in Purwakarta involve collaboration between businesses and the government, using the slogan "Khas Purwakarta" (Purwakarta's Uniqueness). Purwakarta's branding is reinforced by various internationally-scaled events and distinctive cultural features displayed in popular areas and destinations. This cooperation has successfully created a positive brand perception among visitors.

Third, a study by Anggrita Salfa Pharmacytha and Widya Nayati from Gadjah Mada University in 2024, titled *"Heritage Branding Strategy to Maintain Yogyakarta's Title as the City of Education,"* also focuses on public relations strategies, albeit with a different emphasis. This research highlights Brand PR strategies to uphold Yogyakarta's status as an educational city, which must reflect the character, attitude, and behavior of its people and students. Although Yogyakarta's title as a City of Education remains a topic of debate, the city's PR department utilizes city branding and heritage brand awareness as strategies to preserve the significance of this status amid ongoing social conflicts.

Berdasarkan kajian penelitian terdahulu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengisi kesenjangan studi dengan mengeksplorasi bagaimana strategi komunikasi digital yang diterapkan oleh Humas Pemerintah Kota Tebing Tinggi dalam mempromosikan brand image melalui media sosial. Kajian ini akan memberikan wawasan mendalam tentang efektivitas strategi komunikasi digital yang diterapkan serta dampaknya terhadap persepsi masyarakat. Dengan memahami bagaimana media sosial berkontribusi dalam mempertahankan status Tebing Tinggi sebagai "Kota Lemang", pemerintah dapat mengembangkan kebijakan promosi yang lebih baik di masa mendatang. Harapannya, status Kota Tebing Tinggi sebagai pusat kuliner lemanng tidak hanya tetap terjaga, tetapi juga semakin dikenal di tingkat nasional maupun internasional.

Based on previous research, this study aims to fill the gap in existing literature by exploring how digital communication strategies are implemented by the Public Relations Division of the Tebing Tinggi City Government in promoting its brand image through social media. This study will provide in-depth insights into the effectiveness of the applied digital communication strategies and their impact on public perception. By understanding how social media contributes to maintaining Tebing Tinggi's status as the "City of Lemang," the government can develop more effective promotional policies in the future. It is hoped that the status of Tebing Tinggi as the culinary center of lemang will not only be preserved but will also gain greater recognition at both national and international levels.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method in the form of written or spoken words from informants, using an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive approach aims to understand human life experiences or to interpret meanings (Khaliq, Khan, & Hayat, 2021). In selecting informants, the researcher used purposive sampling techniques. The research was conducted at the Public Relations Division of the Tebing Tinggi City Government. The subjects of this study are stakeholders of Tebing Tinggi City, namely the Head of Public Relations of the Tebing Tinggi City Government, community leaders, *lemang batok* vendors, and visitors from outside the region.

During the interview process, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide to maintain flexibility in exploring additional information that emerged during interactions with informants (Fofana, Bazeley, & Regnault, 2020). The data analysis method in this research involved recording all information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, followed by interpreting and developing it based on relevant theories related to the research problem, and drawing conclusions (Alzawad, Lewis, & Walker, 2022). The results are then presented in a qualitative descriptive format. This analysis was carried out through the following steps: 1) recording and producing field notes; 2) collecting, classifying, and summarizing data; and 3) interpreting, by making the data meaningful (Audina, Aspinda, Nasution, & Astuti, 2024).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Strategy of the Tebing Tinggi City Government in Maintaining Its Brand Image as the City of Lemang

The Tebing Tinggi City Government has implemented various strategic measures to strengthen the city's image as the "City of Lemang." Key strategies include product innovation, the development of culinary tourism destinations, product certification and branding, as well as effective public communication strategies. In terms of product innovation, business actors are encouraged to develop new lemang flavor variations to attract modern consumers (Kusufa, Firdaus, Dwanoko, Meviana, & Andiyansya, 2023). Some of the

innovations introduced include new flavors such as durian lemang, chocolate lemang, and cheese lemang. In addition, improving product quality and packaging has become a primary focus to ensure hygiene and appeal, both for local and non-local markets. With these innovations, lemang—originally known as a traditional food—now has a broader appeal and can compete in the modern culinary market.

Although the lemang symbol or icon is not officially included in the city's identity, such as in the logo or regional emblem, the Tebing Tinggi City Government continues to develop lemang-based culinary tourism destinations to help residents and tourists recognize Tebing Tinggi as a city famous for its lemang. One concrete step taken is the establishment of a lemang culinary tourism center in strategic locations, such as K.H. Ahmad Dahlan Street (formerly Tjong A Fie Street) and the area around PTPN III Kebun Rambutan, near the Tebing Tinggi toll gate. This culinary hub allows tourists to enjoy various types of lemang in one place, thereby enhancing the appeal of the city's culinary tourism.



Figure 2. Lemang Culinary Center on K.H. Ahmad Dahlan Street
Source: TBT Website, 2018



Figure 3. Lemang Culinary Center in the PTPN III Kebun Rambutan Area

Source: Personal Documentation

In addition to developing culinary areas, the Tebing Tinggi City Government has also collaborated with the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) at the University of North Sumatra (USU) to promote culinary-based tourism. One promotional effort includes the regular organization of lemang festivals, which not only attract

tourists but also increase media exposure for Tebing Tinggi as the center of lemang.

Notably, in 2013, to commemorate the 96th anniversary of Tebing Tinggi City and the 67th anniversary of Bhayangkara, Tebing Tinggi's lemang set a MURI (Indonesian World Record Museum) record as the largest lemang presentation with 96 flavor variations and a total of 2,112 lemang sticks served during the event. Additionally, they created the largest lemang with a diameter of 10 cm and a length of 80 cm, which became a highlight of the celebration. This achievement not only reinforced Tebing Tinggi's identity as the "City of Lemang" but also demonstrated innovation in developing traditional culinary products to gain wider recognition. Such accomplishments are clear evidence that lemang has great potential to be further developed as a part of the city's cultural and tourism promotion.



Figure 3. Lemang Festival

Source: Jurnal Asia, 2013

To strengthen the competitiveness of lemang, the local government has also provided support in the form of product certification and branding. One significant effort involves assisting entrepreneurs in obtaining halal labels and certifications from the Food and Drug Supervisory Agency (BPOM). These certifications allow lemang to be more widely accepted, including in export markets, as they ensure both halal compliance and product quality. The government also supports the development of professional branding and labeling to make lemang products more competitive in the marketplace. These initiatives reflect the commitment of the Tebing Tinggi City Government in supporting MSMEs to improve the quality and marketability of lemang, thereby maintaining its status as the city's culinary icon and attracting a broader consumer base.

In terms of marketing and promotion, the City Government of Tebing Tinggi, through its Public Relations Division, actively promotes lemang as a city identity through various local and national media outlets. Digital campaigns are also conducted through official social media channels to engage younger generations with Tebing Tinggi's signature culinary heritage. Collaborations with influencers and culinary content creators further help extend the promotional

reach. Platforms used in these campaigns include the Instagram account @kulinertbtktu and the YouTube channel *Media Tebing Tinggi*, which feature engaging content such as virtual MSME exhibitions held in conjunction with the city's anniversary and national celebrations.

Beyond promotional efforts, the government has also provided concrete support to lemang entrepreneurs. In 2023, the Tebing Tinggi Office of Trade, Cooperatives, and MSMEs, in collaboration with the Provincial Office of Cooperatives and MSMEs of North Sumatra, distributed equipment aid to 22 MSME actors. This assistance included meat grinders, spice grinders, spinner machines, tents, and various other tools to support food production. Although the aid was provided to MSMEs in general, lemang entrepreneurs, as part of the food and beverage sector, also benefited from the program.

As part of efforts to build the brand of lemang as a cultural heritage product, the government organized a "Breakfast with Lemang" event in January 2021. The event aimed to inspire lemang entrepreneurs to enhance their product quality, packaging, taste, and marketing strategies. On that occasion, Tebing Tinggi Mayor Umar Zunaidi Hasibuan emphasized the importance of innovation and creativity to ensure that lemang continues to serve as the city's iconic culinary offering.

2. The Impact of Lemang Branding Strategies on Local Economy and Tourism

The branding strategies implemented by the Tebing Tinggi City Government are not only aimed at maintaining the city's image as the "City of Lemang," but also have a positive impact on local economic growth and the tourism sector (Suprihatin Dyah Pratamawati, 2023). With innovations in lemang production and the development of lemang-based culinary tourism, the city's tourism appeal has increased, ultimately driving economic circulation among the local community. Culinary centers built in strategic locations make it easier for tourists to find and enjoy Tebing Tinggi's signature lemang in one place. This boosts economic transactions, not only in the culinary sector but also in supporting sectors such as transportation and accommodation.

The regularly held lemang festivals also contribute to media exposure and city tourism promotion. Besides attracting visitors, these festivals provide a platform for entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products. They also foster creativity among lemang producers, who continue to innovate with new flavors such as durian lemang, rambutan lemang, and *Lemang Batok*, which is known for its distinct taste and rich texture. These unique offerings continue to attract culinary tourists visiting Tebing Tinggi.

Government efforts in product certification and branding have also opened opportunities for lemang to reach broader markets, including export markets. With halal certification and more attractive packaging, lemang products are more easily accepted across different market segments (Rosalina, 2020). According to posts from Instagram accounts @tebingtinggiku and @kulinertbtktu, Lemang Batok from Tebing Tinggi was featured at the 2024 Serpong Culinary Festival, located at Gading Serpong, Jl. Boulevard Raya

Gading Serpong, Pakulonan Barat, Kelapa Dua District, Tangerang Regency, Banten.

Digital marketing strategies through social media and collaborations with influencers have also expanded the promotional reach of lemong. Through platforms like the Instagram account @kulinertbtktu and the *Media Tebing Tinggi* YouTube channel, information about lemong is widely disseminated to both local and non-local audiences. Public awareness of the importance of preserving regional culinary heritage has also increased, ensuring that lemong remains an integral part of Tebing Tinggi's identity.

In addition to promotion and branding, the government supports MSME development by providing training in digital marketing and supplying production equipment. This initiative is intended to enhance the competitiveness of lemong entrepreneurs and help them reach wider markets through digital platforms such as Tebing Tinggi's Local E-Catalog. With this platform, entrepreneurs can broaden their market reach and improve competitiveness through more effective marketing (Yang, Kwilinski, Chygryn, Lyulyov, & Pimonenko, 2021).

Through these various strategies, Tebing Tinggi has successfully maintained its image as the "City of Lemang" and elevated this traditional food into both a cultural asset and a driver of the local economy. The government's efforts to preserve lemong as part of the region's cultural heritage demonstrate that traditional culinary practices can continue to evolve and become a major attraction for both the public and tourists (Besmonte, 2022).

3. Tebing Tinggi's Use of Social Media

The Tebing Tinggi City Government utilizes various social media platforms and weblogs to promote the city's identity as the "City of Lemang" and to showcase its signature culinary delights.

- a. Official Website of the Tebing Tinggi City Government – tebingtinggi.go.id: Through this site, the government provides information about the city's flagship products, including lemong. For instance, the most well-known type is *Lemang Batok*, which can be purchased in front of the Grand Mosque of Tebing Tinggi on Jalan K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, with prices ranging from IDR 20,000 to IDR 50,000 depending on the size.
- b. Instagram – @kulinertbtktu: This account serves as a promotional platform for Tebing Tinggi's traditional culinary offerings, particularly lemong, which is a city icon. Through photos and videos, the account showcases a variety of local foods, offering information about their location, pricing, and unique characteristics. The goal is to raise public and tourist awareness of Tebing Tinggi's culinary wealth, encourage culinary tourism visits, and support local entrepreneurs in marketing their products.
- c. YouTube – Media Tebing Tinggi: This channel disseminates information related to tourism, culture, culinary arts, and government programs through video content. It aims to increase the city's visibility and provide both educational and promotional content to the wider public.

Through these platforms, both residents and tourists can easily access information about local specialties such as lemong, thus increasing visitor interest and boosting the regional economy. Additionally, social media serves as a vital channel for culinary business actors to expand their market reach and increase sales (Rosita, Ihalaui, Abdi, & Sirine, 2023). Furthermore, these platforms play a role in disseminating government programs and educating the public about local culture and tourism, which ultimately helps build a positive city image and strengthens its identity as a unique culinary destination (Farhan, Hasbullah, Hidayatullah, Pangestu, & Suci, 2024).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Government of Tebing Tinggi City has successfully implemented various strategies to maintain its brand image as the "City of Lemang." These efforts include product innovation, the development of culinary tourism destinations, certification and branding initiatives, and effective public communication strategies. The establishment of lemong culinary tourism centers, the organization of lemong festivals, and promotional activities through social media and collaboration with influencers have further strengthened lemong's identity as the city's culinary icon. In addition, support for local entrepreneurs through equipment assistance and digital marketing training has enhanced the competitiveness of lemong in both local and international markets. These initiatives have not only reinforced cultural identity but also had a positive impact on the local economy. It is recommended that the Tebing Tinggi City Government integrate lemong symbols or icons into the city's official identity, such as the regional logo or emblem, to reinforce its image as the "City of Lemang" and help tourists more easily recognize the city's unique identity. As a traditional culinary product, lemong holds cultural value and great potential to boost tourism appeal and stimulate local economic growth. By incorporating lemong elements into the official visual identity, Tebing Tinggi can establish stronger branding, attract more tourists, and support the promotion of the region's flagship products. The government can also conduct outreach programs and involve the community and business actors in this effort so that the lemong symbol genuinely becomes a widely recognized part of the city's identity.

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