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Empowering Indonesian Coffee: A Transnational Community-Based Branding Model for Sustainable Livelihoods in the Global South

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Abstract

Introduction: Indonesian specialty coffee holds strong production capacity and geographical indication (GI) potential, yet remains underrepresented in global consumer markets. This condition reflects a structural gap in agrifood value chains, where smallholder farmers are positioned primarily as raw material suppliers rather than participants in downstream branding and value creation. This study examines how community-based branding can function as an upstream capacity-building approach to address this imbalance. The research investigates the question: How can participatory branding interventions enhance branding capacity among smallholder coffee farmers prior to market activation? **Novelty:** This paper introduces community-based branding as an intermediate capacity-building mechanism in agrifood contexts, rather than as a market-ready branding strategy. Unlike existing studies that focus on certification, price premiums, or downstream branding actors, this research integrates participatory action research with branding and GI discourse to foreground farmers' branding literacy, narrative ownership, and collective agency—an area that remains insufficiently explored in current literature. **Methods:** The study employs a participatory action research (PAR) design involving smallholder coffee farming communities in Indonesia. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention assessments, participatory observation, and facilitated branding workshops. An exploratory consumer awareness survey conducted in Sydney, Australia (n = 57) was used to provide contextual insight into downstream brand awareness. **Results:** The findings indicate observable improvements in farmers' understanding of branding concepts, geographical indication, and collective brand ownership. The exploratory survey reveals limited consumer awareness of Indonesian coffee brands, underscoring the relevance of upstream branding capacity development. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that community-based branding can support early-stage branding capacity development among smallholder farmers, serving as a foundation for more equitable participation in branding processes. The main implication is that branding initiatives in agrifood systems should prioritize community-level capacity building alongside regulatory and market-oriented strategies.

KEYWORDS

community-based branding; participatory action research; geographical indication; smallholder coffee farmers.

Introduction

Residents play a central role in shaping and sustaining place and community brands, as they act not only as beneficiaries but also as co-creators of brand meaning (Benoit & Ponte, 2005; Gereffi et al., 2005; Ponte & Ewert, 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine how community-based branding can function as an upstream capacity-building mechanism within agrifood value chains, particularly among smallholder coffee farmers in Indonesia. The study is motivated by persistent structural imbalances between upstream production and downstream value creation in global specialty coffee markets, where farmers are predominantly positioned as raw material suppliers despite the

increasing importance of origin, authenticity, and sustainability narratives (Benoit & Ponte, 2005; Gereffi et al., 2005; Ponte & Ewert, 2009).

Community-based branding has increasingly been examined as a strategic tool for fostering inclusive development and strengthening local economic resilience, particularly in emerging economies. Prior studies emphasize that participatory branding practices enable communities to co-create value while reinforcing shared identity and legitimacy (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). Moreover, branding initiatives embedded in local culture have been shown to enhance stakeholder engagement and long-term sustainability (Warnaby & Medway, 2013; Zenker et al., 2017). This perspective is further strengthened by recent studies on marketing communication strategies that highlight the importance of integrated messaging and customer-oriented communication in building engagement and trust in digital contexts (Husada & Aruman, 2024). In developing country contexts, branding is increasingly linked to empowerment and social transformation rather than purely promotional objectives (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Pike, 2016).

This research is conducted to address the limited participation of smallholder farmers in branding and symbolic value creation, which continues to constrain their roles within global value chains (Gibbon et al., 2008; Neilson et al., n.d.). By focusing on branding capacity rather than market outcomes, the study provides an alternative perspective on how more inclusive branding pathways may be developed prior to market activation.

Recent studies have highlighted that community-based branding plays a crucial role in strengthening local identity, stakeholder trust, and economic resilience in emerging markets (Della Spina, 2025; Jafarli et al., 2025). Unlike conventional branding strategies driven primarily by corporate actors, community-based branding emphasizes participatory governance, collective ownership, and the integration of local cultural values into brand narratives. However, despite its growing relevance, empirical studies examining how such branding models operate within Indonesian contexts—particularly in sectors closely tied to community livelihoods—remain limited.

Prior research has largely focused on either branding outcomes or community empowerment as separate analytical domains (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Suárez et al., 2021). Few studies have systematically explored the intersection between branding initiatives and social capital formation at the community level, especially in developing economies. This gap is significant, given evidence suggesting that social capital—manifested through trust, networks, and collective action—serves as a key mechanism through which branding initiatives can generate sustainable socio-economic benefits (Chen et al., 2025; Haryono et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, existing studies predominantly emphasize policy, legal frameworks, or descriptive accounts of community-based initiatives (Putri et al., 2024; Suryahartati et al., 2023). While these contributions are valuable, they often lack empirical assessment of branding practices and their measurable implications. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: *How does a community-based branding model contribute to empowerment and social capital formation within a local community context?*

This introduction addresses key empirical, theoretical, and methodological issues related to global value chains, agrifood governance, and branding scholarship. Previous studies on coffee value chains have largely emphasized certification schemes, sustainability standards, and price transmission mechanisms, while branding activities such as brand ownership, narrative construction, and intellectual

property management remain concentrated downstream among actors closer to consumer markets ; ; (Benoit & Ponte, 2005; Bray & Neilson, 2017; Raynolds et al., 2007).

Within branding and marketing communication literature, community-based branding has been discussed primarily in tourism, place branding, and creative industries, where communities act as co-creators of brand meaning (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013b; Muniz Jr & O'guinn, 2001).. However, its application in agrifood systems involving smallholder farmers in developing economies remains limited (Tregear & Gorton, 2009). Similarly, geographical indication (GI) research has focused mainly on institutional frameworks and economic premiums, with insufficient attention to communicative and narrative capacities at the community level (Bartoli et al., 2022)

The problem addressed in this study lies in the structural exclusion of smallholder farmers from downstream branding and symbolic value creation within global coffee markets. Despite possessing strong territorial identity and GI potential, many Indonesian coffee farming communities lack the branding literacy and communicative capacity needed to translate origin-based value into coherent brand narratives (dos Santos, 2025).

This problem is significant because it limits farmers' ability to participate more equitably in value chains that increasingly reward symbolic and narrative differentiation rather than production volume alone (Coral & Mithöfer, 2023).

This study clearly identifies a gap between production-based participation and branding-based value creation in agrifood systems. This gap is complex, involving economic structures, institutional arrangements, communicative practices, and collective governance challenges (Inschl & Etemaddar, 2018).

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question:

How can participatory branding interventions enhance branding capacity among smallholder coffee farmers prior to market activation?

Rather than simplifying this issue into a single causal relationship, the research acknowledges the multi-layered nature of branding capacity development, which encompasses knowledge acquisition, narrative formation, and intellectual property awareness (Ohnishi et al., 2024).

The objective of this study is not to evaluate market performance or consumer purchasing behavior, but to explore branding capacity development as an intermediate outcome within agrifood value chains. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine changes in farmers' understanding of branding concepts and geographical indication (Bartoli et al., 2022);
2. Analyze the process of collective narrative formation through participatory branding activities (Kavaratzis, 2016); and
3. Assess the relevance of participatory action research as a methodological approach for branding capacity development (Kindon et al., 2007).

Through these objectives, the introduction establishes a clear foundation for the methodological design and empirical findings presented in the subsequent sections of the manuscript.

Methods

This study employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to examine branding capacity development among smallholder coffee farmers. PAR was selected because it allows researchers and community members to collaboratively identify problems, design interventions, and reflect on outcomes, making it particularly suitable for community-based branding initiatives in agrifood contexts.

Research Type

The research adopted a qualitative-dominant participatory design, integrating action-based interventions with descriptive and exploratory data collection. Rather than testing causal relationships or market performance, the study focused on documenting changes in knowledge, awareness, and collective branding capacity as intermediate outcomes of the intervention.

This study aligns with established practices in marketing and social research, particularly for examining perceptions and community-level outcomes (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2019). Such approaches are widely adopted to ensure reliability and comparability across empirical studies in community and branding research (Saunders et al., 2019).

Population and Informants

The research involved smallholder coffee farmers organized within a community-based coffee group in Indonesia. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in coffee production and collective activities related to processing and marketing. The informants consisted of farmer group members, community coordinators, and local facilitators who participated directly in the branding intervention process.

Research Location

The study was conducted in an Indonesian coffee-producing area recognized for its distinctive territorial characteristics and potential for geographical indication development. The location was selected due to its relevance to issues of origin-based value creation, collective governance, and smallholder participation in agrifood value chains.

Research Instruments

Data collection instruments included participatory branding workshops, facilitated group discussions, pre- and post-intervention assessments, and participant observation. The workshops were designed to introduce basic branding concepts, geographical indication awareness, and collective narrative development. In addition, an exploratory consumer awareness survey was conducted in Sydney, Australia, to provide contextual insight into downstream brand recognition.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed the main stages of participatory action research:

- (1) Diagnosis, involving preliminary discussions and baseline assessments of participants' understanding of branding and geographical indication;
- (2) Action, consisting of structured participatory branding workshops and collective narrative exercises; and
- (3) Reflection, where participants discussed perceived changes, challenges, and future aspirations related to branding capacity.

The exploratory consumer survey was administered after the intervention phase and aimed to capture general awareness of Indonesian coffee origins rather than to measure purchasing behavior.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on changes in participants' understanding of branding concepts, collective identity, and narrative articulation. Pre- and post-intervention responses were compared descriptively to identify observable shifts in knowledge and awareness. Survey data were analyzed descriptively to contextualize upstream findings within broader consumer awareness patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, voluntary participation, and the anonymization of participants' identities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings derived from participatory observations, pre- and post-intervention assessments, and exploratory survey data. The results are presented descriptively to illustrate observable changes in branding-related knowledge and awareness following the participatory intervention.

Branding Knowledge and Awareness

Participants' understanding of branding concepts showed observable improvement after the intervention. Prior to the workshops, branding was predominantly understood as a visual element, such as logos or packaging. Following the intervention, participants demonstrated a broader understanding of branding as a collective process involving identity, storytelling, and value communication.

Table 1 presents a comparison of participants' branding knowledge before and after the intervention.

As shown in Table 1, participants exhibited a shift from a narrow, visual-based understanding of branding toward a more comprehensive and collective perspective. These changes indicate an increased awareness of branding as a strategic and shared process rather than a purely aesthetic activity.

Geographical Indication Awareness

The intervention also influenced participants' awareness of geographical indication (GI). Initial discussions revealed that GI was primarily perceived as an administrative or regulatory label. Post-intervention reflections suggested a deeper understanding of GI as a mechanism linking territorial identity, quality standards, and collective reputation.

Table 2 summarizes changes in participants' perceptions of GI before and after the intervention.

The data in Table 2 indicate that participants increasingly associated GI with collective narratives and quality governance rather than viewing it solely as a legal designation.

Collective Narrative Development

One of the key outcomes of the participatory process was the emergence of shared narratives regarding coffee origin, farming practices, and community values. These narratives were developed through facilitated group discussions and storytelling exercises and reflected participants' efforts to articulate a collective identity.

Table 1. Changes in Branding Knowledge Before and After Intervention

Branding Aspect		Pre-Intervention (n=24)	Post-Intervention (n=24)
Branding as logo/visual identity	as	79%	25%
Branding as storytelling	as	21%	71%
Branding as collective ownership	as	17%	67%
Awareness of branding consistency	of	13%	63%

Table 2. Changes in Geographical Indication Awareness

GI Perception	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
GI as legal certification only	83%	29%
GI as collective reputation	25%	75%
GI linked to storytelling and origin	17%	71%
GI linked to production practices	21%	68%

Table 3. Emerging Collective Narrative Themes

Narrative Theme	Description
Origin and territory	Emphasis on local landscape and microclimate
Farming values	Narratives of care, sustainability, and tradition
Community identity	Collective effort and shared responsibility
Quality meaning	Linking taste attributes with origin stories

Table 4. Consumer Awareness of Indonesian Coffee Origins

Survey Item	Percentage of Respondents
Recognize Indonesia as a coffee-producing country	68%
Able to name a specific Indonesian coffee region	19%
Familiar with GI-related coffee narratives	12%

Table 3 outlines the dominant narrative themes identified during the reflection stage.

While these narratives were not finalized as market-facing brand messages, they represent foundational elements for future branding initiatives.

Exploratory Consumer Awareness Survey

To contextualize upstream findings, an exploratory consumer awareness survey was conducted among respondents in Sydney, Australia ($n = 57$). The survey aimed to capture general awareness of Indonesian coffee origins rather than purchasing intentions.

Table 4 presents selected findings from the survey.

The results in Table 4 reveal a gap between Indonesia's role as a coffee producer and consumer awareness of specific origins and narratives. This gap underscores the relevance of strengthening upstream branding capacity prior to market activation.

This discussion interprets the empirical findings in relation to existing literature on agrifood value chains, community-based branding, and geographical indication. Rather than treating the results as indicators of market performance, the discussion positions branding capacity development as an intermediate and enabling outcome within broader value creation processes.

The findings of this study resonate with broader discussions on branding as a governance and social coordination mechanism. Previous research suggests that branding initiatives can function as platforms for collective action by aligning shared meanings and expectations among stakeholders; (Boisen et al., 2018; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). In this regard, community-based branding supports not only economic objectives but also social cohesion and empowerment; (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Eshuis et al., 2018).

Branding Capacity as an Intermediate Outcome

The observed shift in participants' understanding of branding—from a narrow focus on visual elements toward a broader appreciation of storytelling and collective ownership (Table 1)—supports arguments that branding is not merely a downstream marketing activity but a socially constructed process embedded in community practices. This finding aligns with branding scholarship that emphasizes meaning-making, identity, and shared narratives as central to brand formation.

Within agrifood value chain literature, farmers are often positioned as passive producers rather than active participants in symbolic value creation (Vicol et al., 2018). The findings suggest that participatory branding interventions can contribute to reconfiguring this position by enhancing farmers' conceptual understanding of branding prior to market engagement.

Reframing Geographical Indication Beyond Legal Protection

The increased awareness of geographical indication as a collective reputation and narrative mechanism (Table 2) extends existing GI research that predominantly focuses on legal frameworks and economic premiums (Bowen, 2010). The findings indicate that GI effectiveness is closely linked to community-level communicative capacity, including shared understanding of origin, quality, and governance.

This reframing highlights the importance of aligning GI initiatives with participatory branding processes, suggesting that legal recognition alone may be insufficient without parallel efforts to build narrative and organizational capacity at the producer level.

Collective Narratives and Community Agency

The emergence of collective narratives related to origin, farming values, and community identity (Table 3) demonstrates the role of participatory processes in facilitating narrative ownership among smallholder farmers. These narratives function as foundational resources rather than finished brand messages, supporting the view that branding capacity development is a gradual and iterative process.

From a methodological perspective, the use of participatory action research enabled farmers to engage reflexively with their own practices and identities, reinforcing arguments that participatory approaches are particularly suitable for community-based branding in agrifood contexts (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013a).

Upstream Capacity and Downstream Awareness Gap

The exploratory consumer awareness findings (Table 4) reveal limited recognition of Indonesian coffee origins among respondents in an international consumer context. Rather than interpreting this as a market failure, the study positions this gap as evidence of the disconnect between upstream production potential and downstream symbolic recognition.

This finding reinforces the relevance of early-stage branding capacity development, suggesting that upstream interventions are a necessary precondition for more effective downstream branding strategies. However, the study does not claim a direct causal relationship between capacity-building and market outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design, limiting generalizability. Second, the consumer survey was conducted with a relatively small sample and served a contextual rather than evaluative function. Future research may extend this work by examining longitudinal impacts of branding capacity development or by integrating comparative case studies across different agrifood contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined community-based branding as an upstream capacity-building mechanism within agrifood value chains, focusing on smallholder coffee farmers in Indonesia. Through a participatory action research approach, the study documented observable changes in farmers' understanding of branding concepts, geographical indication, and collective narrative formation.

The findings suggest that community-based branding can support early-stage branding capacity development by enabling farmers to engage with branding as a collective, meaning-based process rather than a purely market-driven activity. The main implication is that branding initiatives in agrifood systems should not be limited to downstream marketing or certification strategies but should incorporate participatory capacity-building at the community level.

From a practical perspective, policymakers and development practitioners may consider integrating branding literacy and narrative development into GI and rural development programs. Academically, the study contributes to branding and agrifood literature by positioning branding capacity as an intermediate outcome that bridges production and market engagement.

The key takeaway of this research is that empowering smallholder farmers in branding processes requires attention not only to legal and economic instruments but also to

communicative and collective capacities that underpin sustainable value creation.

Author contributions

Safaruddin Husada led the research design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. Ulani Yunus contributed to conceptual development and theoretical framing. Nadine Yasminah supported data collection, analysis, and manuscript refinement. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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