

Developing Malang City Tourism: A Qualitative Analysis of Opportunities, Challenges, and Sustainability Strategies

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Abstract

Malang City possesses diverse tourism potential, ranging from thematic villages, culinary and educational tourism, to emerging halal tourism destinations. However, the city is often perceived merely as a transit point for visitors heading to Batu or Mount Bromo, limiting its positioning as a primary destination. This study aims to analyze tourism development strategies for Malang City using a qualitative descriptive approach supported by primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with thematic village managers, culinary business owners, and representatives of the Malang City Tourism Office, while secondary data were drawn from statistical reports and scholarly literature. Findings reveal that Malang's tourism development can be strengthened through five key strategies: differentiation of attractions (creative, culinary, and halal tourism), improvement of infrastructure and public facilities, multi-stakeholder collaboration, empowerment of local communities, and digital promotion. The study highlights that sustainable and inclusive planning is critical for transforming Malang from a mere stopover into a leading tourism destination in East Java, with broader socio-economic benefits for local communities.

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1. Introduction

Malang City, located in the southern part of East Java, has long been celebrated as a center of education and culture, attracting students, entrepreneurs, and visitors from across Indonesia. Its rich tourism assets include the colorful Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, the creative Kampung Tridi, the blue-themed Kampung Biru Arema, and historical landmarks such as the Brawijaya Museum. These attractions, combined with the lively Alun-Alun Merdeka, modern recreational facilities like Hawai Waterpark, and a thriving culinary scene famous for *bakso Malang* and *rawon*, have positioned Malang as a city with distinct tourism potential. Yet, despite its assets, Malang is often perceived as a stopover city — a place where travelers spend a brief night before continuing on to Batu's theme parks or the renowned sunrise trek at Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. This perception has become both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge because it limits visitor length of stay and economic impact, and an opportunity because the city possesses underutilized potential to position itself as an independent destination.

The past three years have provided critical insight into this potential. Data from the Malang City Tourism Office indicate that domestic tourist visits grew sharply from just half a million in 2021, during the tail end of pandemic restrictions, to nearly six million in 2022. International visits, though smaller in absolute numbers, quadrupled over the same period, reflecting a strong rebound in global travel. By 2024, visits reached approximately 3.1 million, with projections targeting 3.3 million in 2025. These figures are not merely statistics; they

reveal a city in transition, where increasing demand for urban tourism experiences is placing pressure on infrastructure and demanding more sophisticated destination management strategies. Without deliberate planning, Malang risks remaining a transit point, with visitors spending little time and contributing minimally to the local economy.

Despite its status as a “stopover city,” tourism in Malang is experiencing significant growth. According to the Malang City Tourism Office (Disporapar Kota Malang, 2023), domestic tourist visits increased dramatically from only 0.5 million in 2021 (due to pandemic restrictions) to 5.9 million in 2022. International visits also grew fourfold in the same period, showing a clear rebound after COVID-19. By the end of 2024, visits reached 3.1 million, and the local government projects 3.3 million visitors in 2025 (Kompas, 2023).

Table 1. Trend of Tourist Visits in Malang City (2021–2025)

Year	Domestic Tourists (millions)	International Tourists (thousands)	Total
2021	0.5	18	0.518 M
2022	5.9	73	5.973 M
2023	2.9	68	2.968 M
2024	3.0	76	3.076 M
2025*	3.2 (target)	85 (target)	3.285 M

*Source: Disporapar Kota Malang (2023), Kompas (2023).

2025 is projected based on city government tourism targets.

Urban tourism is increasingly recognized as a strategic lever for inclusive economic growth, especially in rapidly urbanizing regions. For cities like Malang, tourism offers more than recreational value; it serves as a direct avenue for job creation, local enterprise stimulation, and urban revitalization. Research shows that urban tourism plays a critical role in regenerating cities by supporting micro-businesses, attracting investment, and enhancing urban branding (Bozhko & Zaitseva, 2021). Unlike many sectors, tourism actively engages local communities, integrating a wide range of stakeholders—from homestay operators and culinary vendors to artisans and local guides. This inclusive participation amplifies tourism’s potential to empower residents and stimulate the creative economy, which is essential in preserving intangible cultural heritage (Bellato & Cheer, 2021). Moreover, urban tourism is a tool for regional economic diversification, especially in cities transitioning from industrial or agricultural economic bases. In German cities, for example, urban tourism was found to have a strong causal link to increases in local tax revenue and GDP, validating the tourism-led growth hypothesis even in developed urban economies (Neuts, 2020).

Malang stands at a critical juncture. With neighboring destinations like Batu City already positioning themselves as leisure capitals supported by well-developed infrastructure, Malang must act swiftly to leverage its cultural and historical assets to remain competitive. Studies stress that the uniqueness of place—its culture, history, and people—plays a decisive role in attracting and retaining tourists in an increasingly globalized tourism market (Sun, 2012). To harness this momentum, urban tourism must be embedded into city development strategies, with coordinated efforts across tourism agencies, local governments, and creative industry players. This includes developing inclusive tourism policies, strengthening urban infrastructure, and ensuring that the economic gains of tourism are equitably shared among communities (Uğur, 2017). Previous studies on Malang tourism have largely focused on fragmented themes, such as the branding of Kampung Jodipan or the economic impact of isolated events like culinary festivals. While these efforts have merit, they fall short of offering a comprehensive analysis that accounts for the interconnectedness of various tourism segments—creative, culinary, and halal tourism—while also considering infrastructural and digital ecosystem limitations.

Recent literature has emphasized the importance of integrated tourism planning in urban destinations. For example, V. Ariani (2018) introduced the “integrated city” concept as a

framework for building urban tourism that leverages cultural identity, infrastructure readiness, and stakeholder collaboration (Ariani, 2018). Similarly, Uğur (2017) highlighted that inclusive development and integrated planning are essential for balancing visitor satisfaction with local community empowerment (Uğur, 2017). In the context of halal tourism, Chantarungsri & Alam (2025) stress the importance of integrating Islamic principles, sustainable architecture, and digital technologies in urban areas to accommodate growing demand while maintaining cultural and environmental integrity (Chantarungsri & Alam, 2025). Moreover, the role of digital marketing and social media is becoming increasingly central to tourism competitiveness, particularly in attracting younger, tech-savvy travelers. Research in Central Java confirms that integrated digital promotion through social media, public relations, and direct community engagement significantly boosts tourist village visibility and local economic outcomes (Dahana et al., 2023).

Despite Malang's strong cultural assets and emerging creative economy, there is limited research on how inter-city competition for example, with neighboring Batu City shapes strategic tourism decisions. A broader, systems-based approach is needed to understand how Malang can differentiate itself through value-driven branding, cross-sector integration, and participatory governance. This study addresses these gaps by conducting a holistic, qualitative exploration of Malang's tourism ecosystem, drawing on interviews with thematic village managers, culinary entrepreneurs, and city officials, and triangulated with secondary data from tourism reports and academic literature. It aims to reposition Malang as a multidimensional urban destination, aligned with global best practices in integrated, inclusive tourism development.

The objective of this study is twofold: first, to identify opportunities for strengthening Malang's tourism offerings by leveraging its creative and cultural assets; and second, to formulate sustainable strategies that enable the city to shift from a transit destination to a primary choice for travelers. This involves examining not only what makes Malang unique, but also what barriers must be overcome: traffic congestion, lack of inclusive facilities, limited coordination among stakeholders to unlock its full potential. The approach emphasizes community empowerment, recognizing that tourism development must deliver tangible benefits to local residents if it is to be both sustainable and socially equitable.

At the heart of this research lies the concept of "Transforming Malang into a Competitive Tourism Destination." This concept frames Malang not as a passive recipient of visitor flows but as an active curator of tourism experiences. It considers multiple, interconnected dimensions: attraction development through thematic villages, halal tourism, and gastronomy; infrastructure enhancement, including transport and accessibility; digital promotion through social media campaigns and virtual tours; community capacity building through MSME training and guide certification; and multi-stakeholder collaboration among government, academia, and private sector actors. Environmental and cultural sustainability serve as the foundation, ensuring that growth does not compromise the very assets that make Malang attractive.

The significance of this research extends beyond the local context. Mid-sized cities across Indonesia and Southeast Asia face similar challenges of defining their tourism identity in the shadow of more established destinations. By documenting Malang's experience and analyzing its opportunities and constraints, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how urban tourism can be leveraged as a tool for local development. It offers a replicable model for other cities seeking to balance economic growth with cultural preservation and social inclusion.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore tourism development strategies for Malang City in depth and within its real-world context. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture participants' experiences, perspectives, and collective insights regarding tourism challenges and opportunities in a rich, contextualized manner rather than through predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Primary data were collected from three key stakeholder groups: (1) managers of thematic village attractions such as Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan and Kampung Tridi, (2) culinary entrepreneurs and creative industry actors representing Malang's gastronomic tourism

segment, and (3) officials from the Malang City Tourism Office who are responsible for planning and policy implementation. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct knowledge and involvement in Malang's tourism ecosystem (Patton, 2015).

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period using a combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. In-depth interviews were semi-structured, lasting 45–60 minutes each, and focused on themes such as tourism potential, visitor profiles, infrastructure needs, community participation, and promotion strategies. FGDs were organized with community leaders and tourism activists to gather collective perspectives, while document analysis involved reviewing statistical reports, tourism masterplans, and academic literature related to urban tourism. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) interactive model, which involves three concurrent flows: data reduction (coding and clustering of transcripts), data display (arranging findings into matrices and thematic maps), and conclusion drawing/verification (iteratively comparing data segments to refine interpretations). To strengthen analytical rigor, triangulation was applied across sources (interviews, FGDs, documents) and methods, and peer debriefing sessions were held with tourism experts to validate emerging interpretations (Carter et al., 2014).

After thematic coding was completed, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis was conducted as an additional analytic layer to synthesize key findings. Coded themes were categorized into internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats), creating a structured matrix that facilitated the identification of strategic directions for tourism development in Malang. The use of SWOT allowed the researchers to move beyond descriptive findings toward actionable recommendations that integrate community perspectives with policy and planning considerations.

Throughout the research process, reflexive memos were kept to document interpretive decisions, and credibility was further enhanced through member checking by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants for feedback. Ethical considerations were fully addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and anonymizing all identifiable information in transcripts and reports. The research adhered to the ethical standards recommended by the Indonesian National Health Research Ethics Commission.

3. Results and Discussion

Result

The results of this study are presented as a narrative synthesis of the data obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis conducted over a three-month period in Malang City. A total of 15 participants were involved, consisting of thematic village managers, culinary entrepreneurs, and officials from the Malang City Tourism Office. Each interview lasted between 45–60 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. These transcripts, along with notes from two FGDs and secondary documents, were analyzed following Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing.

Data Collection and Theme Development

The data collection process generated a rich corpus of qualitative material consisting of 15 in-depth interview transcripts, two FGD summaries, and supporting documents from the Malang City Tourism Office and Statistics Indonesia (BPS). The interviews involved key stakeholders across the tourism value chain: thematic village managers, culinary entrepreneurs, creative industry actors, and government officials. This diversity of participants allowed the research team to capture perspectives from both policy-making and grassroots levels, reflecting the complexity of Malang's tourism ecosystem.

Each transcript was carefully reviewed and coded inductively, using open coding to identify initial categories related to tourism potential, visitor behavior, infrastructure,

promotion strategies, and community participation. Codes were then grouped into focused categories and subsequently abstracted into broader themes. This iterative process followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) interactive model, ensuring that interpretation emerged from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

During coding, several patterns became immediately apparent. Managers of thematic villages consistently mentioned the **unique visual identity** of their attractions as the main draw for visitors, especially domestic millennial travelers seeking “Instagrammable” experiences. One manager stated:

“Kebanyakan pengunjung datang untuk foto. Mereka suka warna-warni dinding rumah, lalu belanja minuman atau jajanan kecil di warung warga.” (Manager, Kampung Tridi).

“Most visitors come to take photos. They like the colorful walls of the houses, then buy drinks or snacks at the local stalls.” (Manager, Kampung Tridi).

This comment illustrates how tourism creates both cultural and economic value at the neighborhood level. Similarly, culinary entrepreneurs spoke about the importance of Malang’s gastronomy brand, emphasizing that it remains underdeveloped as a formal tourism product:

“Bakso Malang sudah dikenal sampai Jakarta, tapi belum ada paket tur kuliner resmi. Kalau ada peta kuliner, wisatawan bisa keliling khusus mencoba makanan khas.” (Culinary Business Owner, Kayutangan).

“Malang meatballs are already well-known in Jakarta, but there is no official culinary tour package yet. If there were a culinary map, tourists could go on a special tour to try local specialties.” (Culinary Business Owner, Kayutangan).

From the government’s perspective, officials acknowledged that while visitor numbers are increasing, there is still no integrated branding strategy to position Malang as a primary destination. They also recognized infrastructure bottlenecks, particularly traffic congestion, insufficient parking, and a lack of inclusive facilities for people with disabilities:

“Malang harus bisa menciptakan pengalaman yang nyaman. Sekarang masih macet di akhir pekan, dan fasilitas bagi difabel belum memadai.” (Representative, Disporapar Kota Malang).

“Malang must be able to create a comfortable experience. Currently, there is still traffic congestion on weekends, and facilities for people with disabilities are inadequate.” (Representative, Malang City Tourism and Creative Economy Agency).

The FGDs provided additional insight into community readiness. Local leaders expressed willingness to collaborate with the government but highlighted the need for training in hospitality, product packaging, and digital marketing to make tourism initiatives sustainable:

“Kami siap mendukung pariwisata, tapi perlu pendampingan. Misalnya cara memasarkan produk online, mengelola sampah supaya kampung tetap bersih.” (Community Leader, RW 04).

“We are ready to support tourism, but we need guidance. For example, how to market products online and manage waste so that the village remains clean.” (Community Leader, RW 04).

Document analysis corroborated these findings. Tourism statistics confirmed the post-pandemic rebound, while city planning documents indicated that tourism development remains one of Malang’s economic priorities but lacks a clear road map for differentiating itself from neighboring Batu City or Surabaya.

Together, these data points formed three core themes:

1. **Destination Differentiation Potential** Malang’s unique assets (thematic villages, gastronomy, cultural heritage) represent a foundation for creating a distinct identity, but they are not yet fully integrated into a cohesive narrative.
2. **Structural and Infrastructural Challenges** Persistent bottlenecks in mobility, accessibility, and facility readiness continue to constrain visitor satisfaction and limit length of stay.
3. **Community Readiness and Participation** There is enthusiasm among local residents to engage in tourism, but they require institutional support, training, and capacity-building programs to participate meaningfully and benefit equitably.

These three themes were used as the basis for synthesizing a SWOT analysis that maps Malang’s internal strengths and weaknesses against external opportunities and threats. The transition from descriptive themes to the structured SWOT framework ensures that the resulting strategic recommendations are firmly rooted in empirical evidence rather than being merely prescriptive.

The qualitative data revealed a complex but promising picture of Malang City’s tourism development. Three major themes emerged: (1) untapped potential for destination differentiation, (2) structural and infrastructural challenges that limit visitor experience, and (3) community readiness and willingness to engage in tourism initiatives.

Key Findings by Theme

Interviews with thematic village managers highlighted that visitor numbers remain highly seasonal, peaking during school holidays, which suggests an opportunity to develop events and festivals during off-peak months. Culinary entrepreneurs expressed optimism about positioning Malang as a “gastronomy tourism city” but noted limited support for packaging and promoting local cuisine beyond the city level. Tourism officials acknowledged that branding efforts have been fragmented and that coordination between government, private sector, and local communities remains suboptimal.

To synthesize these findings, a SWOT matrix was developed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis of Malang City Tourism Development

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique thematic villages (Jodipan, Tridi, Biru Arema) that attract domestic visitors. ● Strong culinary identity (bakso, rawon, street food). ● Strategic geographic location near Batu and Bromo. ● Growing number of domestic and international tourists post-pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited integrated branding; fragmented marketing efforts. ● Inadequate infrastructure (traffic congestion, limited parking, pedestrian-unfriendly roads). ● Low digital visibility for halal tourism. ● Lack of inclusive facilities for disabled visitors.

Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Growing demand for urban creative tourism and halal tourism. ● Digital platforms enabling promotion through social media influencers and virtual tours. ● Government interest in strengthening creative economy clusters. ● Potential partnerships with universities and private investors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Competition from Batu City and Surabaya as more established destinations. ● Risk of overtourism in thematic villages causing environmental degradation. ● Economic downturns or pandemics reducing travel demand. ● Climate-related disruptions affecting outdoor tourism.

Discussion

The SWOT analysis not only summarized the current state of Malang City’s tourism sector but also served as the basis for developing actionable strategies. Leveraging the identified strengths and opportunities, the first strategic direction focuses on positioning Malang as a distinct urban destination through destination branding that highlights its thematic villages and culinary identity. Digital promotion, including influencer marketing and social media campaigns, can be utilized to amplify this branding and attract a younger, tech-savvy audience.

Strengths of Malang City Tourism from a Regional Development Perspective

From a regional development perspective, the strengths of Malang City’s tourism ecosystem represent more than a collection of attractions—they form a set of strategic assets that can be leveraged to drive inclusive growth, strengthen local identity, and catalyze socio-economic transformation. Tourism is widely recognized as a driver of regional development, particularly in medium-sized cities where industrial diversification and urban regeneration are priorities. Malang, with its distinctive cultural, gastronomic, and spatial characteristics, possesses several strengths that provide a solid foundation for repositioning the city from a transient stopover into a primary destination within East Java’s tourism corridor.

1. Unique Thematic Villages as Anchors of Creative Placemaking

One of Malang’s most remarkable strengths is its collection of thematic villages, which have become iconic symbols of the city’s creative economy. Kampung Warna-Warni Jodipan, Kampung Tridi, and Kampung Biru Arema are not merely tourist spots; they are living laboratories of community-led urban regeneration. These initiatives have transformed once-neglected neighborhoods into vibrant, colorful spaces that attract domestic and international visitors seeking immersive cultural experiences. From a regional development standpoint, these villages illustrate how bottom-up initiatives can generate social cohesion, enhance neighborhood pride, and stimulate micro-economies through tourism-related spending.

Creative placemaking has been identified as a powerful tool for revitalizing urban areas, and Malang’s villages exemplify this phenomenon. By integrating public art, heritage preservation, and local storytelling, they create a distinctive sense of place that differentiates Malang from neighboring cities like Batu, which focus more on theme parks and commercialized leisure experiences. This differentiation is crucial in avoiding direct competition and establishing Malang’s unique brand identity within the broader East Java tourism network. Moreover, the success of these villages demonstrates that tourism can be used as a mechanism for spatial justice—channeling resources and attention to peripheral neighborhoods and aligning with the goals of inclusive urban development.

2. Strong Culinary Identity and Gastronomic Potential

Another significant strength is Malang’s well-established culinary identity. The city is synonymous with culinary staples such as bakso Malang, rawon, cwie mie, and an abundance of street food offerings. Gastronomy tourism has gained recognition as an engine for regional economic development, as it stimulates local value chains, supports small producers, and celebrates intangible cultural heritage. In Malang, culinary culture is

not only a source of pride but also a strategic asset that can be curated into experiential tourism products.

From a development perspective, culinary tourism offers high potential for spillover benefits, particularly for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Food-based tourism stimulates demand for local agricultural produce, spices, and beverages, creating backward linkages that benefit rural communities in the Malang Regency hinterlands. It also provides opportunities for capacity building among food vendors, encouraging innovation in product packaging, hygiene standards, and digital marketing. By formalizing gastronomic trails, organizing culinary festivals, and integrating local food into destination branding, Malang can enhance visitor length of stay and spending, directly contributing to local income generation and employment creation.

3. Strategic Geographic Location and Connectivity

Malang's geographic position constitutes a critical comparative advantage. Located on the route connecting Surabaya, Batu, and the Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park, Malang is strategically positioned to capture visitor flows passing through the region. This locational strength allows the city to function as both a gateway and a hub, offering tourists the possibility of multi-destination itineraries. From a regional development lens, Malang's position can be leveraged to encourage more balanced tourism flows, reducing pressure on oversaturated destinations like Bromo while redistributing economic benefits across the East Java tourism corridor.

The city's connectivity is further enhanced by Abdul Rachman Saleh Airport, railway access from Surabaya, and expanding road networks, all of which make it relatively easy for domestic tourists to visit. Improving the efficiency of these transport nodes and integrating them with tourism infrastructure could transform Malang into a central node in East Java's tourism supply chain. This would not only increase visitation but also stimulate investment in hospitality, logistics, and supporting industries creating multiplier effects that benefit the broader regional economy.

4. Post-Pandemic Rebound and Market Momentum

Perhaps one of the most promising strengths is the post-pandemic rebound in tourist arrivals. Domestic visits surged from 0.5 million in 2021 to 5.9 million in 2022, and international arrivals quadrupled during the same period. These figures signify a strong latent demand for urban tourism experiences and a renewed confidence in Malang as a safe and attractive destination. From a regional planning perspective, this rebound provides a timely window of opportunity to implement strategic interventions while demand is rising, ensuring that growth is channeled in a sustainable direction.

Market momentum is particularly important because it signals to investors and policymakers that tourism development is a viable pathway for local economic revitalization. The increase in visitor numbers also justifies public investment in infrastructure upgrades, destination branding, and community training programs. If harnessed correctly, this growth trajectory can generate a virtuous cycle where improved facilities attract more visitors, who in turn contribute greater economic value, enabling further reinvestment in tourism and urban development projects.

5. Cultural Capital and Human Resources

Malang's status as a university city also constitutes an often-overlooked strength. The presence of a large student population, creative communities, and cultural organizations creates a fertile environment for developing innovative tourism products. Universities can serve as partners in research, talent development, and pilot projects for digital tourism applications or cultural programming. From a development standpoint, this human capital base is invaluable because it provides the skills and knowledge necessary to professionalize tourism services, design marketing campaigns, and measure tourism impacts in evidence-based ways.

Furthermore, Malang's residents have demonstrated a high degree of community readiness and willingness to participate in tourism initiatives. This social capital is a critical asset because sustainable tourism development depends not only on physical infrastructure but also on local buy-in. Communities that feel a sense of ownership over tourism are more likely to maintain cleanliness, preserve cultural heritage, and

collaborate with municipal authorities—thereby reducing governance costs and increasing the long-term resilience of the tourism sector.

When viewed collectively, these strengths position Malang as a city with considerable potential to become a model for integrated, inclusive urban tourism in Indonesia. Each strength—be it the thematic villages, culinary identity, geographic location, market momentum, or human capital—functions as a building block that can be combined into a holistic development strategy. The challenge for policymakers and planners lies in translating these assets into synergistic interventions that multiply their impact.

For instance, integrating thematic villages into a curated tourism circuit that includes culinary stops, cultural workshops, and digital storytelling could significantly enhance visitor experience and spending patterns. Similarly, leveraging Malang's geographic location to promote regional circuits that link Malang, Batu, and Bromo in a complementary—not competitive—manner would create a win-win scenario for the entire region. Importantly, these strategies must be framed within sustainable development principles, ensuring that growth does not compromise environmental integrity or exacerbate social inequalities.

Opportunities for Malang City Tourism from a Regional Development Perspective

While Malang City's strengths provide a robust foundation, its real competitive edge lies in its ability to seize emerging opportunities that align with global tourism trends, regional policy priorities, and local socio-economic aspirations. From a regional development perspective, opportunities represent the "open windows" through which Malang can channel investment, attract visitors, and trigger a virtuous cycle of growth and inclusion. Leveraging these opportunities requires vision and strategic coordination, but if properly harnessed, they can transform Malang from a transit city into a benchmark for sustainable urban tourism in Indonesia.

1. Rising Demand for Urban Creative Tourism

One of the most promising opportunities is the global surge in demand for creative and experiential tourism. Today's travelers increasingly seek participatory, immersive experiences rather than passive sightseeing. Malang's rich cultural capital—its thematic villages, heritage architecture, local crafts, and performing arts—places it in a strong position to meet this demand. Creative tourism is particularly valuable because it attracts higher-spending, longer-stay visitors who are motivated by meaningful interactions with local communities.

From a regional development standpoint, creative tourism contributes to urban revitalization by encouraging adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, stimulating public art initiatives, and creating new markets for creative industries. Cities that successfully develop creative tourism ecosystems often see spillover benefits in entrepreneurship, innovation, and social cohesion. For Malang, this means that investing in creative hubs, festivals, and community-based workshops can strengthen the local creative economy while simultaneously enhancing the city's tourism offering. Moreover, creative tourism encourages decentralization, allowing neighborhoods outside the traditional city center to benefit from visitor spending, thereby promoting balanced spatial development.

2. Growth of Halal Tourism and Inclusive Market Segments

Another major opportunity lies in the rising global demand for halal tourism. As the Muslim middle class expands in Indonesia and across Asia, there is increasing interest in destinations that provide halal-certified food, prayer facilities, and family-friendly experiences. Malang, with its strong cultural and religious heritage, is well-placed to develop halal tourism products that align with Islamic principles while maintaining inclusivity for all visitors.

From a development perspective, halal tourism can become a strategic tool for social equity, as it ensures that Muslim travelers—both domestic and international—feel welcome and catered to. Integrating halal standards into restaurants, hotels, and attractions also raises overall service quality and hygiene standards, benefiting all visitors. Furthermore, halal tourism development can create opportunities for local producers of halal-certified food, cosmetics, and fashion, thereby expanding value chains and generating employment.

At a policy level, developing Malang as a halal-friendly destination could align with East Java's ambition to position itself as a hub for the sharia economy, thus attracting investment and government support.

3. Digital Transformation and Smart Tourism Potential

The rapid expansion of digital technologies presents a unique opportunity for Malang to leapfrog into the era of smart tourism. Digital tools such as interactive maps, mobile apps, real-time crowd monitoring, and virtual tours can significantly enhance the visitor experience while improving city management. Smart tourism initiatives have proven effective in cities such as Copenhagen and Foz do Iguaçu, where technology integration improved mobility, safety, and destination competitiveness (Bussador et al., 2023).

For Malang, adopting a smart tourism framework would not only make it easier for tourists to navigate the city but also provide decision-makers with valuable data on visitor flows, peak periods, and satisfaction levels. These insights can inform infrastructure investment, crowd control measures, and marketing campaigns. Digital transformation also opens the door to influencer marketing, user-generated content campaigns, and virtual promotion, which are essential for attracting younger, tech-savvy travelers. From a regional development perspective, this opportunity is particularly significant because it positions Malang as an innovation-friendly city, potentially attracting startups, tech firms, and creative entrepreneurs who wish to participate in building its digital ecosystem.

4. Government Support and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Policy momentum represents another key opportunity. The Malang City Government, along with East Java provincial authorities, has expressed strong interest in strengthening the creative economy and developing tourism clusters as part of its economic diversification strategy. This political will provides a supportive environment for public-private partnerships, funding initiatives, and regulatory reforms that can accelerate tourism development.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration—between government, academia, private investors, and local communities—has been identified as a critical success factor in sustainable tourism development globally (Uğur, 2017). Malang's status as a university city provides a ready-made network of research institutions that can contribute expertise in planning, monitoring, and training. For example, universities can assist in designing capacity-building programs for local guides, conducting impact assessments, and developing innovative tourism products. Collaboration with private investors can also mobilize capital for infrastructure projects such as parking facilities, pedestrian zones, and cultural centers, while community participation ensures that development remains inclusive and socially legitimate.

5. Educational Tourism and Knowledge-Based Travel

Malang's identity as an educational hub offers a less-explored but highly promising opportunity in the field of educational tourism. The city hosts dozens of universities, colleges, and training centers, creating a natural market for study tours, academic conferences, and experiential learning programs. Educational tourism is a high-value segment because it often involves longer stays, group travel, and repeat visits. Moreover, it aligns with global trends toward "slow tourism," where travelers seek depth of experience and personal growth rather than rushed itineraries.

From a development perspective, educational tourism can generate synergies with Malang's research ecosystem, encouraging collaborations with international institutions and fostering knowledge exchange. It can also inspire local youth to engage with their cultural heritage and environment, strengthening civic pride and stewardship. Developing this segment would diversify Malang's tourism portfolio and reduce its vulnerability to seasonal fluctuations, as educational travel can be scheduled year-round.

6. Integration into Regional and National Tourism Circuits

Malang's strategic location creates opportunities for integration into wider regional and national tourism circuits. By collaborating with neighboring destinations such as Batu, Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park, and even Surabaya, Malang can position itself as part

of a comprehensive East Java tourism package. Such integration could encourage longer stays, as visitors would have more reasons to explore multiple destinations within a single trip.

From a regional planning perspective, integrated circuits support more balanced tourism flows, reducing congestion in overburdened areas while spreading economic benefits across multiple jurisdictions. Malang's role could be that of a cultural and educational "anchor," complementing Batu's leisure orientation and Bromo's eco-tourism appeal. This collaborative approach aligns with sustainable development principles, as it minimizes destructive competition and fosters collective branding of East Java as a diverse tourism region.

Taken together, these opportunities present a compelling case for positioning tourism as a cornerstone of Malang's development strategy. Capitalizing on them would not only increase visitor numbers but also generate wide-ranging socio-economic benefits, from job creation and MSME growth to improved infrastructure and enhanced cultural vitality. Importantly, these opportunities are mutually reinforcing: digital transformation amplifies branding efforts, creative and halal tourism diversify the product portfolio, and educational tourism deepens community engagement.

For policymakers, the key challenge lies in sequencing and prioritizing interventions so that opportunities are captured in a coherent and sustainable way. Strategic planning must ensure that investment in infrastructure is synchronized with branding campaigns, community training, and digital adoption. Public policy should also anticipate potential risks—such as overtourism, gentrification, and social exclusion—to ensure that growth remains equitable. If executed effectively, Malang can transform these opportunities into a blueprint for mid-sized cities across Indonesia seeking to balance economic development with cultural and environmental sustainability.

By capitalizing on its strengths, Malang has the opportunity to redefine itself as a leading mid-sized urban destination—one that not only attracts tourists but also uplifts local communities, fosters inter-sectoral collaboration, and contributes to East Java's broader socio-economic transformation. These strengths thus form the backbone of a place-based development approach that aligns tourism with the city's long-term vision for economic diversification, cultural preservation, and inclusive prosperity.

Previous research has shown that effective destination branding strategies must be holistic, integrating elements of local culture, community participation, and smart use of digital technology. The "integrated city" concept in urban tourism development, applied in various destinations, emphasizes the importance of combining creative elements, gastronomy, and local experiences as key differentiators from similar destinations. This model has proven effective in enhancing city competitiveness by aligning tourism planning with cultural identity and infrastructure readiness (Ariani, 2018). Additionally, halal tourism approaches are increasingly being adopted in many cities as a form of inclusivity and market differentiation. The development of sustainable, environmentally conscious halal infrastructure is crucial to attract Muslim travelers while maintaining principles of social equity and conservation (Chantarungsri & Alam, 2025).

In terms of digital promotion, studies in several Indonesian tourist villages highlight that social media and integrated communication strategies play a central role in boosting destination visibility and image. Consistent promotion through social media, public relations, and collaboration with local actors has been proven to increase visitation and strengthen community engagement (Dahana et al., 2023). Furthermore, cross-sector integration—between tourism industry actors and city policymakers—is a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable tourism development. Integrated development models implemented in cities like Liptov and Cusco demonstrate that successful destination promotion not only depends on branding narratives, but also on the alignment of infrastructure, spatial planning, and clearly defined stakeholder roles (Uğur, 2017; Esenarro et al., 2024).

Malang's destination branding strategy must draw from these approaches, particularly by highlighting thematic uniqueness such as its colorful villages, rich local culinary heritage, and authentic cultural narratives. Malang's competitive advantage must also be aligned with its

adaptability to emerging tourism trends like digital nomadism, slow tourism, and community-based experiences. In this context, the use of influencers and user-generated content can expand the city's exposure to younger markets heavily influenced by digital media.

Threats to Malang City Tourism from a Regional Development Perspective

While Malang City possesses substantial strengths and promising opportunities, its tourism sector faces a series of external threats that could undermine growth and jeopardize long-term sustainability if not managed proactively. From a regional development standpoint, threats are not merely challenges to be mitigated; they are structural risks that require forward-looking policies and contingency planning. Identifying and addressing these threats is critical to building a resilient tourism economy that supports Malang's broader development agenda.

1. Intense Competition from Neighboring Destinations

Perhaps the most immediate threat comes from the strong competition posed by neighboring destinations such as Batu City and Surabaya. Batu has positioned itself as a premier leisure capital, with well-developed theme parks, resorts, and family-oriented attractions that capture a large share of East Java's tourist traffic. Surabaya, as a major metropolitan hub, attracts business travelers and offers sophisticated urban amenities that Malang cannot yet match.

From a regional development lens, this competitive landscape risks locking Malang into a subordinate role as a mere "gateway" or overnight stop rather than a primary destination. If visitors continue to spend the majority of their time and money in Batu or Surabaya, Malang's tourism economy will generate limited multiplier effects for local businesses. Over time, this dynamic could reinforce economic disparities between neighboring cities, leaving Malang dependent on spillover traffic instead of developing its own distinct tourism proposition.

2. Risk of Overtourism and Environmental Degradation

Another significant threat is the potential for overtourism, particularly in popular thematic villages such as Jodipan and Tridi. These areas have finite carrying capacities, and unregulated visitor flows can quickly lead to overcrowding, infrastructure strain, and deterioration of the very aesthetic qualities that attract tourists in the first place. Without effective visitor management systems, the growth in tourism numbers could undermine community well-being, generate resident backlash, and trigger a cycle of declining destination quality.

From a sustainability perspective, overtourism is a serious risk because it erodes social license for tourism development. Communities that feel overwhelmed by tourism impacts may resist further initiatives, creating friction between local residents and policymakers. Environmental degradation—such as waste accumulation, water pollution, and damage to painted village facades—can also tarnish Malang's image, leading to negative word-of-mouth and reduced visitor satisfaction. In the long term, this threatens the city's ability to maintain a competitive and resilient tourism offering.

3. Economic Volatility and Demand Shocks

Malang's tourism sector remains highly vulnerable to macroeconomic fluctuations and external shocks, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when visitor numbers collapsed almost overnight. Domestic tourism demand is closely tied to household disposable income, making it sensitive to inflation, fuel prices, and employment trends. Economic downturns can rapidly reduce leisure spending, leading to lower occupancy rates, reduced revenues for local businesses, and job losses in the hospitality sector.

From a regional development standpoint, this vulnerability underscores the importance of economic diversification and risk management strategies. Without building financial resilience among tourism operators—especially micro and small enterprises—Malang risks experiencing cyclical crises that disrupt livelihoods and slow economic recovery. Furthermore, heavy reliance on domestic tourists means that Malang may miss out on the stabilizing effect of international visitor markets, which often follow different seasonal patterns and spending behaviors.

4. Climate Change and Natural Hazards

Climate-related disruptions present a growing long-term threat to Malang's tourism development. The city is susceptible to extreme rainfall events, floods, and landslides, which can damage infrastructure, limit accessibility, and deter visitors during peak holiday periods. Rising temperatures may also affect outdoor tourism comfort levels, reducing the attractiveness of open-air attractions such as thematic villages and heritage walks.

From a regional planning perspective, climate risks have significant implications for infrastructure investment and disaster preparedness. Failing to integrate climate adaptation measures—such as flood-resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and green infrastructure solutions—could result in costly damages and reputational harm. Destinations that are perceived as unsafe or frequently disrupted by natural hazards may experience declining competitiveness, as travelers increasingly favor places with reliable infrastructure and safety assurances.

5. Social Inequality and Risk of Gentrification

Tourism-driven urban development can inadvertently exacerbate social inequality if benefits are not equitably distributed. There is a risk that rising land values and commercialization of tourism neighborhoods could displace lower-income residents or erode local cultural authenticity. Gentrification of thematic villages, for instance, may lead to the replacement of locally owned warungs with homogenized cafes and souvenir shops catering to tourists, reducing the community's direct participation in the tourism economy.

From a development perspective, this is a significant threat because it undermines the very foundation of community-based tourism, which relies on local buy-in and participation. If tourism is perceived as benefiting only external investors or a narrow elite, it may generate resentment and resistance, ultimately destabilizing social cohesion. Furthermore, cultural commodification risks diluting the authenticity of Malang's identity, making its tourism offering less distinctive over time.

6. Governance and Policy Uncertainty

Another external threat is the potential for inconsistent policies, shifting regulations, or bureaucratic delays that disrupt tourism planning and investment. Changes in local government leadership or policy priorities can lead to discontinuity in tourism programs, causing uncertainty for private investors and discouraging long-term commitments. Inconsistent enforcement of zoning regulations or environmental protections can also result in haphazard development that degrades urban aesthetics and reduces destination quality.

From a regional governance perspective, policy uncertainty threatens to stall momentum just as Malang is attempting to reposition itself as a competitive urban destination. Long-term tourism strategies require stability and cross-administration commitment to ensure that infrastructure investments, branding campaigns, and community empowerment programs are sustained over multiple political cycles.

7. Global Market Dynamics and Competitive Pressures

Finally, Malang faces the challenge of keeping pace with global tourism trends and technological innovations. Competing destinations are investing heavily in smart city infrastructure, sustainable tourism certifications, and integrated marketing campaigns. If Malang fails to innovate, it risks falling behind in the global competition for visitors, investors, and talent.

From a development standpoint, this competitive pressure highlights the need for continuous improvement, benchmarking, and adoption of global best practices. Without sustained investment in innovation and human capital, Malang could lose relevance as travelers increasingly seek destinations that offer seamless digital experiences, sustainability credentials, and high service standards.

Taken together, these threats underscore the importance of resilience-oriented planning for Malang's tourism sector. They call for proactive measures to manage competition, protect cultural and environmental assets, diversify visitor markets, and integrate disaster risk reduction into infrastructure planning. From a regional development perspective, threat

management should not be seen as a defensive exercise but as an opportunity to future-proof Malang's tourism economy.

For example, by differentiating its product offering from Batu and Surabaya, Malang can turn competitive pressure into an impetus for innovation. By adopting visitor management systems and climate adaptation strategies, it can transform overtourism and environmental risks into models of sustainable practice that enhance its international reputation. Strengthening governance and institutional capacity can mitigate policy uncertainty and attract long-term private investment.

Ultimately, the ability to anticipate and respond to these threats will determine whether Malang can achieve its vision of becoming a primary destination that drives inclusive growth and cultural vitality in East Java. Threat management must therefore be embedded into the city's tourism master plan as a central component of its regional development strategy.

At the same time, Malang must address external threats by differentiating its tourism profile from neighboring Batu City and the Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. Rather than relying solely on spillover traffic, Malang can emphasize creative and educational tourism, offering experiences that cannot be found elsewhere. This approach not only strengthens the city's competitive edge but also ensures that visitor flows are distributed more evenly, reducing the risk of dependency on a single market segment.

Research has consistently shown that destination differentiation is a critical factor in maintaining long-term competitiveness, particularly in regions where tourism clusters are geographically concentrated. Cities located near iconic natural destinations often risk being overshadowed unless they establish a clear and unique identity. In several case studies, secondary cities that positioned themselves around creative, cultural, and educational tourism were able to successfully attract niche segments of visitors, often with higher spending and longer stays. These cities focused on immersive, participatory experiences—such as arts residencies, heritage workshops, and science-based tourism—which added distinct value beyond nature-based attractions (González et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies in European and Southeast Asian contexts have demonstrated that relying heavily on spillover traffic from better-known destinations leads to vulnerability to fluctuations in tourist flows, especially during crises or seasonal downturns. In contrast, destinations that invested in unique thematic offerings and developed place-based storytelling were better positioned to build resilient visitor economies (Zarrilli & Britton, 2020). Educational tourism, in particular, is gaining relevance as a sub-sector, with universities, research centers, and creative hubs becoming powerful magnets for younger and international audiences seeking meaningful travel (Kastenholz et al., 2018).

For Malang, differentiation through creative and educational tourism not only helps avoid direct competition with Batu City's leisure orientation or the eco-tourism appeal of Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park but also encourages broader spatial distribution of tourist flows across urban neighborhoods. This aligns with current best practices in sustainable urban tourism, which emphasize decentralizing attractions to avoid congestion and promote local economic inclusion (Esenarro et al., 2024). By embracing this approach, Malang can reinforce its brand identity while building a more balanced and future-proof tourism ecosystem.

Weaknesses of Malang City Tourism from a Regional Development Perspective

While Malang City possesses significant strengths that provide a solid foundation for tourism-led development, several weaknesses hinder its ability to fully realize this potential. From a regional development perspective, these weaknesses are not merely operational issues; they represent structural and systemic barriers that constrain Malang's ability to position itself as a leading urban destination. Addressing them is critical not only for enhancing the visitor experience but also for ensuring that tourism contributes equitably and sustainably to local economic transformation.

1. Fragmented Destination Branding and Lack of Integrated Narrative

Perhaps the most pressing weakness is the absence of a unified and compelling brand narrative that can position Malang competitively within East Java's tourism landscape. Current promotional efforts are fragmented, often focusing on individual attractions or

isolated events rather than presenting Malang as a holistic experience. For instance, thematic villages are promoted independently, with little connection to the city's rich culinary culture or heritage assets. This lack of integration creates a disjointed visitor journey and weakens the city's overall market positioning.

From a regional development standpoint, fragmented branding undermines Malang's ability to attract high-value tourists, such as international visitors or niche segments seeking curated experiences. Without a strong city-wide narrative, Malang risks being perceived as a "stopover city" where visitors spend minimal time and money before moving on to Batu or Bromo. This perception limits the multiplier effects of tourism on the local economy, as short stays reduce demand for accommodation, transport services, and creative economy products.

2. Infrastructure Bottlenecks and Mobility Constraints

Another critical weakness lies in Malang's infrastructure, particularly in terms of transport connectivity, mobility, and public space readiness. Traffic congestion is a recurring problem, especially on weekends and holidays, when visitor numbers peak. Narrow streets in residential areas leading to thematic villages create bottlenecks that not only inconvenience visitors but also disrupt daily life for residents. Parking shortages exacerbate these challenges, forcing tourists to park in unauthorized areas and increasing friction with local communities.

Pedestrian infrastructure is also underdeveloped, with many areas lacking sidewalks or featuring uneven, poorly lit walkways that discourage walking. This reduces the accessibility of attractions and diminishes the potential for tourists to explore the city on foot—an important factor in extending length of stay and increasing spending in local businesses. From a regional development perspective, poor infrastructure constrains tourism's capacity to act as a driver of urban regeneration. Instead of catalyzing public space improvements and mobility upgrades, tourism risks becoming a source of congestion and urban stress, creating tension between visitors and residents.

3. Limited Inclusivity and Accessibility for Diverse Visitors

Malang also faces weaknesses related to inclusivity and universal accessibility. Facilities for travelers with disabilities remain limited, with few ramps, tactile paving, or adapted public restrooms in key tourism areas. This lack of inclusive design not only excludes an important segment of potential visitors but also runs counter to the principles of socially equitable development. In an era where sustainable and inclusive tourism is increasingly prioritized by policymakers and international organizations, Malang's failure to address these gaps risks marginalizing vulnerable groups and weakening its competitiveness in the long term.

From a development perspective, inclusivity is more than a moral imperative—it is a practical necessity for maximizing tourism's contribution to local welfare. By excluding people with disabilities or elderly travelers, Malang forgoes potential revenue streams and misses an opportunity to position itself as a progressive, accessible city aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities).

4. Weak Digital Presence and Underutilization of Smart Tourism Tools

In the digital age, a robust online presence is essential for destination competitiveness. Malang's current digital footprint is relatively weak, with limited official websites, inconsistent social media engagement, and insufficient integration of digital tools such as virtual tours, interactive maps, or real-time event calendars. This is particularly problematic given the preferences of millennial and Gen Z travelers, who rely heavily on digital platforms for trip planning and decision-making.

From a regional development standpoint, a weak digital presence limits Malang's ability to capture demand from global markets and to communicate effectively with potential investors, partners, and visitors. The absence of smart tourism applications also means that visitor flows are not monitored in real time, which complicates crowd management and reduces the city's ability to respond to overtourism risks. In contrast, cities that have adopted smart tourism technologies—such as real-time traffic monitoring, e-ticketing systems, and data-driven marketing—are better positioned to enhance visitor experience and optimize economic impact.

5. Governance and Coordination Gaps

Another underlying weakness is the limited coordination among key stakeholders—government agencies, private sector actors, universities, and local communities. While there are isolated initiatives to promote tourism, these efforts often operate in silos without a clear master plan or shared vision. This governance gap leads to duplication of efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and missed opportunities for synergistic partnerships.

From a regional planning perspective, governance coherence is essential for achieving tourism’s potential as a driver of balanced growth. Without institutional mechanisms to coordinate activities, Malang risks perpetuating a fragmented approach that fails to address structural challenges holistically. The absence of a comprehensive tourism roadmap also hinders the ability to attract large-scale investments, as potential investors seek clarity on long-term city plans before committing capital.

6. Vulnerability of the Tourism Economy

Finally, Malang’s tourism economy remains vulnerable to external shocks, such as pandemics, economic downturns, or natural disasters. The city’s heavy reliance on domestic leisure travelers means that its visitor base is sensitive to fluctuations in household income and mobility restrictions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malang experienced a dramatic collapse in arrivals, exposing the fragility of its tourism sector and its limited diversification across visitor segments.

From a development lens, this vulnerability underscores the need for risk management and contingency planning as part of tourism strategy. Without such measures, the city risks repeating cycles of boom and bust that destabilize local livelihoods and undermine public confidence in tourism as a sustainable pathway for growth.

Taken together, these weaknesses reveal a city at a crossroads. Malang possesses the raw materials for a vibrant, inclusive tourism economy, but structural and systemic issues limit its ability to capitalize on them. From a regional development perspective, the implications are clear: without addressing branding fragmentation, infrastructure deficits, inclusivity gaps, and governance challenges, tourism risks becoming a missed opportunity rather than a catalyst for transformation.

The weaknesses outlined above call for an integrated approach to tourism planning—one that aligns physical infrastructure upgrades with digital innovation, community empowerment, and coherent branding. Regional planners and policymakers must view tourism not as an isolated sector but as an engine that can drive investment in roads, public spaces, ICT infrastructure, and human capital. Addressing these weaknesses is not simply a matter of improving visitor satisfaction; it is about positioning Malang as a resilient, competitive city that leverages tourism as a pillar of its long-term development strategy.

The analysis also revealed that infrastructure and accessibility remain critical weaknesses. To turn these weaknesses into opportunities, multi-stakeholder projects should be developed to improve public transportation, signage, and pedestrian-friendly spaces. The integration of smart tourism applications could provide visitors with real-time information about attractions, traffic, and events, creating a more seamless and enjoyable experience.

Urban tourism development is increasingly tied to the readiness of cities to provide accessible, inclusive, and technologically integrated infrastructure. Research has shown that cities that fail to address accessibility such as inadequate signage, poor pedestrian infrastructure, and limited transport connectivity face challenges in attracting and retaining tourists, particularly international visitors and those with special mobility needs. A study of Naples emphasized the importance of urban accessibility in enhancing the comfort and inclusiveness of tourist spaces, directly influencing visitors’ overall experience and perception of the destination (Rocca, 2021).

The integration of smart tourism applications—ranging from real-time traffic updates to digital maps and personalized recommendations—has been shown to significantly enhance visitor satisfaction, especially in complex urban environments. In the case of Yerevan, the adoption of a Comprehensive Smart Tourism and Infrastructure Model demonstrated how combining transport, engineering, and tourism data can generate seamless and sustainable tourist experiences (Orbelyan, 2024). Similarly, studies from Foz do Iguacu and Copenhagen

show that aligning smart city initiatives with tourism planning boosts urban competitiveness by improving mobility, safety, and digital connectivity across the visitor journey (Bussador et al., 2023); (SITCON, 2022).

The literature also emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder governance in driving infrastructure improvements. The success of smart tourism cities is often linked to effective collaboration between local government, private sector actors, and civil society, especially in ensuring that public investments in digital tools are matched with physical infrastructure upgrades. Without such alignment, cities risk creating fragmented experiences that undermine tourism value chains (Cavalheiro & Joia, 2021)

Moreover, the threat of overtourism — particularly in popular thematic villages — necessitates proactive management. Visitor flow systems and alternative routes can help prevent overcrowding and minimize negative environmental and social impacts. These measures will protect the very assets that make Malang attractive, ensuring long-term sustainability. The growing popularity of thematic villages in Malang underscores the need for proactive strategies to prevent overtourism and protect the city's cultural and environmental assets. Research has shown that sustainable visitor management (VM) requires a shift from reactive, top-down approaches to inclusive planning that involves local communities, destination organizations, and government stakeholders. A participatory VM framework ensures that interventions are not only contextually appropriate but also socially accepted, enabling long-term sustainability and reducing community resistance to tourism growth (Høegh-Guldberg & Seeler, 2021). In parallel, the adoption of smart tourism technologies—such as real-time crowd monitoring, visitor scheduling systems, and digital kiosks—has proven effective in dispersing tourist flows, mitigating congestion, and enhancing both visitor experience and local quality of life (Kalaitzakis et al., 2022).

Urban destinations that successfully integrate smart solutions with infrastructure improvements—like informative signage and pedestrian management—are better positioned to manage visitor carrying capacity and avoid degradation of their key attractions (Zubiaga et al., 2019). Moreover, building capacity among local tourism managers is essential. Studies in Asian heritage cities reveal that overcoming overtourism requires interdisciplinary skills, including urban planning, tourism management, and community development, all guided by a shared vision for sustainable growth (Jamieson & Jamieson, 2019). Drawing from these insights, Malang should implement visitor flow systems and spatial dispersion strategies while investing in digital infrastructure and community engagement to ensure that tourism enhances, rather than undermines, the city's long-term resilience.

Finally, community engagement emerged as a cross-cutting priority. Building the capacity of local residents to become co-creators of tourism products is essential to ensure that economic benefits are equitably distributed. Training programs, micro-business development initiatives, and local guide certification can empower communities, foster a sense of ownership, and increase their participation in tourism governance. Together, these strategies form a coherent roadmap for transforming Malang into a competitive and sustainable tourism destination.

4. Conclusion

This study provides comprehensive insights into the current state and future potential of tourism development in Malang City. Using a qualitative descriptive design, supported by interviews, FGDs, and document analysis, the research revealed a complex but promising picture of Malang's tourism ecosystem. The findings confirm that Malang possesses distinctive strengths in its thematic villages, culinary identity, and strategic location within East Java's tourism corridor. These assets collectively form a strong foundation for creating a differentiated tourism narrative that could elevate Malang from its current position as a transit city to a primary destination. The post-pandemic rebound in tourist arrivals further demonstrates growing market demand and highlights the timeliness of efforts to strengthen Malang's tourism positioning. At the same time, structural and infrastructural challenges remain significant barriers. Traffic congestion, limited parking, pedestrian-unfriendly streets, and insufficient inclusive facilities reduce visitor satisfaction and limit their length of stay. The lack of integrated branding and coordination among stakeholders weakens Malang's

competitiveness, particularly in comparison with neighboring Batu City. Another key finding is the readiness and enthusiasm of local communities to engage in tourism activities. Residents of thematic villages and MSME actors expressed willingness to collaborate in destination development, provided they receive adequate training and institutional support. This finding underscores the critical role of community empowerment in ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably distributed and sustainable in the long term.

The thematic analysis was synthesized into a SWOT framework, which clarified Malang's internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats. This synthesis enables a clearer understanding of the city's strategic position and serves as an evidence-based foundation for formulating holistic, multi-level tourism strategies. Overall, this research contributes to the literature on urban tourism development by presenting a case study of a mid-sized Indonesian city striving to redefine its tourism identity. The findings highlight the importance of integrating attraction development, infrastructure enhancement, digital promotion, and community empowerment into a coherent strategy that balances economic growth with cultural and environmental sustainability.

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