JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

Media Strategies for Place Branding in Emerging Free Zones: A Case Study of the Aras Free Zone

1. Bahman. Irani: Department of Communication Science, Ara.C., Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran
2. Hossein. Honarvar*: Department of Psychology, Urm.C., Islamic Azad University, Urmia, Iran
3. Mehran. Samadi: Department of Communication, Ta.C., Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran

*corresponding author's email: hossein.honarvar@iau.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to design and present a conceptual model for place branding in emerging free zones with an emphasis on media strategies and communication approaches in the Aras Free Zone in order to identify the effective components influencing brand identity, investment attraction, tourism development, and international positioning. This applied study was conducted using an exploratory-theoretical qualitative approach. Data were collected through library research, documentary analysis, qualitative content analysis, and semi-structured interviews with organizational managers, public relations experts, media representatives, and economic actors associated with the Aras Free Zone. Media documents, including news reports, digital campaigns, advertising materials, and official archives, were also analyzed. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience in branding and media activities. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the extracted themes were categorized into three principal dimensions: brand identity, media strategies, and challenges/opportunities. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through triangulation of sources and comparison with international theoretical frameworks. The findings revealed that coherent media strategies significantly strengthened the place brand image of the Aras Free Zone at both domestic and international levels. The results indicated that narrative coherence, integrated visual identity, and the simultaneous use of traditional and digital media enhanced audience engagement and improved perceptions of the zone among investors and tourists. Social media platforms, particularly visual and interactive platforms, increased audience interaction through multimedia storytelling and live event coverage. Thematic analysis identified three major dimensions influencing branding effectiveness: brand identity, media strategies, and contextual challenges/opportunities. The study further demonstrated that multilingual content production, international news coverage, media tours, and participation in economic exhibitions contributed substantially to increasing the visibility and competitiveness of the zone. Conversely, limitations in local media infrastructure and financial resources were recognized as barriers to sustaining large-scale campaigns. The study concludes that successful place branding in emerging free zones requires the integration of a strong and coherent brand identity with multilayered media strategies and continuous performance evaluation. The findings emphasize that combining traditional communication channels with modern digital media, alongside rapid audience feedback mechanisms, creates a sustainable and competitive place image. The proposed conceptual model demonstrates that media-centered branding can strengthen economic diplomacy, attract investment, improve tourism development, and enhance the international reputation of emerging free zones. The model presented in this study is adaptable to other free trade-industrial zones facing similar geopolitical and economic conditions.

Keywords: Place branding; media strategies; Aras Free Zone; brand identity; digital media; social media; investment attraction; economic diplomacy.

Article history:
Received 11 February 2026
Revised 27 March 2026
Accepted 05 May 2026
Initial Publish 29 June 2026
Published online 01 March 2027

How to cite this article:
Irani, B., Honarvar, H., & Samadi, M. (2027). Media Strategies for Place Branding in Emerging Free Zones: A Case Study of the Aras Free Zone. *Journal of Management and Business Solutions, 5*(2), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.61838/jmbs.298

Introduction

In the contemporary global economy, competition among regions, cities, and special economic zones (SEZs) has intensified dramatically due to the expansion of globalization, digital communication systems, foreign direct investment flows, and international tourism markets. Special economic zones are no longer viewed merely as geographically bounded industrial or trade territories designed to stimulate exports and investment; rather, they have evolved into strategic instruments of economic diplomacy, spatial governance, regional competitiveness, and international branding. Governments increasingly perceive SEZs as catalysts for economic diversification, innovation, urban transformation, and geopolitical influence (1, 2). Consequently, the success of SEZs depends not only on fiscal incentives, infrastructural facilities, and legal advantages but also on their ability to construct a strong, recognizable, and sustainable brand identity capable of attracting investors, tourists, entrepreneurs, and global stakeholders (3, 4).

Brand creation in SEZs has become a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond conventional marketing approaches. Modern place branding emphasizes symbolic identity, emotional attachment, institutional credibility, social legitimacy, and communication coherence across different stakeholders and governance levels (5, 6). In this context, organizational and territorial branding are closely interconnected because the image of a place is simultaneously shaped by institutional behavior, governance structures, cultural narratives, media representations, and social perceptions. Successful brand creation therefore requires a dynamic interaction between internal organizational capacities and external environmental conditions. This multidimensional process involves psychological and motivational mechanisms, economic support systems, organizational culture, work-life balance, and institutional reputation, all of which contribute to constructing and sustaining a competitive place identity (7, 8).

The growing strategic importance of SEZ branding can be observed across numerous international experiences. In East and Southeast Asia, special economic zones have transformed into internationally recognized economic ecosystems through deliberate branding strategies, spatial planning, and media communication. China's regional development initiatives, particularly in the Greater Bay Area and Belt and Road corridors, demonstrate how state spatial selectivity and branding mechanisms can shape international economic influence and regional competitiveness (9, 10). Similarly, Japanese and Chinese overseas SEZs in Cambodia reveal that successful economic zones depend heavily on the integration of branding strategies, institutional trust, infrastructural quality, and strategic positioning within international markets (11). These experiences indicate that branding has become a critical intangible asset influencing investment attractiveness, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability.

At the same time, contemporary research increasingly highlights that branding in special economic zones cannot rely solely on economic narratives or infrastructural promotion. The emergence of digital governance, social media communication, and participatory branding models has shifted attention toward audience engagement, stakeholder interaction, and emotional branding. Digital tourism governance and online branding campaigns in the Mandalika Special Economic Zone demonstrate that communication strategies, digital storytelling, and social media engagement substantially affect public perception and destination competitiveness (12). Similarly, collaborative partnerships and digital tourism promotion initiatives have been shown to strengthen local identity and stakeholder participation in tourism-oriented economic zones (6). These findings suggest that modern branding is deeply dependent on communication networks and organizational capabilities that align institutional values with audience expectations.

An important dimension of contemporary brand creation concerns the internal organizational environment and the psychological foundations of branding processes. Research indicates that organizational resilience, adaptive strategies, and non-market interactions significantly influence institutional reputation and branding sustainability (13). Employees, managers, and internal stakeholders play a central role in translating organizational values into external brand experiences. Psychological commitment, motivational support, and social trust enhance organizational identification and reinforce branding consistency across communication channels. In this regard, organizational culture functions as a strategic infrastructure for brand sustainability because it shapes employee behavior, internal communication, and stakeholder perceptions simultaneously (7, 8). Therefore, successful brand creation depends not only on external promotion but also on the internal alignment between organizational values, employee experiences, and institutional identity.

The relationship between economic factors and brand creation is equally significant. Financial incentives, economic stability, infrastructural investment, and institutional support systems contribute directly to organizational credibility and competitiveness. SEZs are frequently promoted as engines of prosperity and regional transformation; however, their long-term success depends on whether economic development is accompanied by social legitimacy and sustainable governance structures (1, 2). Studies on emerging economies demonstrate that corporate social responsibility, ethical governance, and stakeholder-oriented management strengthen institutional reputation and improve market positioning (7). Likewise, the integration of local products, indigenous culture, and community participation into economic zone development strategies contributes to stronger symbolic differentiation and place authenticity (14). These findings emphasize that economic performance alone cannot guarantee branding success unless it is integrated with social and cultural legitimacy.

Another influential factor in brand creation relates to work-life balance and employee wellbeing. Contemporary organizational studies increasingly recognize that sustainable branding is associated with human-centered organizational environments characterized by psychological safety, flexibility, and employee support. Organizations that promote work-life balance often experience higher levels of employee engagement, organizational loyalty, and communication consistency, which collectively reinforce branding effectiveness. In competitive economic zones where labor mobility and professional competition are high, maintaining employee wellbeing becomes essential for preserving institutional identity and long-term brand coherence (5, 13). Thus, internal organizational wellbeing constitutes a strategic branding asset rather than merely a human resource consideration.

In parallel with these organizational dimensions, external brand power has emerged as one of the most influential determinants of place branding effectiveness. Organizational reputation, strategic visibility, media communication, and institutional credibility significantly affect stakeholder trust and market attractiveness. The expansion of digital media ecosystems has amplified the importance of communication management in shaping territorial and organizational brands. Media representation influences how economic zones are perceived globally, particularly regarding investment security, governance quality, innovation capacity, and cultural attractiveness (4, 12). Consequently, branding strategies increasingly incorporate digital platforms, visual storytelling, and social engagement mechanisms to strengthen emotional connections with audiences and create differentiated place identities.

Despite the growing prominence of SEZ branding, contemporary literature also identifies several contradictions and challenges associated with branding strategies in emerging economic zones. The paradox of nation branding and place branding arises when promotional narratives conflict with socio-economic realities, environmental sustainability, or governance limitations (3). Some economic zones face criticism for prioritizing symbolic image construction over social inclusion, environmental justice, or community participation. Research on spatial containment and exclusion within island-based SEZs demonstrates that branding-driven development may produce unequal socio-spatial outcomes and reinforce exclusionary governance patterns (15). Similarly, criminological perspectives on SEZs reveal that weak governance structures and deregulated environments may create vulnerabilities related to transparency, legality, and institutional accountability (16). These critiques suggest that branding strategies must balance economic competitiveness with ethical governance, sustainability, and social legitimacy.

Furthermore, globalization and digital transformation have intensified interregional competition among economic zones, requiring organizations to continuously innovate their branding models. Contemporary branding frameworks increasingly emphasize resilience, adaptability, and anti-fragility in response to economic crises, pandemics, technological disruptions, and geopolitical uncertainty (5). Hybrid strategic approaches, such as SWOT-AHP models and integrated sustainability frameworks, are increasingly utilized to evaluate branding capacities and development priorities in competitive environments (17). Low-carbon urbanism, sustainable governance, and rhetorical decarbonization have also become integral components of contemporary branding narratives as organizations attempt to align economic development with environmental responsibility (18). Therefore, modern brand creation requires multidimensional strategic coordination across economic, environmental, social, psychological, and communication domains.

The complexity of these dynamics is especially evident in emerging and transitional economic zones where organizations simultaneously seek investment attraction, social legitimacy, international recognition, and regional competitiveness. In such contexts, the interaction between internal organizational factors and external branding mechanisms becomes particularly critical. Organizational culture, psychological values, economic support systems, and work-life balance collectively influence how institutional identity is communicated and perceived. Simultaneously, organizational brand power and external reputation determine the effectiveness of communication strategies, stakeholder trust, and public legitimacy. The conceptual model of the present study reflects this interconnected structure by positioning brand creation as a central phenomenon shaped by both internal brand-building factors and external organizational power.

Although prior studies have examined place branding, tourism promotion, digital governance, sustainability, and economic competitiveness in SEZs, limited research has investigated the integrated interaction between internal organizational dynamics and external brand-building mechanisms within a comprehensive conceptual framework. Existing literature often focuses separately on economic performance, digital promotion, governance models, or tourism branding without sufficiently exploring how psychological, social, cultural, and organizational dimensions collectively contribute to sustainable brand creation. Moreover, studies addressing emerging economic zones in developing or transitional contexts remain relatively limited, particularly regarding the role of internal organizational factors in shaping branding outcomes (3, 10).

Given these theoretical and practical gaps, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of brand creation by integrating internal organizational dimensions with external branding mechanisms within the context of an emerging economic zone. By focusing on psychological, motivational, and social values; culture and work environment; economic factors; work-life balance; and organizational brand power, the study aims to explain how these interconnected factors influence the process of brand creation and generate internal and external organizational outcomes. Therefore, the aim of this study was to develop and explain a conceptual model of brand creation based on internal and external brand-building factors in the context of an emerging special economic zone.

Methods and Materials

This study is an applied-research conducted with an exploratory-theoretical approach. Its objective is to design an effective model for the branding of the Aras Free Trade-Industrial Zone, with an emphasis on media and communication strategies. In the first step, theoretical data were extracted through library studies and a literature review. These studies included an examination of the concepts of place branding, the role of media in shaping brand identity, and the specific characteristics of free zones, particularly border zones similar to Aras. For this purpose, books, reputable domestic and international scientific articles, official reports from the Free Zones Organization, and media documents from the Aras Free Zone’s archive were utilized.

Following this stage, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on a collection of media documents related to the Aras Free Zone. These documents included news reports, coverage of cultural and economic events, digital content productions, and media campaigns from recent years, in order to identify existing communication patterns, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. The research population consisted of the main stakeholders of the Aras Free Zone brand, namely organization managers, public relations experts, resident economic actors, and representatives of domestic and foreign media. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that individuals with direct experience and knowledge of the branding process and media initiatives were included in the data collection process.

Field data were collected through semi-structured interviews with relevant experts and managers, as well as a thorough review of published documents, images, and videos from the Aras Free Zone. In the analysis phase, a thematic analysis approach was employed, whereby the data were coded and the main themes were extracted across three key dimensions: brand identity, media strategies, and challenges and opportunities. Finally, the integration of theoretical and empirical findings formed the basis for designing the proposed model for the media-centric branding of the Aras Free Zone, a model that is implementable and can be localized to the specific conditions of this region.

Findings and Results

The findings of the present study were extracted through a qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, documentary sources, organizational reports, media archives, and analytical review of branding-related communications in the studied organization. The data analysis process was conducted in several stages, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, resulting in the extraction of a coherent conceptual framework for brand creation. The analysis demonstrated that brand creation in the organization is influenced by a combination of internal and external brand-building factors. Internal factors consisted of psychological, motivational, and social values; culture and work environment; economic factors; and work–life balance, while the principal external factor was identified as organizational brand power. These factors collectively affected the central phenomenon of brand creation, which in turn generated both internal and external organizational outcomes. The extracted themes and categories showed a high level of conceptual coherence and reflected the perspectives of managers, employees, branding specialists, and communication experts involved in the study. The findings are presented in the following tables and figure.

Table 1. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Indicators Extracted from the Qualitative Analysis

Main Theme	Subthemes	Representative Indicators
Psychological, Motivational, and Social Values	Psychological commitment	Organizational belonging, emotional attachment, psychological security
	Motivational reinforcement	Incentive systems, recognition mechanisms, achievement orientation
	Social values	Social respect, interpersonal trust, collaborative interaction
Culture and Work Environment	Organizational culture	Shared values, ethical climate, innovation-oriented culture
	Work environment quality	Communication transparency, teamwork climate, managerial support
	Learning atmosphere	Knowledge sharing, continuous learning opportunities
Economic Factors	Financial incentives	Salary competitiveness, rewards, economic security
	Career opportunities	Promotion opportunities, long-term career prospects
	Resource accessibility	Availability of organizational facilities and support
Work–Life Balance	Flexibility	Flexible working arrangements, time management support
	Psychological balance	Reduced occupational stress, emotional stability
	Personal wellbeing	Family support, quality-of-life enhancement
Organization’s Brand Power	Organizational reputation	Institutional credibility, market recognition
	Competitive positioning	Distinctiveness, strategic visibility
	Media presence	Public communication strength, digital visibility
Brand Creation	Brand identity formation	Consistent image, value alignment, symbolic coherence
	Brand communication	Internal and external message integration
	Brand differentiation	Unique organizational characteristics
Internal Outcomes	Employee loyalty	Commitment retention, reduced turnover intention
	Organizational engagement	Participation, proactive behavior
	Internal trust	Confidence in leadership and organizational mission
External Outcomes	Market attractiveness	Attraction of stakeholders and clients
	Public image improvement	Positive external perception
	Competitive advantage	Stronger strategic positioning in the market

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the process of brand creation is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interconnected organizational, psychological, social, and economic dimensions. Among the extracted themes, psychological, motivational, and social values were repeatedly emphasized by participants as the most influential internal drivers of sustainable brand creation. Interviewees consistently referred to the role of organizational trust, motivational reinforcement, and emotional commitment in strengthening employees’ identification with the organizational brand. Simultaneously, the findings showed that organizational culture and work environment significantly contributed to creating coherence between organizational values and employee behavior. Economic dimensions, particularly financial incentives and career opportunities, were identified as important practical supports for maintaining brand commitment. Work–life balance also emerged as a critical factor affecting employee wellbeing and organizational identification. Finally, organizational brand power, especially through reputation and media visibility, was recognized as the primary external factor reinforcing the organization’s branding capacity and strategic positioning.

Table 2. Frequency and Distribution of Open and Axial Codes Across Main Themes

Main Theme	Number of Open Codes	Number of Axial Codes	Relative Frequency (%)
Psychological, Motivational, and Social Values	39	11	24.38
Culture and Work Environment	33	9	20.63
Economic Factors	28	8	17.50
Work–Life Balance	24	7	15.00
Organization's Brand Power	21	6	13.13
Brand Creation	9	3	5.63
Internal Outcomes	4	2	2.50
External Outcomes	2	1	1.25
Total	160	47	100.00

Table 2 demonstrates the coding distribution obtained from the thematic analysis process. The highest frequency belonged to psychological, motivational, and social values, accounting for 24.38% of the total extracted concepts, indicating the centrality of human-centered and emotional dimensions in the process of organizational brand creation. Culture and work environment represented the second most significant category, reflecting the importance of organizational atmosphere and value systems in shaping branding behaviors. Economic factors and work–life balance also showed substantial frequencies, suggesting that practical and wellbeing-related dimensions play major supportive roles in organizational branding. Organization's brand power emerged as the most important external factor, particularly in relation to reputation and public visibility. The comparatively lower frequencies of internal and external outcomes indicate that these categories were interpreted more as consequences of the branding process rather than direct antecedents.

Table 3. Selective Coding Matrix and Relationships Between Core Categories

Core Category	Related Categories	Nature of Relationship	Analytical Interpretation
Brand Creation	Psychological, Motivational, and Social Values	Direct positive relationship	Stronger motivational and social values increase employee identification with the brand
Brand Creation	Culture and Work Environment	Direct positive relationship	Supportive organizational culture strengthens brand coherence
Brand Creation	Economic Factors	Reinforcing relationship	Financial security and incentives enhance brand commitment
Brand Creation	Work–Life Balance	Stabilizing relationship	Employee wellbeing improves sustainable branding behaviors
Brand Creation	Organization's Brand Power	Strategic relationship	External reputation strengthens internal branding legitimacy
Internal Outcomes	Brand Creation	Consequential relationship	Effective branding increases loyalty and engagement
External Outcomes	Brand Creation	Consequential relationship	Strong branding improves public image and competitiveness

The findings reported in Table 3 reveal the structural relationships between the extracted categories and the central phenomenon of brand creation. Psychological, motivational, and social values demonstrated the strongest direct relationship with the brand creation process, emphasizing the importance of employee-centered organizational environments. Culture and work environment were found to reinforce organizational consistency and value alignment, thereby facilitating branding effectiveness. Economic factors acted as reinforcing mechanisms by increasing employees' practical commitment to organizational objectives. Work–life balance functioned as a stabilizing factor by reducing psychological strain and supporting sustainable engagement with branding activities. Moreover, organizational brand power strengthened both the internal legitimacy and external visibility of the organization. The analysis further confirmed that successful brand creation ultimately generates significant internal outcomes, including loyalty and organizational commitment, as well as external outcomes such as improved public image and competitive advantage.

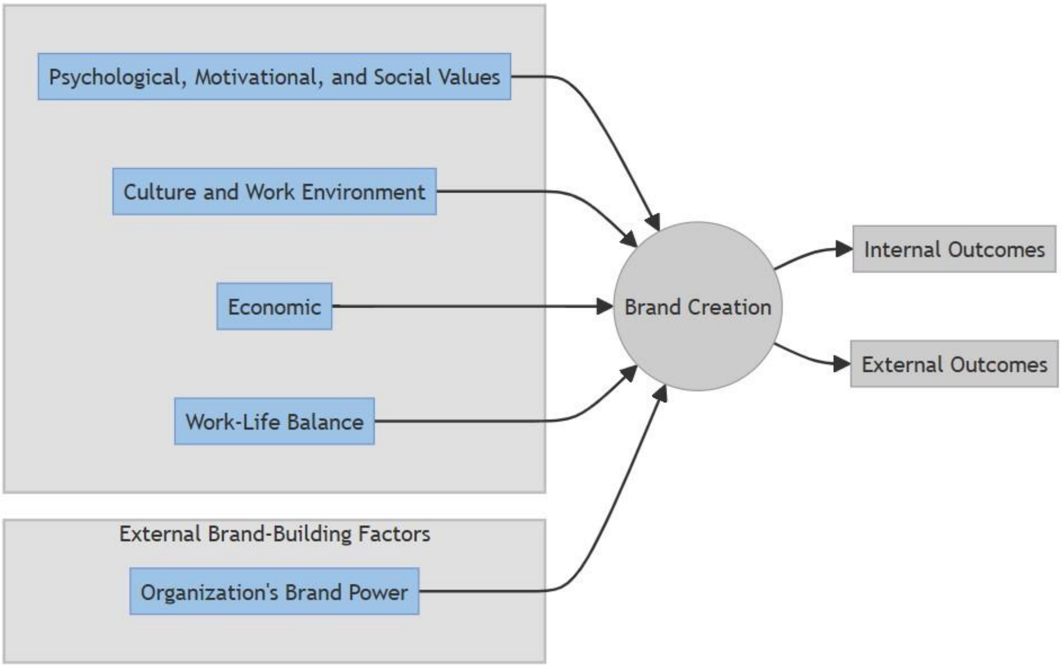

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Brand Creation Based on Internal and External Brand-Building Factors

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 illustrates the structural relationships identified through the qualitative analysis. The model demonstrates that brand creation represents the central phenomenon influenced simultaneously by multiple internal brand-building dimensions and one major external factor. Psychological, motivational, and social values, alongside culture and work environment, economic conditions, and work–life balance, collectively form the internal infrastructure necessary for sustainable branding. Organization’s brand power acts as the principal external driver that reinforces credibility, strategic positioning, and public recognition. The model further indicates that successful brand creation generates both internal outcomes, such as employee loyalty and organizational engagement, and external outcomes, including market attractiveness and enhanced public image. The conceptual framework extracted from the findings therefore reflects a dynamic and interconnected branding system in which organizational culture, employee wellbeing, economic support, and strategic communication operate simultaneously to produce long-term branding effectiveness.

Table 4. Final Paradigm Model of Brand Creation Derived from Thematic Analysis

Paradigm Component	Extracted Factors	Interpretation
Causal Conditions	Psychological, motivational, and social values; organizational culture; economic incentives	Foundational drivers initiating the branding process
Contextual Conditions	Work environment quality; work–life balance; organizational support	Environmental conditions facilitating branding sustainability
Intervening Conditions	Organization’s brand power; media visibility; market reputation	Strategic conditions influencing branding effectiveness
Central Phenomenon	Brand Creation	Development of a coherent and sustainable organizational brand
Strategies	Integrated communication; employee engagement; media positioning	Operational mechanisms for strengthening the brand
Consequences	Internal and external outcomes	Loyalty, public image enhancement, competitive advantage

The paradigm model presented in Table 4 summarizes the final analytical structure derived from the thematic analysis process. The model indicates that brand creation emerges through the interaction of causal, contextual, and intervening conditions. Psychological and motivational factors, together with organizational culture and economic incentives, serve as the primary causal drivers initiating the branding process. Contextual conditions, including work environment quality and work–life balance, provide the operational setting within which branding activities become sustainable and effective. Intervening conditions such as organizational brand power and media visibility influence the strength and reach of branding initiatives. The central phenomenon of brand creation is operationalized through integrated communication strategies, employee engagement practices, and strategic media positioning. Ultimately, these processes generate significant internal consequences, including loyalty and organizational cohesion, as well as external consequences such as stronger public image, market attractiveness, and competitive differentiation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that brand creation in emerging special economic zones is a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of internal organizational factors and external brand-building capacities. The results revealed that psychological, motivational, and social values constituted the most influential internal dimension affecting the process of brand creation. Participants consistently emphasized that organizational trust, emotional attachment, employee motivation, and social belonging significantly strengthened organizational identification and reinforced the coherence of the organizational brand. This finding reflects the growing emphasis in contemporary branding literature on the human-centered foundations of institutional reputation and place identity. In modern branding frameworks, employees are increasingly recognized not merely as operational actors but as strategic ambassadors who embody organizational values and communicate institutional legitimacy through daily interactions and behavioral consistency (7, 8). The findings therefore suggest that sustainable brand creation in special economic zones depends heavily on cultivating emotional commitment and psychological alignment among internal stakeholders.

The strong influence of psychological and motivational values identified in this study aligns with the work of Jiang and colleagues, who emphasized that organizational resilience and adaptive strategic behavior emerge from internal trust, institutional cohesion, and non-market strategic capacities (13). Similarly, Warren and Grigaliūnaitė highlighted that social capital and collaborative relationships strengthen organizational anti-fragility and contribute to the sustainability of place-oriented branding systems (5). The current findings expand these perspectives by demonstrating that psychological engagement and social legitimacy are not only supportive organizational conditions but also direct contributors to brand creation itself. Employees who perceive alignment between organizational values and personal identity become more likely to reinforce coherent brand narratives internally and externally, thereby enhancing institutional credibility and long-term reputational stability.

Another major finding of the study concerned the critical role of organizational culture and work environment in shaping branding effectiveness. The results indicated that supportive organizational climates characterized by transparency, collaboration, innovation, and managerial support significantly enhanced branding coherence and institutional identity formation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that organizations with strong internal cultures were more successful in maintaining consistent communication and projecting credible external images. This finding is highly consistent with contemporary place branding theories, which emphasize that organizational identity and external reputation are inseparable dimensions of the same strategic process (4). In multi-level governance systems, successful branding depends on the ability of institutions to coordinate internal organizational culture with external communication strategies and stakeholder expectations.

The findings also support the arguments presented by García and colleagues regarding the relationship between organizational responsibility, market legitimacy, and institutional reputation in emerging economies (7). The current study demonstrated that organizational culture influences branding not only through communication practices but also through ethical behavior, employee experiences, and internal trust formation. Furthermore, the findings correspond with the perspectives of Li and Lin, who argued that rhetorical strategies and institutional narratives significantly shape urban and regional branding trajectories (18). The present study extends these arguments by showing that internal organizational environments provide the foundational context within which branding narratives become credible and sustainable.

Economic factors emerged as another significant component influencing brand creation. Participants emphasized the importance of financial security, organizational support, competitive compensation, and career development opportunities in strengthening employee commitment to the organizational brand. The findings suggest that economic support systems function as reinforcing mechanisms that stabilize organizational identity and increase institutional attractiveness. This result aligns with the broader literature on special economic zones, which consistently identifies economic incentives and institutional investment as central drivers of competitiveness and attractiveness (1, 2). However, the current study demonstrates that economic dimensions influence branding not merely through external market performance but also through internal organizational commitment and employee perceptions of institutional legitimacy.

The findings additionally correspond with the observations of Masrun and Ilhamudin, who emphasized that sustainable development in special economic areas requires integrating economic strategies with local participation and organizational support systems (14). Likewise, Zhao and Tan argued that successful SEZ competitiveness depends on institutional coordination, strategic positioning, and organizational stability alongside infrastructural and economic capacities (11). The present study confirms these perspectives while further indicating that economic support contributes to branding effectiveness by strengthening employees' psychological investment in organizational success and institutional continuity.

An important dimension of the findings involved the role of work-life balance in sustainable brand creation. Participants repeatedly described organizational flexibility, psychological wellbeing, and supportive work environments as important contributors to organizational loyalty and brand consistency. This finding highlights the increasing significance of human wellbeing within contemporary branding systems. In competitive organizational environments, employees' emotional stability and work-life integration directly affect communication quality, stakeholder interactions, and organizational reputation. These findings support the arguments advanced by Warren and Grigaliūnaitė regarding the importance of social resilience and adaptive institutional environments in maintaining organizational sustainability (5). Similarly, Jiang and colleagues emphasized that organizational resilience depends heavily on supportive internal systems capable of maintaining employee engagement during periods of uncertainty and transformation (13).

The current findings therefore suggest that work-life balance should not be interpreted solely as a human resource policy but rather as a strategic branding mechanism. Organizations that promote employee wellbeing create more stable, coherent, and credible brand identities because employees become more committed to organizational values and communication consistency. This insight is particularly important for emerging special economic zones where labor competition, organizational mobility, and professional instability may weaken institutional cohesion and branding continuity.

One of the most significant findings of the study was the influential role of organizational brand power as the principal external brand-building factor. Participants emphasized that organizational reputation, strategic visibility, media communication, and institutional credibility strongly influenced stakeholder trust and public perception. This finding aligns with studies examining digital tourism governance, media branding, and communication-centered development strategies in special economic zones (6, 12). In contemporary economic systems, organizations increasingly compete not only through infrastructural or financial capacities but also through symbolic visibility, digital engagement, and strategic communication.

The findings also support Aminah and colleagues' argument concerning the paradoxical nature of nation and place branding in emerging economic zones (3). While external branding can generate visibility and attractiveness, branding strategies become effective only when institutional realities support promotional narratives. Participants in the current study emphasized that strong organizational branding requires coherence between internal organizational culture and external communication strategies. This observation is highly significant because it demonstrates that branding legitimacy cannot be sustained solely through promotional campaigns or visual identity systems. Instead, sustainable branding emerges from the alignment between organizational practices, employee experiences, governance structures, and public communication.

The results further indicated that successful brand creation generated both internal and external organizational outcomes. Internal outcomes included employee loyalty, organizational commitment, and increased engagement, while external outcomes involved improved public image, stronger market positioning, and enhanced stakeholder attraction. These findings are consistent with the literature on collaborative place branding and strategic territorial management (4, 5). Effective branding systems create reciprocal reinforcement between organizational identity and external legitimacy, thereby strengthening both internal organizational stability and external competitiveness.

At the same time, the findings indirectly reflect some of the critical concerns raised in the literature regarding exclusionary governance and spatial inequalities within SEZ development processes. Grydehøj and Su argued that economic zones may produce mechanisms of containment and exclusion if branding strategies prioritize symbolic competitiveness over social inclusion (15). Likewise, Hall and colleagues emphasized that weak governance structures and deregulated environments may undermine institutional legitimacy despite strong branding initiatives (16). Although the present study primarily focused on organizational and branding dimensions, the findings suggest that sustainable brand creation ultimately depends on maintaining legitimacy, ethical governance, and stakeholder trust alongside economic competitiveness.

Furthermore, the study's findings correspond with recent discussions on sustainability-oriented branding and adaptive development models. Ze-lin and colleagues highlighted the importance of integrated SWOT-AHP approaches in strengthening strategic adaptability and development quality (17). Similarly, Liu and He emphasized that regional competitiveness increasingly depends on flexible spatial strategies and coordinated governance systems capable of responding to changing socio-economic conditions (9). The present study contributes to these discussions by demonstrating that organizational branding systems function most effectively when internal organizational dimensions and external strategic capacities operate in an integrated and mutually reinforcing manner.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that brand creation in emerging special economic zones is not a linear promotional activity but rather a multidimensional strategic process rooted in organizational culture, employee psychology, institutional legitimacy, economic support, and communication power. Sustainable branding therefore requires simultaneous attention to internal organizational wellbeing and external reputational management. The conceptual model developed in this study demonstrates that psychological values, organizational culture, economic support, work-life balance, and organizational brand power collectively shape branding effectiveness and generate long-term organizational outcomes. Consequently, organizations operating in competitive economic environments should approach branding as an integrated organizational strategy rather than merely a marketing or communication function.

One limitation of the present study concerns the qualitative nature of the research design and the relatively limited number of participants involved in the data collection process. Although the thematic analysis provided deep conceptual insights into brand creation dynamics, the findings may not fully represent all organizational contexts or special economic zones with different governance structures, economic conditions, or cultural environments. Another limitation relates to the contextual focus of the study, as the findings were extracted within a specific organizational and regional setting, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other national or international contexts. In addition, some participants may have provided socially desirable responses regarding organizational identity and branding practices, potentially affecting the objectivity of certain findings.

Future research should investigate the proposed conceptual model using quantitative approaches and structural equation modeling to examine the causal relationships between internal and external brand-building factors. Comparative studies between different special economic zones, industrial clusters, or regional development models could provide deeper understanding regarding contextual differences in branding mechanisms. Longitudinal studies may also help explain how branding strategies evolve over time in response to economic crises, technological transformation, and geopolitical changes. Furthermore, future scholars are encouraged to examine the role of digital media ecosystems, artificial intelligence, organizational sustainability, and environmental governance in shaping the future of place and organizational branding within emerging economic zones.

From a practical perspective, organizations operating within special economic zones should prioritize the development of supportive organizational cultures that strengthen psychological commitment, employee wellbeing, and communication coherence. Managers should recognize that branding effectiveness depends heavily on internal organizational legitimacy and employee engagement rather than solely on external promotional activities. Investment in organizational transparency, collaborative leadership, and work-life balance policies can substantially improve institutional reputation and branding sustainability. In addition, organizations should strengthen strategic communication systems and digital branding capacities to enhance public visibility and stakeholder trust. Policymakers and organizational leaders should also integrate branding strategies with broader economic, social, and sustainability objectives to ensure that institutional reputation is supported by authentic organizational practices and long-term developmental legitimacy.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

1. Aggarwal A. Special Economic Zones for Shared Prosperity. 2022. doi: 10.22617/tcs220424-2.
2. Iqbal MZ, Ahmad B. Prospective Analysis of Economic and Social Development Through Special Economic Zones (SEZs): Pakistan a Case in Point. Irasd Journal of Economics. 2024;6(1):128-43. doi: 10.52131/joe.2024.0601.0198.
3. Aminah S, Wardhani B, Dugis V, Susanto J. The Paradox of Nation Branding: A Lesson Learned From the Mandalika Special Economic Zone. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics. 2025;10(4):398-412. doi: 10.1177/20578911251366112.
4. Alsayel A, Fransen J, Jong Md. City Branding in a Multi-Level Governance Context: Comparing Branding Performance Across Five Institutional Models for Urban Development in Saudi Arabia. Journal of Place Management and Development. 2023;16(2):267-90. doi: 10.1108/jpmd-07-2022-0061.
5. Warren G, Grigaliūnaitė S. Leveraging Social Capital to Catalyse Post-Pandemic Anti-Fragility: The "Vilnius Model". Journal of Place Management and Development. 2023;16(4):577-601. doi: 10.1108/jpmd-11-2022-0104.
6. Wardhani WNR, Purnomo P, Pratiwi R. Collaborative Partnerships, Religious Reputation Culture, and Digital Tourism Promotion in Support of Halal Tourism Villages. Iqtishadia Jurnal Kajian Ekonomi Dan Bisnis Islam. 2023;16(2):265. doi: 10.21043/iqtishadia.v16i2.24039.
7. García OC, Flores-Hernández A, López-Pérez ME, Ruz-Mendoza MÁ. The Manager's Vision of CSR in an Emerging Economy: From Implementation to Market Impact. Administrative Sciences. 2024;14(3):44. doi: 10.3390/admsci14030044.
8. Kos A, Gudowski J. Corporate Social Responsibility in Use. The Example of Activity by Legnica Special Economic Zone Joint-Stock Company, Poland. Journal of Modern Science. 2023;53(4):540-56. doi: 10.13166/jms/177343.
9. Liu Y, He S. From the Pearl River Delta to the Greater Bay Area: State Spatial Selectivity, Contingent Socio-Spatial Processes, and Variegated Geographies of China's City-Regionalism. Transactions in Planning and Urban Research. 2024;3(3):216-40. doi: 10.1177/27541223241270374.
10. Jafarzadeh H, Yang D. Impacts of the Belt and Roads Initiative on Sustainability: Local Approaches to Spatial Restructuring in the Aras Special Economic Zones. Sustainability. 2023;15(16):12347. doi: 10.3390/su151612347.

11. Zhao S, Tan CC. A Comparative Analysis of the Japanese Overseas SEZ in Phnom Penh and the Chinese Overseas SEZ in Sihanoukville, Cambodia: From the Perspective of Porter’s Diamond Model. International Journal of China Studies. 2023;14(1):171-209. doi: 10.22452/ijcs.vol14no1.7.

12. Zitri I, Rifaid R, Lestanata Y, Kurniawan C. Navigating Digital Tourism Governance: A Case Study of Branding Strategies in the Mandalika Special Economic Zones. Otoritas Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan. 2024;14(1):148-59. doi: 10.26618/ojip.v14i1.12423.

13. Jiang L, Sun Y, Zhao H. Grounded Theory Approach to Non-Market Strategy and Organizational Resilience: The Case of Chinese Private Enterprise. Kybernetes. 2023;53(12):5648-70. doi: 10.1108/k-03-2023-0386.

14. Masrun M, Ilhamudin M. The Existence of Local Products (Production/Processing) in Special Economic Area of Mandalika Lombok. Probisnis Jurnal Manajemen. 2024;15(1):31-9. doi: 10.62398/probis.v15i1.443.

15. Grydehøj A, Su P. Interaction Between Islands and Special Economic Zones: Spatial Processes of Containment and Exclusion. Area. 2023;55(4):541-9. doi: 10.1111/area.12900.

16. Hall A, Antonopoulos GA, Atkinson R, Wyatt T. Duty Free: Turning the Criminological Spotlight on Special Economic Zones. The British Journal of Criminology. 2022;63(2):265-82. doi: 10.1093/bjc/azac010.

17. Ze-lin L, Duan X, Cheng H, Liu Z, Li P, Zhang Y. Empowering High-Quality Development of the Chinese Sports Education Market in Light of the “Double Reduction” Policy: A Hybrid SWOT-AHP Analysis. Sustainability. 2023;15(3):2107. doi: 10.3390/su15032107.

18. Li Y, Lin GCS. The Making of Low-Carbon Urbanism: Climate Change, Discursive Strategy, and Rhetorical Decarbonization in Chinese Cities. Environment and Planning C Politics and Space. 2022;40(6):1326-45. doi: 10.1177/23996544221077446.