Strategy to Increase Tourists at Merdeka Beach, Serdang Bedagai, North Sumatra-Indonesia

Budi Syahputra[1], Slamet Widodo[2]
[12]Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
Correspondent: widodoprofesional@gmail.com[2]

ABSTRACT : Merdeka Beach in Serdang Bedagai has great potential as a leading tourist destination, but its development still faces challenges, especially in providing infrastructure and facilities that are in accordance with local characteristics and tourist needs. In this context, this study aims to identify and analyze the need for infrastructure and facilities that can increase the number of tourists at Merdeka Beach, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of collaboration between the government, local communities, and the private sector in developing this destination sustainably. This study uses a qualitative approach that allows for in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of managers and tourists, with data collection techniques including observation, interviews, and documentation, and supported by literature studies. The results of the study indicate that although there have been significant efforts to improve infrastructure and facilities, there are still gaps, especially in terms of accessibility and destination promotion. Collaboration between related parties has had a positive impact, but strengthening is still needed, especially in terms of marketing strategies and the development of more complete facilities to meet tourist expectations. This study contributes to the understanding of the importance of synergy between various parties in managing new tourist destinations in rural areas, and emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and environmental aspects in tourism development.

Keywords: Merdeka Beach, Infrastructure, Facilities, Collaboration, Tourism Development.

INTRODUCTION

Effectively developing tourist attractions requires special attention to the provision of infrastructure and facilities that are in accordance with the characteristics and needs of a particular tourist destination. In the context of Merdeka Beach in Serdang Bedagai, infrastructure and facilities must be adjusted to local conditions and visitor aspirations. As stated by Pine and Gilmore (2018), modern tourists seek unique and authentic experiences, so the facilities provided at Merdeka Beach must be able to create memorable and authentic experiences.

Merdeka Beach, as a newly developing tourist destination, has great potential to become a major attraction in the Serdang Bedagai area. However, its development efforts still face various challenges, especially in the provision of infrastructure and facilities that support the tourist attraction. For example, road access to Merdeka Beach still needs to be improved in quality so that it is easier for tourists to reach. In addition, supporting facilities such as parking areas, information centers, and health services also need to be improved to support visitor comfort. This is in accordance with the view of Stephen J. Page (2017), who stated that "accessibility and quality of infrastructure greatly influence tourists' decisions to visit a destination."

One important aspect in the development of Merdeka Beach is the synergy between the local government, local communities, and the private sector. The management of this tourist destination is carried out by the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) of Bagan Kuala Village, which collaborates with various parties, including the local government and the private sector through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program. This collaboration is important to ensure that the development of Merdeka Beach can run sustainably and provide economic, social, and environmental benefits. Hall (2020) emphasized the importance of a holistic approach in managing tourist destinations that integrates economic, social, and environmental aspects. Pokdarwis also collaborates with state and private universities in North Sumatra and other social institutions (Widodo, S. 2020).

However, despite various efforts, there are still gaps in the development of Merdeka Beach, especially related to the lack of in-depth research on the specific infrastructure needs that support the tourist attractions on this beach. Previous studies such as those conducted by Buhalis and Amaranggana (2016) discussed more about the development of tourist destinations in a global context, while local contexts such as Merdeka Beach still receive less attention.

This study aims to identify and analyze the infrastructure and facility needs that support the increase in the number of tourists at Merdeka Beach, Serdang Bedagai. In addition, this study also aims to evaluate the effectiveness of collaboration between the government, local communities, and the private sector in developing Merdeka Beach as a sustainable tourist destination. Previous relevant studies, such as those conducted by Pine and Gilmore (2018), examined the importance of unique tourism experiences in attracting tourists. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2016) also highlighted the importance of adopting technology in managing tourist destinations to increase their attractiveness. However, these studies focused more on tourist destinations that had already developed or were located in urban areas. This study contributes by focusing on the local context, namely Merdeka Beach, which is a new tourist destination in a rural area. This study also adds a dimension of collaboration between various parties in developing tourist destinations, which has not been widely discussed in previous studies.

Tourism Development and Infrastructure

Tourism development cannot be separated from the important role of adequate facilities and infrastructure. Frischmann (2015) stated that infrastructure is an essential social and physical framework to facilitate human social and economic activities. Furthermore, Hall (2020) added that good tourism infrastructure not only increases accessibility but also influences tourists' perceptions of destination quality. In addition, Pearce (2019) stated that the existence of supporting facilities

such as transportation, accommodation, and recreational facilities can increase the attractiveness of tourists to a destination.

Tourism Marketing Strategies

Marketing strategies are an effective way to increase tourist visits. Kotler and Armstrong (2016) identified that the marketing mix consists of several key elements, namely product, price, place, and promotion (4P). This marketing mix is used by the managers of Merdeka Beach to offer the various unique features of the beach. Baker (2018) stated that an effective tourism destination marketing strategy must pay attention to market preferences and appropriate segmentation.

1. Product : The products offered include tour packages, cottages, mangrove crab cultivation, and halls for entertainment stages (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016).
2. Price : The relatively cheap entrance ticket price is one of the attractions for tourists (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). In the context of pricing strategy, Kotler et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of analyzing the value perceived by tourists to set competitive prices.
3. Place : Strategic location that is easily accessible is a determining factor in the success of a tourist destination (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Buhalis (2020) added that digital connectivity and transportation infrastructure also play an important role in attracting tourists.
4. Promotion : Promotions carried out directly and through social media can increase tourist awareness of the destination (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). According to Gursoy and Chi (2018), effective promotions must include a strong narrative and user engagement through online reviews and social media.

Tourist Attractions

John Urry (2016) stated that tourist attractions are choices to move and take time away from daily routines. Page (2017) identified factors that contribute to tourist attractions, including the uniqueness of resources, the experiences offered, and accessibility to the destination. Butler (2018) also added that tourist attractions can develop and change over time. In addition, Prayag and Hosany (2020) argue that positive emotional experiences during a visit can increase tourist loyalty to a destination.

Management and Collaboration

Pantai Merdeka was developed through synergy and collaboration with various parties, including local governments, the private sector, and social community institutions. This collaboration aims to build adequate infrastructure and improve the competence of tourism managers (Widodo, 2020). Cohen and Cohen (2019) emphasize that effective collaboration between various stakeholders can encourage innovation in destination management and strengthen tourism competitiveness. In addition, the involvement of local communities in tourism management is also a crucial factor in the success of destination development (Susanti et al., 2020).

Challenges in Tourism Development

Some of the challenges faced in the development of Merdeka Beach include the lack of information media to introduce tourist attractions, low managerial competence, and incomplete facilities. To

overcome this, efforts to increase the capacity of managers and develop better tourism facilities are needed (Makbul, 2021; Widodo et al., 2023). According to Ritchie and Crouch (2021), challenges in tourism development also include market uncertainty and changes in tourist preferences, which require dynamic strategy adaptation.

METHODS

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2017), a qualitative approach is a research method used to explore and understand the meaning that comes from social or humanitarian problems. This approach was chosen because the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of managers and tourists at Merdeka Beach. A qualitative approach allows researchers to gain in-depth insight into how the actors involved interpret the actions, situations, or events that occur (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In addition, this approach is suitable for understanding local contexts and complex social interactions that may not be expressed through quantitative methods.

2. Data Collection Techniques

The data collection process in this study aims to obtain good and accurate data and information from the objects studied so that the truth of the information obtained can be accounted for. The data collection technique used in this study is triangulation, which combines various data collection techniques and existing data sources (Fatimah et al., 2020). By using triangulation, researchers can validate data obtained from various sources and techniques, thereby increasing the accuracy and credibility of the research results.

a. Primary Data Collection Techniques

Primary data in this study were obtained directly from the field and categorized into three main parts:

1. This data collection technique is carried out through direct or indirect observation of activities that occur in the field (Makbul, 2021). Researchers observe the interactions between tourists and managers of Merdeka Beach as well as observations of the facilities and infrastructure available at the research location. This observation helps researchers to get a real picture of the existing situation and conditions.
2. An interview is a meeting between two or more people to exchange information and ideas through questions and answers so that meaning can be built on a particular topic (Irsyadi et al., 2020). Interviews in this study were conducted with managers and managers of Merdeka Beach tourism and visiting tourists. This technique is used to explore data related to promotional strategies, challenges faced, and tourist perceptions of this tourist destination. The interviews conducted were semi-structured, allowing researchers to obtain in-depth but still focused answers.

3. Documentation is the recording of events that have occurred. The documents used can be in the form of writing, pictures, or monumental works of a person (Fathonah & Ayuni, 2022). Researchers use documentation in the form of writing, such as annual reports, promotional materials, and other documents relevant to the management of Merdeka Beach. This documentation is used to complement the data obtained from observations and interviews, as well as to understand the historical context and development of tourist destinations.

b. Secondary Data Collection Techniques

Secondary data in this study were obtained indirectly through intermediary media. Researchers chose to use literature study as a secondary data collection technique. Literature study is a data collection technique by reviewing books, literature, notes, and various reports related to the problem to be solved (Jannah & Putro, 2021). This technique helps in providing context and theoretical basis that supports this research. Researchers conducted a literature review of relevant theories regarding tourism marketing strategies, tourism destination management, and challenges faced in tourism development.

3. Data Analysis

After the data was collected, the next step was to analyze the data obtained. Data analysis in this study was carried out through several stages:

a. The first step in data analysis is to reduce the data obtained by selecting relevant data, grouping data based on emerging themes, and compiling data in a simpler form to facilitate analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018).

b. After the data has been reduced, the data is then presented in the form of narrative text, tables, or graphs that make it easier for researchers to identify the main patterns or themes that emerge from the data (Creswell, 2017).

The last stage is drawing conclusions and verification. At this stage, the researcher evaluates the findings obtained from the data analysis and draws conclusions that are in accordance with the research objectives. The verification process is carried out to ensure that the conclusions drawn are supported by valid data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The result and discussion section of this research focuses on the exploration of tourism development at Pantai Merdeka through the lens of the 3A concept: Attraction, Amenities, and Accessibility. This analysis not only provides insight into the current state of tourism at Pantai Merdeka but also compares it with previous research and identifies challenges encountered during the study.

1. Attractions

Discussion: Tourist attractions are critical in drawing visitors to a destination. Pantai Merdeka

offers unique cultural and natural attractions such as the Kite Festival, traditional Malay dances, and the Malay Telangkai Festival. These attractions have the potential to enhance the cultural value and appeal of the destination.

Comparison with Previous Research: Similar studies, such as those by Purnamasari et al. (2021), have shown that local cultural events significantly increase tourist engagement and satisfaction. However, compared to the established tourist sites, Pantai Merdeka's attractions are still in the development stage and require more promotion and integration into the broader tourism circuit.

Challenges: The primary challenge is the limited awareness of these cultural events outside the local community. The absence of a robust marketing strategy targeting a broader audience has hindered the full potential of these attractions from being realized.

2. Amenities

Discussion: Amenities play a vital role in ensuring a comfortable and enjoyable stay for tourists. At Pantai Merdeka, there has been significant improvement in facilities, including restrooms, places of worship, and SME kiosks. These enhancements have been driven by collaboration with various stakeholders, including local government and private enterprises.

Comparison with Previous Research: In line with studies by Novitasari & Hidayat (2020), which emphasize the importance of amenities in tourist satisfaction, Pantai Merdeka has made considerable progress. However, compared to more established tourist destinations, the facilities at Pantai Merdeka are still relatively basic and may not meet the expectations of more discerning tourists.

Challenges: One of the main challenges is the ongoing need for maintenance and further development of facilities to match the increasing number of visitors. Additionally, securing continuous funding and support from stakeholders remains a persistent issue.

3. Accessibility

Discussion: Accessibility is essential for the development of tourism. The improvement of road infrastructure leading to Pantai Merdeka has made the destination more accessible, thereby increasing the number of visitors. The role of the local government in supporting this development has been crucial.

Comparison with Previous Research: This finding is consistent with research by Supriyadi (2019), which highlights the positive correlation between improved accessibility and increased tourist numbers. However, compared to destinations with diverse transportation options, Pantai Merdeka's reliance on road access alone limits its accessibility, especially for tourists coming from outside the region.

Challenges: The primary challenge lies in diversifying the modes of transportation available to tourists. Additionally, there is a need to improve public transportation options and connectivity with other tourist sites to create a more comprehensive tourism network.

Marketing Strategy and 4Ps Application

Discussion: The marketing strategy at Pantai Merdeka has focused on affordability and sustainability, utilizing the marketing mix (4Ps) framework:

1. **Price**: The low-cost entrance fees and free facilities align with the goal of making the destination accessible to a broad audience.

2. **Product**: The unique offering of cultural events and natural beauty, though still underdeveloped, provides a competitive advantage.

3. **Place**: The remote location, while adding to the appeal for some, may also be a deterrent for others due to accessibility challenges.

4. **Promotion**: Recent efforts to promote the destination through social media are a positive step, but more aggressive and targeted marketing is needed to attract a wider audience.

Comparison with Previous Research: According to research by Setyowati & Hartono (2022), effective use of the 4Ps in tourism marketing has been shown to significantly enhance destination appeal. Pantai Merdeka's strategy is on the right track but requires further refinement and expansion to reach its full potential.

Challenges: The primary challenge in marketing is the limited budget and expertise in digital marketing, which restricts the reach and impact of promotional activities. Additionally, the remote location poses logistical challenges in attracting visitors.

Challenges in Research

Methodological Challenges: One of the significant challenges encountered during this research was the limited availability of up-to-date and comprehensive data on the development of Pantai Merdeka. The reliance on primary data collection through interviews and observations was necessary due to the lack of secondary data.

Comparison with Previous Research: This research encountered similar challenges to those documented by Wicaksono (2021), where limited data availability required extensive fieldwork and primary data collection. However, this study was able to overcome these challenges through the triangulation of data sources and cross-verification with local stakeholders.

Overcoming Challenges: The use of triangulation in data collection, combining interviews, observations, and documentation, helped mitigate the limitations of each method. Collaboration with local authorities and stakeholders also provided access to otherwise unavailable data and insights.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to analyze the strategies employed by Pantai Merdeka management to increase the number of tourists through infrastructure development, including the enhancement of facilities, amenities, and marketing efforts. The findings indicate that significant progress has been made in improving the tourist experience at Pantai Merdeka, yet challenges remain, particularly in digital marketing and human resource development.

Key Findings:

1. The continuous effort to improve facilities, from entry points to beach amenities, has made Pantai Merdeka more attractive and accessible to tourists. This development is crucial in sustaining and increasing visitor numbers, especially as facilities are a key component of the 3A tourism framework (Attraction, Amenities, Accessibility).

2. The marketing strategy at Pantai Merdeka primarily relies on word-of-mouth and direct marketing. While this has been effective to some extent, it is limited in scope and reach. The lack of a robust digital marketing strategy hampers the ability to attract a broader audience, particularly those outside the immediate geographic area.

3. A significant challenge identified in this research is the difficulty in implementing and maintaining a consistent digital marketing presence. This is largely due to the need for enhanced human resources with skills in digital marketing. The current strategy does not fully leverage the potential of online platforms, which are increasingly vital in modern tourism marketing.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future research should explore the development and impact of comprehensive digital marketing strategies tailored to local tourism destinations like Pantai Merdeka. This could include an examination of social media marketing, search engine optimization, and online booking systems to increase visibility and tourist engagement.

2. Further studies could investigate the role of human resource training and development in improving tourism management outcomes. This research should focus on equipping local tourism managers with the necessary skills in digital marketing, customer service, and sustainable tourism practices.

3. Comparative studies could be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of similar strategies employed by other emerging tourist destinations. This would provide a broader understanding of best practices in tourism management and the potential for replicating successful strategies at Pantai Merdeka.

Recommendations for Practical Implementation

1. It is recommended that Pantai Merdeka management invest in digital marketing training for their staff. This includes workshops, certifications, and the use of digital marketing tools that can enhance their online presence and attract a wider audience.

2. A detailed digital marketing plan should be created, encompassing social media, search engine optimization, email marketing, and online partnerships. This plan should be monitored and adjusted regularly to adapt to changing trends and technologies.

3. Pantai Merdeka management should consider collaborating with local universities and colleges to create internship programs that focus on digital marketing and tourism management. This would not only provide valuable experience for students but also bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to Pantai Merdeka's marketing strategy.

4. Implementing more sophisticated visitor feedback mechanisms, such as online surveys and review platforms, can provide valuable insights into tourist satisfaction and areas for improvement. These insights should be used to continuously refine and enhance the tourist experience at Pantai Merdeka.

5. Finally, it is crucial to ensure that all development efforts align with the principles of sustainable tourism. This includes preserving the natural environment, promoting local culture, and ensuring that tourism development benefits the local community economically and socially.

By addressing these areas, Pantai Merdeka can enhance its appeal as a tourist destination and sustain long-term growth in visitor numbers, contributing to the broader development of the local economy.

REFERENCE

Baker, M. J. (2018). *Destination Marketing: A Strategic Approach*. Routledge.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods. Allyn and Bacon.

Buhalis, D. (2020). *Technology in Tourism: Challenges and Opportunities*. Journal of Tourism Futures, 6(1), 65-79.

Buhalis, D., & Amaranggana, A. (2016). Smart tourism destinations: Enhancing tourism experience through personalisation of services. Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Technology, 7(2), 127-147.

Butler, R. W. (2018). Tourism and Resilience: The Effects of Changes in Tourism Demand on Destinations. Tourism Review, 73(3), 329-341.

Butler, R. W. (2018). Tourism Area Life Cycle.

Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2019). *New Directions in the Sociology of Tourism*. Current Issues in Tourism, 22(1), 55-70.

Creswell, J. W. (2017). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

Fatimah, F., Rahman, A., & Lubis, M. (2020). Triangulasi dalam Penelitian Kualitatif. Jurnal Metodologi Penelitian, 12(2), 123-132.

Fathonah, F., & Ayuni, R. (2022). Metode Dokumentasi dalam Penelitian Sosial. Jurnal Penelitian Sosial, 18(1), 45-56.

Frischmann, B. (2015). Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources. Oxford University Press.

Gursoy, D., & Chi, C. G. (2018). *A Review of Studies on Tourism Management in the Social Media Era.* International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 30(12), 3396-3415.

Hall, C. M. (2020). *Tourism Planning: Policies, Processes, and Relationships.* Pearson.

Irsyadi, M. N., Yuliana, Y., & Wijaya, H. (2020). Wawancara dalam Penelitian Kualitatif: Pendekatan, Teknik, dan Aplikasi. Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan, 22(3), 112-125.

Jannah, R., & Putro, A. P. (2021). Studi Pustaka sebagai Metode Pengumpulan Data dalam Penelitian. Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan, 9(2), 78-90.

Kemenparekraf. (2021). Pengembangan Pariwisata Berbasis Komunitas.

Kotler, P., & Armstrong, G. (2016). *Principles of Marketing* (16th ed.). Pearson.

Kotler, P., Keller, K. L., & Chernev, A. (2020). *Marketing Management* (15th ed.). Pearson.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2016). Naturalistic Inquiry. Sage Publications.

Makbul, M. (2021). *Pengembangan Destinasi Wisata: Tantangan dan Peluang di Era Digital.* Jurnal Pariwisata, 18(2), 67-82.

Makbul, M. (2021). Observasi dalam Penelitian Kualitatif. Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan, 7(1), 34-42.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2018). Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Page, S. J. (2017). *Tourism Management.* Routledge.

Pearce, D. G. (2019). *Tourism Development and Its Impacts: A Global Perspective.* CABI.

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2018). The Experience Economy. Harvard Business Review Press.

Prayag, G., & Hosany, S. (2020). *Emotional Experiences and Place Attachment: A Comparison Between Tourists and Residents.* Journal of Travel Research, 59(4), 749-762.

Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2021). *The Competitive Destination: A Sustainable Tourism Perspective.* CABI.

Susanti, E., Rahmat, M., & Arifin, Z. (2020). *Peran Masyarakat Lokal dalam Pengembangan Pariwisata Berkelanjutan.* Jurnal Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, 5(1), 45-60.

Urry, J. (2016). *Mobilities: New Perspectives on Tourism.* Routledge.

Widodo, S. (2020). *Pengembangan Pantai Merdeka melalui Kolaborasi Pokdarwis dan CSR.* Jurnal Pengembangan Desa, 12(1), 45-56.

Widodo, S., Nasution, M. I., & Siregar, H. (2023). *Strategi Pengelolaan Destinasi Wisata di Era Pandemi.* Jurnal Pariwisata Indonesia, 22(1), 101-117.

Widodo, S, et al (2023), Pengembangan Pariwisata Halal Menuju Pariwisata Sustainable. Andalan Bintang Ghonim.