

Garut Place Branding Strategy: Elevating Local Cultural Values Amidst the Dominance of the "Kota Dodol" Image

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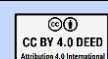
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ABSTRACT

This study examines Garut Regency's shifting identity, from historically noble nicknames like "Swiss van Java" and "Kota Intan" to the commercially driven "Kota Dodol." This condition signifies the dominance of the capitalist market, which risks commodifying Garut's cultural diversity, local wisdom, and natural wealth into a single commercial narrative. The research examines how place branding can elevate authentic cultural values amid the hegemony of the "Kota Dodol" image. Using Michel Foucault's critical framework on Power/Knowledge relations and the Regime of Truth, alongside Anholt's Place Branding Hexagon, this study uses a qualitative interpretive case study design. Primary data were collected through FGDs with traditional and cultural stakeholders, supported by secondary data, including digital media analysis and literature reviews. The findings reveal that the local government's collaboration with corporate entities to establish the commercial welcome monument serves as an apparatus of market hegemony that marginalizes alternative cultures. Furthermore, Foucault's lens highlights the need to deconstruct the dominant colonial myth about the origin of the name Garut ("kakarut"), which local traditional councils strongly resist. Through Anholt's framework, digital data confirms a brand credibility gap. The public heavily associates Garut with the commercial *dodol* industry and nature tourism, while the idealized "Kota Intan" identity struggles with poor physical realities. The study concludes that before repositioning "Kota Intan" as a high-value umbrella brand, local stakeholders (Penta-helix) must collaboratively fix physical prerequisites and internal governance to ensure that branding reflects true historical and cultural preservation.

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1. Introduction

The Garut Regency Government has been trying to overcome its regional identity crisis through various steps since 2022, starting from the formation of a study team (Garut Regency Government, 2022), designing the direction of place branding based on culture and nature in 2024 (West Java Provincial Government, 2024) which scheduled a logo competition branding which is implemented in 2025, and up to 2026, three local cultures were proposed as Intangible Cultural Heritage, leading to several identity recommendations (Antara News, 2026). However, this effort was deemed unsuccessful, unlike the logo competition. Critics argued the chosen Joyful Garut logo lacked local

values (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). *The* right strategy must be comprehensive and multidimensional to build a positive reputation and emotional connection with the community, not just visuals or campaigns (Dinnie, 2008; Anholt, 2006).

In the past, Garut had a magnificent and respected identity through the nickname "*Swiss of Java*" in the colonial era that represented natural beauty, and *kota Intan* in the era of President Soekarno that reflected the cleanliness and elegance of the city (Mujaffar, 2021; Falah et al., 2017; Farisya et al., 2025). However, this historical splendor has shifted and faded under the dominance of commercial discourse. The current reality shows that Garut's identity in the eyes of tourists has narrowed and is only known as a City with *Dodol* souvenirs based on a single culinary commodity.

Today, *dodol* products hold a very strong economic and symbolic position in Garut Regency. However, when this single product becomes the sole representation, Garut Regency risks losing its identity. This risk potentially makes foreign tourists unaware of Garut's abundant natural resources, culture, history, arts, and livestock. In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that served as the primary data for this study, cultural figures expressed deep concern that the term "*Dodol City (Kota Dodol)*" has dominated public representation for too long and no longer adequately describes Garut's diversity. However, this does not mean *dodol* should be completely removed from the region's image. In tourism studies, commodification is not always synonymous with cultural destruction; rather, it must be critically examined in light of the complex relationships between culture, markets, representation, and power (Shepherd, 2002). Therefore, this study positions *dodol* as a valuable asset worthy of development, but firmly rejects depictions of Garut that stop at *dodol* products alone and fail to address other cultural values.

In studying place branding in Garut Regency, the main framework used is Michel Foucault's critical theory, particularly regarding the Power/Knowledge relationship and the Regime of Truth (Foucault, 1980). Through this perspective, it is clear how capitalist market forces currently control Garut's public discourse by establishing the image of "*Dodol City/City of Dodol*" as the sole dominant representation while simultaneously eclipsing other cultural narratives. These commercial interests risk creating a new belief system, or Regime of Truth, that slowly erodes Garut Regency's identity, marginalizing deeper philosophical values and the nobility of local culture.

Previous studies have shown that place branding, *establishing an identity in the form of an effective place name*, does not simply focus on imaginatively crafting a slogan or logo, but rather on formulating, communicating, and proving an authentic value proposition to all stakeholders (Dinnie, 2011; Lu & de Jong, 2019). Unfortunately, failing to translate strategic concepts into practice often creates a wide credibility gap between the promoted brand promise and the factual reality on the ground (brand reality) (Zenaludin & Kurniawan, 2025; Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025; Apriani et al., 2026). Therefore, formulating a city identity requires cross-sector integration and active local involvement so that regional reputation development is supported by fundamental improvements from within, not merely empty propaganda (Lu & de Jong, 2019; Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025).

In Garut Regency, the study focuses on place branding. Contemporary research on the dynamics of toponymy and regional nicknames shows that many names, such as "*Kota Dodol*," "*Swiss van Java*," and "*Joyful Garut*," can be perceived as symbolic wealth while generating multiple identities (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). The wide credibility gap between brand promises and on-the-ground conditions, coupled with suboptimal

Penta-helix collaboration, poses a governance challenge for Garut Regency (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). This paradigm shift toward commercialization can create a capitalist market hegemony that ultimately reduces the region's history, sidelines local values, and exchanges Garut's cultural dignity for the commercial convenience of a single image: "*Kota Dodol*." In this context, this study formulates the main problem: how a place branding strategy can reformulate and elevate Garut's cultural and philosophical values amidst the strong commercial dominance of "*Kota Dodol*."

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive case study design to explore identity shifts and dynamic place branding in Garut Regency in depth (Idrus, 2009). This interpretive design was deemed most relevant for analyzing subjective meanings, discourse, and the power-knowledge relations behind public spaces, in line with Foucault's discourse theory framework (Foucault, 1980). The strategy for restructuring Garut Regency's image can be formulated through qualitative content analysis of digital media narratives, travel reviews, and scientific documentation, which are then classified into the six pillars of Anholt's City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2006). To develop a holistic understanding, this study triangulated data collection methods, using primary data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and secondary data from literature reviews, historical document searches, and digital media analytics such as Google Trends and TikTok hashtags. These multiple data sources allow researchers to map the gap between ideal identities constructed offline and the images circulating online.

According to Idrus (2009), primary data collection through FGDs followed qualitative research ethical standards. The researchers selected participants using a selective sampling technique. Purposive sampling involved approximately 11 key informants on Garut culture and customs, including representatives from the Garut Regency Customary Council (DAKG), the Garut Arts Council (DKG), the Garut Regency Cultural Council (DKKG), history and culture observers, and local wisdom-based agricultural activists. The discussion lasted about 120 minutes, and the principal researcher moderated it, guiding the topic without directing opinions. As part of ethical compliance, all participants confirmed informed consent before the discussion began; we ensured their willingness to be audio-recorded and visually documented. The discussion was conducted in Indonesian with Sundanese inserts to maintain cultural familiarity and explore local philosophical meanings. All recordings were then transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis.

At the data analysis stage, this study integrates Foucault (1980) Discourse Analysis to analyze interview transcripts and secondary data. The process coding was carried out systematically through open coding to mark statements related to the hegemony of the "*Kota Dodol*" narrative and cultural resistance, which were then categorized into major themes across six dimensions. Place Brand Hexagon from Simon Anholt. To minimize researcher bias and ensure data validity, researchers consistently engaged in reflexivity and applied techniques such as member checking, returning initial draft findings to FGD participants to validate the accuracy of the interpretation of meaning. This entire process was strengthened through source triangulation; critical narratives from traditional figures were cross-examined with archival evidence from ancient colonial maps and netizen perception trends on social media, resulting in a formulation of identity.place branding which is credible and academically accountable.

3. Result and discussion

The discourse analysis findings on Garut Regency's place branding are drawn from a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with local traditional and cultural figures. The slogans presented in the table above served as the primary source material for discussion during the FGD with the Garut traditional, cultural, and arts communities. This analysis is also supported by interview data from previous research (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). Altogether, these diverse perspectives clearly show an ongoing debate among local stakeholders about the region's branding direction.

Table 1. Summary of Findings from Discourse Analysis on Garut Regency Place Branding

Aspect / Key Focus	Main Findings	Implications & Stakeholder Perspectives
Hegemony of Public Space ("Kota Dodol" Monument)	The city entry border monument is dominated by a single corporate brand (capitalist power), excessively monopolizing a strategic spatial node (<i>offset</i>).	Customary & Cultural Figures (Garut Arts Council [DKG], Garut Cultural Council [DKKG], Garut Traditional Council [DAKG], cultural observers, and local wisdom-based agricultural activists): Reject this single commercial narrative for marginalizing MSMEs, obscuring noble history, and contradicting the philosophy of Sundanese resilience (preferring the historical "Kota Intan" identity).
Identity Fragmentation & Multiplicity	Garut has overlapping nicknames (Mooi Garut, Kota Intan, Swiss van Java, <i>Kota Dodol</i> , Joyful Garut), creating a brand credibility gap because physical realities have declined (e.g., deforestation and environmental degradation).	Local Government (Polarized): The Vice Regent feels historical nicknames are restrictive and confusing; Bappeda views them as historical assets that must be preserved; the Regional Secretary views them as useful tools for promotional targeting.
Promotional Policy ("Joyful Garut")	The slogan and logo competition was executed top-down, won by an external party, and framed in a foreign language.	Vice Regent & Community: Sharply criticized for being reckless, failing to embody the true "spirit of Garut people," and completely bypassing local cultural knowledge systems.

Penta-helix Synergy Dysfunction	Cross-sectoral collaboration (Government, Business, Academia, Community, Media) remains highly suboptimal, operating in isolated silos.	Related Sectors: Academics are insufficiently integrated ("lacking depth"). Business actors operate without clear cultural guidelines, degrading the city's historical and architectural values.
Historical Ambiguity of Name Origin	A cohesive place brand is fundamentally hindered by the normalized colonial myth that "Garut" derives from "kakarut" (scratched by thorns), an account lacking rational and philosophical validity.	Traditional Council (DAKG) & Scholars: Self-funded cartographic (1641, 1760, 1809 maps) and botanical (<i>Aquilaria sp.</i>) research refutes the "kakarut" myth ("Garut <i>lain kakarut</i> "). They urge academics and governments to conduct comprehensive interdisciplinary studies to officially patent the authentic origin, restoring collective pride and grounding economic branding in historical truth (Tim Penulis DAKG, 2025).

3.1 The Hegemony of "Dodol City" at the Welcome Monument Through Michel Foucault's Perspective

The welcome monument to the city of Dodol, visible at the Tarogong Square roundabout, is not simply a neutral physical structure but a discursive apparatus that works productively to construct the identity of public space. In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), the speakers agreed that the monument demonstrates the strength of capitalist hegemony. They highlighted the close relationship between the local government at the time and capital owners, particularly large-scale dodol companies (Shepherd, 2002; Syafiuddin, 2017). This power relationship granted dominant entrepreneurs special privileges to shape the region's visual identity. Other sources agree, viewing this spatial collaboration as a form of control over public discourse by those with direct access to the center of government (Foucault, 1980).

In addition, the success of this market hegemony is supported by the very strategic placement of the welcome monument in Dodol city. As can be seen in the picture below, in 2015 there was only a monument; in 2017 several small monuments of dodol brands appeared, and from 2019 until now it has been named the dodol city, with the brand name in the middle and small monuments of dodol products in front, left, and right around Tarogong Square, Garut Regency. The commercial monument is located at a strategic main entry point, but it is positioned too prominently at the front line (Shepherd, 2002). This single-brand dominance in spatial planning creates a massive visual repetition mechanism, like a Panopticon watchtower (Foucault, 1980; Syafiuddin, 2017).

Figure 1. Visual representations of the Garut Regency entrance monument's condition from 2015 to 2025.



According to a source who did not want to be named, *"Sebenarnya tidak apa-apa mengambil julukan dari kuliner seperti dodol, atau apa pun. Saya tidak setuju lamun seratan kota dodol payun teuing, offset. Manawi sugin kapayuna tiasa julukan nu sanes misalna, garut kota coklat, kota santri, kota apa pun"*.

Translation: Actually, it is okay to take a name from culinary delights like dodol, or whatever. I disagree if the name of the city of dodol is too forward or off-topic. Hopefully, in the future, other nicknames will be added. For example, Garut, the city of chocolate, the city of Islamic students, or whatever city.

This attitude is considered beyond the limits of reasonableness or offset, because public spaces that should represent diversity are instead turned into giant marketing/advertising billboards for a single business entity.

Although some cultural figures do not completely reject the existence of these commodities, they are very concerned about their impact as a single narrative (*single narrative*) (Shepherd, 2002; Farisya et al., 2025). Mr. Oos, for example, appreciates the government's efforts to promote the dodol icon and does not question its funding source. However, he strongly objects to the commodity being used to represent Garut's complex history and philosophy. In line with this, Mr. Warjita from the Garut Regency Traditional Council (DAKG) reminded that the formation of regional identity always intersects with the interpretation of historical narratives and cultural symbols. The dominance of this dodol monument is feared to perpetuate and become a single narrative that marginalizes and hides the region's original cultural richness.

Furthermore, the image of "Dodol City" also suggests a weakening of the Garut community's identity in the eyes of outsiders, along with the loss of the prestigious nickname of Diamond City or Swiss van Java. Mr. Cepi from DAKG expressed concern because, in the Betawi dialect, the word "dodol" is often associated with being stupid or slow (due to the time-consuming process of making dodol). Dodol commodities are also widely found in other regions and are not exclusively native to Garut. who did not want to be named, critically criticized how this discursive truth is purely shaped by the power of commercial capital through his statement: *"Anu gaduh artos caket penguasa, janten*

tiasa ngatur" (Those who have money are close to the rulers, so they can control things) (Bălan, 2010).

Genealogically, "Kota Dodol" is actually a construction from outside (*outsiders*) that is forced and normalized inward. Mr. Imda from the Garut Cultural Council (DKG) explained that Garut was nicknamed "Dodol City" in the past, initially given by European travelers and outsiders who enjoyed being served the food when they came to Garut, similar to the phenomenon of outsiders labeling Bogor as "Rain City" without any initiation from local residents. In 2014, Mr. Imda participated in an event that showcased regional characteristics in Indonesia. At the event, dodol was shown to be produced in other regions, such as Aceh and Kudus. Making dodol the only instrument of *place branding is considered* an excessive form and cannot represent the true essence of Garut society (Apriani et al., 2026; Sari, 2026).

Philosophically, this single narrative is considered contrary to the local knowledge system of the Sundanese people. Ibu Nira explains the formation of identity through the texture of this single food. Through her discursive analysis, she states: "*Dodol raos, lengket, legit, ini dapat mencerminkan oh, orang Garut mah leuleus, mararanis tapi leleus, orang Garut mah babari biye, hapunten da Garut mah maung.*" Meaning: "Dodol is delicious, sticky, and chewy; this can reflect that Garut people are weak, sweet but weak, Garut people give up easily/are soft, but sorry, Garut is a tiger." The representation of "*dodol*" is considered to marginalize the value of local resilience that should be represented by cultural symbols such as the Garut sheep or the noble mythology of Kian Santang and Prabu Siliwangi. This monopoly of representation on the city boundary monument ultimately obscures small and medium business groups by determining their subject position. This highlights the structural injustice that occurs when a dodol monument highlights only one corporate brand. However, Garut's dodol culinary ecosystem is supported by many home-based factories (*home industry*). This reality demonstrates how capitalist power defines large business actors as the primary subjects of regional identity, while small producers, artisans, and traditional community groups are rendered marginalized and invisible (Foucault, 1980; Bălan, 2010).

For a discourse to become deeply rooted in society's collective memory, it requires a systematic repetition mechanism across various representational spaces. The discourse of "Kota Dodol" is repeated massively through the arrangement of symbols that display only one specific commercial brand symbol (Shepherd, 2002). Furthermore, this repetition is widely supported by the circulation of digital texts, mass media coverage, and official statements from policymakers. In his interview with detikNews, the previous regent said the monument was not a problem for the local government (Ghani, 2019). This shows the normalization of the installation of commercial slogans on the welcome monument, located at the main entrance of Garut Regency, as a common practice, demonstrating how policy instruments and media synergize in preserving visuals in public spaces.

In 2020, collaboration between local governments and the private sector in the 2019–2020 period was a clear example of how power (power) and the formation of narrative/knowledge (knowledge) support each other in dominating public space. In 2019, the government granted permission to erect the "Kota Dodol" monument at the main entrance to Garut Regency. This collaboration was further strengthened by entrepreneurial capital through the Garut Culture Festival, held in 2020 for the 207th anniversary of Garut Regency. This major event was initiated and directly sponsored by the leadership of this dodol company (Pemerintah Kabupaten Garut, 2020). In Foucault's

view, this strategic collaboration succeeded in constructing a new "truth," where commercial promotional interests blended into and took over the face of local culture thanks to the direct legitimacy of policymakers.

This phenomenon of hegemonic collaboration certainly has advantages and disadvantages in the context of Garut Regency's development. The advantages are that the active involvement of the large-scale private sector has proven able to make a real economic contribution by enlivening regional celebrations, driving tourism, and providing mass entertainment for the public through well-organized events (such as culinary festivals, sports, and arts attractions). However, a shortcoming is the monopoly of representation, which concentrates the power and capital to participate in this strategic public space.

Through massive repetition and institutional legitimacy, the discourse of "Dodol City" ultimately formed a Regime of Truth (Foucault, 1980). This artificial truth limits local communities' ways of thinking, reducing Garut Regency to a single culinary commodity. This regime of truth works effectively by hiding other realities from public memory, such as the complexity of Garut Regency's Priangan history, the charm of its mountain ecology, and the richness of its regional arts and culture. As a result, the public has become accustomed to accepting this simplified image without questioning why the *Dodol* City welcome monument displays only one brand of dodol and places that brand at the center of the monument. This directly closes the space for discussion about Garut's multi-sectoral potential. In establishing its hegemony, the truth regime of "Dodol City" actively divides social actors into subject positions (subject positions) which are considered possible (*possible*) or impossible (*impossible*). This power structure enables only "consumer subjects" for tourists coming for culinary transactions and tourism-support businesses for dodol corporations. Conversely, the subject positions of cultural groups, guardians of tradition, historians, and activists of local wisdom farming and animal husbandry are rendered impossible and relegated to the margins. Their critical voices against the shallowness of identity are deemed to lack authority because the cultural and ecological values they defend do not produce instant economic utility within the logic of the capitalist market.

In addition, Garut Regency still faces obstacles in formulating its place branding. Based on the discourse analysis of the research document by Wahyuningtyas et al. (2025), the multiplicity of nicknames for Garut Regency does not merely reflect administrative confusion, as seen in the "Joyful Garut" slogan competition. This policy drew cultural resistance because it imposed a foreign language construction while ignoring local knowledge systems. This struggle over the authority of meaning was explicitly criticized from within the bureaucratic structure itself; in her interview (DW-03), the Vice Regent of Garut, drg. Luthfianisa Putri Karlina, M.BA., asserted her rejection, stating that the slogan did not originate from the "spirit of Garut people" and was won by an outsider (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). This rejection shows a counter-discourse effort to reclaim the local community's prerogative to define the city's identity, anchored in deep philosophy and history.

Furthermore, the dysfunctional synergy of the Penta-helix model in Garut reveals an imbalance in power/knowledge relations that systematically marginalizes historical and ecological discourses (Zenaludin & Kurniawan, 2025; Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). The reduced subject position of academics, who were assessed as "lacking depth," proves that scholarly discourse has not been granted legitimacy as a strategic foundation. In contrast, the business sector's dominance, operating without cultural

guidelines, produces destructive spatial discourses, as historian Mr. Kunto explains, highlighting the degradation of historical values resulting from commercial development (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2025). This dynamic confirms that without equal discursive co-creation among stakeholders, place branding practices will inevitably commodify space under capital power.

From a Foucauldian (1980) discourse-analysis perspective, the fundamental obstacle to formulating Garut Regency's place branding lies in the discursive struggles surrounding the region's uncertain origin story. For years, the normalized "truth" has asserted that the name "Garut" derives from the word "*kakarut*" (scratched). This oral myth, set during the reign of the Regent of Limbangan, Adipati Adiwijaya (1813–1831), recounts a Dutch soldier whose tongue stumbled, mispronouncing the scratchy plant from "*kakarut*" as "*gagarut*" or "*ki garut*" (*Pemerintah Kabupaten Garut*, 2017). In Foucault (1980) analysis, this narrative operates as a form of subjugated knowledge. FGD participants sharply criticized this account as irrational and devoid of philosophical grounding, questioning who this Dutch figure actually was and why a colonial mispronunciation should be the absolute anchor of identity. Perpetuating the "*kakarut*" discourse without critical deconstruction risks tarnishing the region's noble philosophical values, proving that regional place branding cannot be decided hastily without exposing the logical flaws in the dominant narrative. As a form of discursive resistance, the Customary Council of Garut Regency (DAKG) initiated an archaeology of knowledge to dismantle this colonial regime of truth using scientific evidence. Through cartographic tracing, DAKG revealed that the point designated as "Garut" existed long before the Dutch myth emerged.

A crucial aspect of this power/knowledge dynamic is that DAKG members drove this counter-knowledge production entirely through a self-funded initiative, without external financial support, highlighting the community's resilience in reclaiming its historical authority (Tim Penulis DAKG, 2025). Currently, the space for discussion remains widely open, with the hope that the counter-discursive cry of "*Garut lain kakarut*" ("Garut is not kakarut") will be earnestly heard by academics, as well as local and central governments. Reconstructing history through valid, interdisciplinary research is essential so that the origin of the name Garut can be carefully re-examined and documented. Ultimately, restoring this historical discourse is not merely about meeting economic needs through strong place branding; it also serves as an instrument of emancipation to strengthen unity, boost collective pride, and restore the dignity of Garut's citizens.

3.2 Re-Imaging Strategy: Mapping the Gap between Real Identity and Public Image

The first step in mapping this identity is to identify a list of historical nicknames and contemporary slogans of Garut studied in previous research by Wahyuningtyas et al. (2025). The study inventoried 14 names of Garut's identity, which include legendary historical nicknames such as "Mooi Garut" (Garut Endah), "Swiss van Java", "City of Diamonds", "Situ Bagendit", and "Garut Pangirutan". In addition, there are also nicknames based on commodities and economic activities such as "Kota Dodol", "Kota Domba", "Kota Cokelat/Chocodot", "Kota Kuliner", as well as community spiritual identities such as "Kota Santri" and the modern slogan "Joyful/Amazing Garut". From a discourse analysis perspective, the abundance of identity discourse on the one hand reflects extraordinary symbolic richness, but in practice it actually creates "identity

fragmentation" or confusion of meaning that makes the public and the government lose a definite direction in highlighting a single image of the city.

Furthermore, to map Garut Regency's place-branding strategy, this study uses an empirical approach, drawing on digital data from the internet and regional institutional statistics to analyze Anholt's six dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2006). Digital audience interaction records are extracted and presented in Table 3, which contains data from Google Trends (Google Trends, 2025) regarding search interest for the word "Garut" and its derivative keywords, and Table 4, which summarizes the massive trend in the use of specific hashtags about Garut on the TikTok platform. In addition to exploring the discourse developing in cyberspace, this analysis is also supported by real-world data on the number of arts and performance communities in 2025, including the existence of hundreds of traditional studios, music groups, and gamelan (karawitan), along with a mapping of various local communities driving the region, such as traditional councils and tourism associations. The integration of digital perceptions (online) and the presence of real communities (offline) serves as the main instrument to dissect and evaluate the reality of Garut Regency across the dimensions of Presence, Place, Prerequisites, People, Pulse, and Potential.

Table 3. Data from Google Trends regarding the word "Garut"

Query	Search interest	Increase percent
<i>garut kota</i>	100	20%
<i>kota garut</i>	98	20%
<i>kabupaten garut</i>	93	40%
<i>hotel garut</i>	91	-2%
<i>wisata garut</i>	67	-40%
<i>villa garut</i>	49	40%
<i>domba garut</i>	47	-20%
<i>kode pos garut</i>	46	30%
<i>garut gempu</i>	45	450%
<i>gempu garut</i>	43	450%
<i>cipanas garut</i>	42	-30%
<i>adzan garut</i>	38	300%
<i>dodol garut</i>	35	20%
<i>stasiun garut</i>	32	190%
<i>wisata di garut</i>	26	-40%

Table 4. Data from TikTok on the trend of hashtag usage in the word Garut

Hashtag	Use of hashtags	Descriptive Video Trend
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#garut	1jt posts	Recommendations for culinary, accommodation, cafes, restaurants, transportation, tourist destinations, events, news in Garut
#garutselatan	91,6k posts	Beach views, villas, accommodation, waterfalls, tourist destinations
#kulinergarut	61,6k posts	Typical Sundanese cuisine, Baso Aci, local culinary, green mountain views, beautiful accommodation in Garut, and food at cafes/restaurants
#wisatagarut	71,6k posts	Green mountain views, beautiful accommodation in Garut, and food at cafes/restaurants, hot spring recommendations, and tourist destinations.
#dodolgarut	39,9k posts	Introduction to the types of dodol products, dodol production,
#eksploregarut	28,1k posts	Views of green mountains, beautiful accommodation in Garut, and food at cafes/restaurants
#garutkotaintan	13,0k posts	Content singing the song Garut, the diamond city while showing the green views in Garut
#garutkota	18,4k posts	Video of regional leaders and representatives
#garutkekinian	8.7k posts	cafes, restaurants, food stalls, and tourist destinations
#sekitargarut	8,2k posts	Green mountain views, mobility like the scenery on the road, and culinary delights

The Presence dimension measures a city's international status, global familiarity, and how the wider public perceives its historical and cultural contributions. Historically, Garut's presence on the world stage has been represented by lavish colonial nicknames such as Swiss van Java and Mooi Garut, reflecting its natural splendor. However, qualitative analysis of digital search data shows that Garut's current "presence" is driven more by local functional issues and temporary on-the-ground events. Based on Google Trends data from 2020-2025, searches with the highest interest are dominated by the keywords "Garut city" (score 100 with a 20% increase in interest), "Garut city" (score 98), and "Garut regency" (score 93 with a 40% increase). National public interest is also strongly influenced by natural disasters, as shown by spikes in searches for the keyword "Garut earthquake," each surging by up to 450%. This confirms that discourse on Garut Regency remains highly passive and reactive; the city's image is shaped by natural incidents, not by a global reputation communication strategy deliberately designed and controlled by the government.

The Place dimension explores public perception of the city's physical outdoor aspects, spatial beauty, and natural landscapes. On social media, visual dominance, or hegemony, occurs, where Garut's natural beauty dominates netizens' perceptions (Milki, 2024; Zenaludin & Kurniawan, 2025). Analysis of the TikTok platform supports this visual power: the hashtag #garutselatan garnered 91,600 posts specifically highlighting

exotic beaches, villas, and waterfalls. This narrative of the landscape's beauty continues to be replicated through the hashtags #wisatagarut (71,600 posts) and #eksplorigarut (28,100 posts), filled with visuals of green mountains and beautiful accommodations. Google Trends confirms this digital reality: searches for "hotelgarut" lead with a score of 91, followed by "villagarut" at 49 (up 40%) and "cipanas garut" at 42. However, the dominance of the natural narrative and the commercialization of tourism indirectly drown out the discourse on the richness of real arts and culture; Yet Garut boasts 215 traditional performance studios/helaran, 95 gamelan groups, and 25 Padalangan studios (Dinas Komunikasi dan Informatika Kabupaten Garut, 2025). This shows a discursive gap: Garut is "sold" primarily as a visual landscape, while its local cultural pulse receives less attention in the digital space.

The Prerequisites dimension examines how the public assesses the quality standards of public facilities, accommodations, and transportation infrastructure. Currently, social media serves as a primary platform for discussing the adequacy of Garut's infrastructure. The main hashtag #garut has surpassed 1 million posts on TikTok, dominated by reviews of culinary recommendations, accommodations, restaurants, and transportation/route guides. Google Trends data also clearly shows the urgency of citizen and tourist mobility: searches for the keyword "Garut station" ranked 32 but surged by 190%. However, to truly prove the promise of the nickname "Diamond City" (Beautiful, Orderly, Safe, Comfortable), digital communication alone is not enough. Real co-creation and collaborative action are needed with local infrastructure-driving associations, such as the Garut BPC of the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI) and the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) (Mastika & Nimran, 2020). Without synergy among stakeholders (Penta-helix), the beautiful promises on visitors' mobile screens will end up as illusions shattered by the reality of inadequate physical facilities.

The People dimension measures the friendliness of local residents, the sense of security newcomers feel, and the availability of an inclusive social community. The warm and religious character of the Garut community is strongly reflected in the "City of Santri" pillar, which is supported by Google Trends search data from 2020-2025, where the keyword "adzangarut" recorded a massive spike of up to 300%. Furthermore, Garut sheep ranked 7th for the searched term. This shows that this dimension is driven by local communities that actively innovate and preserve noble values, such as the Indonesian Sheep and Goat Breeders Association (HPDKI) Garut, a livestock community that preserves breeding and holds Garut Sheep dexterity art contests (Farisya et al., 2025). On the other hand, the preservation of the culture of physical dexterity and the community's sense of security are maintained from generation to generation by local pencak silat communities, such as the Indonesian Pencak Silat Association (HPSI) Gadjah Putih Mega Paksi Pusaka in Semarang and the Sinar Pusaka Putra Garut Pencak Silat Padepokan (Bakesbangpol Kabupaten Garut, 2025). These communities demonstrate strong social capital that supports the place-branding ecosystem from within and beyond.

3.3 Pulse Dimension (Passion)

Pulse Dimension explores discourse on lifestyle, the dynamics of urban entertainment, and the availability of cultural festivals. Culturally, Garut Regency has a very energetic cultural pulse; data records 215 traditional performances and helaran studios, 138 music groups, and 95 gamelan studios (Pemerintah Kabupaten Garut, 2026).

This cultural passion is institutionalized and guarded by heritage guardian entities such as the Garut Arts Council (DKG), which oversees 8 arts committees, and the Cultural Heritage Expert Team. However, in the digital public space, discourse on the passion of city life is communicated organically and bottom-up by the community, especially young people who have made Garut a center for culinary exploration and modern lifestyle. This is evident in the hashtag #garutkotaintan (13,000 posts), which has become a medium for netizens to sing regional songs against the backdrop of beautiful mountains, as well as discourse on the modern lifestyle of young people in various cafes and restaurants, recorded in the hashtag #garutkekinian (8.7,000 posts).

Furthermore, the young generation's passion for hangout culture and gastronomic tourism is strongly represented through the hashtag #kulinergarut, which has reached 61.6 thousand posts. This hashtag generates many visuals of the Sundanese specialty Baso Aci, along with a row of contemporary cafes and restaurants paired with green mountain views and beautiful accommodations. The younger generation's enthusiasm for staycations and healing also shows up in the hashtags #wisatagarut (71.6 thousand posts) and #eksploreagarut (28.1 thousand posts), which are filled with recommendations for tourist destinations, aesthetic eateries, and hot springs. This social media discourse aligns with trends in people's search behavior on Google Trends. Although the macro keyword "wisatagarut" scored 67 (with a 40% decrease), the public's desire for tourist accommodation facilities remains very high, evidenced by searches for "hotelgarut," which dominated at a score of 91, and a surge in searches for "villagarut" at a score of 49 (an increase of up to 40%). This dynamic confirms that Garut is a passionate lifestyle and culinary destination for young people, while also remaining enriched by cultural entertainment such as skill attractions facilitated by the Indonesian Sheep and Goat Breeders Association (HPDKI) Garut (Farisya et al., 2025).

The Potential Dimension examines the discourse on creative economic opportunities and the investment climate. Currently, the representation of Garut's potential in the digital space is unequal due to the hegemony of the commercial discourse of "Kota Dodol." This is clear in the dominance of the hashtag #dodolgarut (39.9 thousand posts), which monopolizes exposure for local products on TikTok. As a result, other mainstay economic potential is marginalized. Garut's world-famous coffee is only listed in the hashtag #kopigarut (4.6 thousand posts), while premium leather crafts only garner minimal attention through #taskulitgarut (3.1 thousand posts) and #kulitgarut (1.7 thousand posts) (Bappeda Provinsi Jawa Barat, 2016; Tempo.co, 2022; Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2025; Pemerintah Kabupaten Garut, 2025). Garut is driven by highly progressive economic communities, such as the Garut Millennial Farmers Community, which has implemented Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in agriculture, and the Eptilu Incorporated (KEI) Cooperative Group in Cikajang, which has successfully pioneered Siamese orange agrotourism (Perum Perhutani, 2019; Pemerintah Kabupaten Garut, 2025). By implementing umbrella brand narratives such as "Kota Diamond", the government should be able to empower these communities to diversify their promotions and undermine the dominance of single commodity narratives.

In the context of formulating a new direction for Garut Regency's place branding, discourse analysis of policy documents, public communication dynamics, and academic studies indicate strong support from traditional and cultural stakeholders (such as the Garut Regency Customary Council [DAKG], the Arts Council [DKG], and the Cultural Council [DKKG]) to restore the historical nickname "Diamond City." This cultural group's

choice reflects a collective desire to dismantle the single dominant image of "Dodol City," which many consider too demeaning to regional identity. Support from local cultural actors is important for providing bottom-up cultural legitimacy (Papp-Váry, 2011; Kalantarzadeh & Fasli, 2018; Putra et al., 2025; Milki, 2024). However, in an objective review of place branding, stakeholder preferences do not necessarily prove place branding effectiveness. Scientific evidence or market testing has not supported the internal desires of traditional groups or shown that the nickname "Diamond City" has the functional readiness to be adopted effectively.

To align findings from the various dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon with recommendations for Garut Regency's place branding strategy, a critical evaluation is needed that bridges ideal ideas and field realities. Aligning findings in the Presence and Potential dimensions requires empirical evidence before establishing a city identity. Currently, the proposal to restore the historical identity of "Kota Diamond" has not proven to be more marketable than the image of culinary commodities or natural tourism that has dominated. Digital data clearly shows an imbalance in public interest; discourse on search engines and social media is dominated by keywords such as dodol (sweet dodol) products and tourist destinations, with the hashtag #dodolgarut generating 39.9 thousand posts on TikTok, compared with #garutkotaintan, which received only 13 thousand posts. Furthermore, no external perception study has validated that the name "Kota Diamond" is considered more authentic, has differentiating power, or can trigger positive associations in the minds of a national audience. Without valid market research, hastily shifting the identity focus risks confusing the target market.

When analyzed through the prerequisites and place dimensions, Garut Regency's place branding strategy faces a tough credibility test. The nickname "Kota Intan," an acronym for Beautiful, Orderly, Safe, and Comfortable, has the highest brand credibility gap among other nicknames. A wide gap exists between the brand promise and the physical reality on the ground (brand reality); this ideal of beauty and order clashes with the arrangement of street vendors (PKL), the degradation of mountain forests that triggers natural disasters, and street crime. Based on Anholt's framework, a place's reputation cannot be engineered solely through promotional messages; it must rely on real improvements in governance and brand-building from the inside out. Forcing a brand without improving this physical reality will only make the place branding strategy labeled as empty propaganda.

3.4. Strategic place branding recommendations

Based on the imbalances in the dimensions above, we cannot immediately jump to creating a new logo or slogan (Dinnie, 2011; Anholt, 2006). The main strategy must focus on concrete actions from all elements of the Penta-helix to improve infrastructure governance and city order to close the credibility gap. Furthermore, the identity must be developed through operational research to create an inclusive narrative. The chosen identity must be proven to accommodate all potential sub-brands of the region without discrimination, from the Samarang leather craft industry and internationally acclaimed Garut coffee to the dodol industry itself, thus realizing a cohesive and globally competitive city image.

4. Conclusion

Through the lens of Foucault, the "Kota Dodol" welcome monument is not merely a physical structure, but a powerful symbol of an alliance between political power and capitalist interests. By placing a single massive commercial brand at the city's main entrance, the local government officially normalized and validated a commercial monopoly over public space. This top-down policy created a "regime of truth" that forced the public to accept a singular corporate identity, effectively marginalizing the voices of local cultural figures, traditional councils, and small businesses. Ultimately, this spatial hegemony reduces Garut's rich historical and cultural heritage into a mere promotional tool for a capitalist enterprise. Using Anholt's City Brand Hexagon, supported by digital data from Google Trends and TikTok, it is clear that a severe disconnect exists between what Garut wants to be and how it is actually perceived. Currently, the public image is heavily dominated by two things: the commercial dodol industry and aesthetic nature tourism. While cultural figures propose returning to the noble identity of "Kota Intan" (Beautiful, Orderly, Safe, Comfortable), this concept faces a massive "brand credibility gap." The promise of "Kota Intan" contradicts the harsh physical realities on the ground, such as disorganized street vendors, environmental degradation, and underdeveloped infrastructure. Therefore, a successful re-imaging strategy cannot rely on a new slogan alone. It requires real, collaborative action from all Penta-helix actors (government, communities, academia, business, and media) to fix the city's internal conditions first, ensuring that the new identity is empirically viable, inclusive, and authentic.

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