



Kesawan Square in Heritage Tourism: Historical Dynamics and Digital Transformation, 2010-2025

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving dynamics of the Kesawan Area in Medan City as a heritage tourism destination from 2010 to 2025. Its primary aim is to analyze the processes of revitalization, branding strategies, and digital transformation undertaken to establish Kesawan as a historical icon of the city, while also examining how these processes shape perceptions of heritage. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-historical method, drawing on field observations, interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that the period 2010–2020 marked the initial phase of revitalization, characterized by heritage branding through cultural festivals, architectural preservation, and the promotion of regional identity. In contrast, the period 2020–2025 witnessed the adoption of smart tourism and digital technologies, which significantly increased tourist visits and stimulated the growth of local micro, small, and medium enterprises. Strong branding reinforced Kesawan's historical image, while digital transformation expanded accessibility and enhanced tourist engagement, despite persistent challenges such as the digital divide and the risk of commodification. The study underscores that heritage preservation can be managed adaptively and sustainably through the integration of branding strategies and digital innovation. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of heritage tourism by offering insights into how historical dynamics and digital transformation intersect to shape the meaning of heritage within urban spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kesawan area in Medan City is one of the historical and cultural centers of North Sumatra that holds significant value in the region's urban development. Originating in the Dutch colonial period, Kesawan embodies architectural, social, and economic legacies that reflect the dynamics of Medan's multicultural society. The presence of historical buildings along Jalan Ahmad Yani—familiarily known as Kesawan Street—renders the district an iconic heritage landscape with considerable potential for tourism development.

The rise of heritage-based tourism has become increasingly relevant in light of growing awareness of cultural preservation and the quest for local identity amid globalizations. As Ashworth (2011) argues, heritage tourism serves not only as a form of recreation but also as a strategy to safeguard the collective memory of a community. In the context of Medan, Kesawan functions simultaneously as a space for preserving historical values and as a driver of the creative economy.

The years 2010–2020 may be regarded as Kesawan's initial phase of revitalization and heritage branding. During this period, the Medan City Government began to acknowledge the area's potential through conservation initiatives for historical buildings, the organization of cultural festivals, and efforts to associate the city's identity with the Kesawan icon. Drawing on Anholt's (2007) theory of place branding, which highlights how a city's image can be shaped through historical symbols that embody local values and distinctiveness, Kesawan's branding emerged not as a mere ceremonial effort but as a strategic initiative to reinforce Medan's identity as a multicultural city.

Revitalization during this decade also constituted a response to the physical vulnerability of colonial buildings amid rapid urban expansion. As Jokilehto (2017) emphasizes, heritage conservation must strike a balance between modernization and the preservation of historical value. This balance resonates with broader debates surrounding commodification, sustainability, and authenticity in heritage tourism—debates that remain crucial to Kesawan's trajectory.

Kesawan's branding as a heritage district was reflected in various cultural events, notably the Kesawan Festival, which served as both a platform for reintroducing historical values and local wisdom to the community and a means of attracting visitors. Richards (2007) has argued that culture-based events provide an effective strategy for strengthening destination identity, and Kesawan exemplifies this practice.

Against this background, the central research question of this study concerns how Kesawan's revitalization from 2010 to 2025 has reshaped its identity through heritage branding and digital transformation, while confronting the challenges of commodification, sustainability, and authenticity. The study seeks to analyze Kesawan's historical dynamics, assess the branding and digitalization strategies implemented, and evaluate their implications for sustainable heritage tourism in Medan. The period 2020–2025 marks a significant turning point. The Medan City Government identified the Revitalization of the Old City of Kesawan as a strategic priority for tourism development, strengthening spatial planning, improving infrastructure, and incorporating digital technologies into tourism promotion.

Central to this era has been the adoption of the smart tourism paradigm. According to Gretzel et al. (2015), smart tourism integrates information technologies to deliver interactive, personalized, and sustainable visitor experiences. In Kesawan, this has materialized through social media engagement, tourism applications, and virtual tours, all of which form part of a digital branding strategy. The embrace of these tools, particularly in the post-COVID-19 landscape, illustrates the city's adaptive response to global shifts in tourism consumption patterns that increasingly privilege digital interaction.

Revitalization during this period has thus extended beyond physical restoration to encompass narrative construction through digital storytelling. As Chronis (2012) notes, narratives in heritage tourism are essential for creating emotional connections between visitors and destinations. In Kesawan, stories of colonial legacies, trade histories, and Medan's multicultural social fabric have been reinterpreted and disseminated through digital platforms, thereby reinforcing its symbolic identity.

Digital transformation has also enabled collaborative governance. Carayannis and Campbell's (2011) quadruple helix model underscores that innovation in regional development requires synergy among government, academia, business, and communities. Kesawan embodies this model as a collaborative arena where diverse stakeholders converge in the preservation and promotion of heritage.

Economically, digital tourism initiatives have opened new opportunities for local micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises to market culinary products, souvenirs, and heritage tour packages on online platforms. This development aligns with Coulson's (1999) concept of the digital economy, wherein technology fosters a more inclusive and competitive economic ecosystem. However, these opportunities are tempered by challenges such as digital inequality among tourism actors and the risk of cultural commodification. Cohen (1988) cautions that when heritage is overly shaped for consumption, authenticity is compromised, and intrinsic values may erode.

From a social perspective, digital revitalization has shaped younger generations' engagement with heritage values. Through social media, Kesawan has gained visibility and accessibility, instilling a sense of pride and cultural responsibility among youth. This trend resonates with Halbwachs' (2024) theory of collective memory, which emphasizes how shared narratives shape identity across generations. Yet, Kesawan's revitalization must be situated within the broader dynamics of Medan's urban development. Rapid economic growth has intensified tensions between modernization and preservation. Woodward and Jones (2008) argue that postmodern cities often embody contradictions between capitalist development and heritage protection, and Kesawan exemplifies this paradox.

At the same time, the revitalization of Kesawan represents Medan's ambition to position itself on the international tourism map. With its dual branding as a heritage and culinary city, Medan aspires to rival destinations such as Jakarta's Old Town and Semarang's Kota Lama. Theoretically, this aligns with Butler's (1999) concept of sustainable tourism, which calls for balancing environmental conservation, community well-being, and quality visitor experiences. Kesawan demonstrates efforts to integrate these three dimensions, supported by strong community involvement. Murphy (1985) reminds us that community participation remains the cornerstone of sustainable heritage tourism. Policy frameworks further reinforce Kesawan's revitalization. The city's vision of tourism as a leading sector is consistent with Indonesia's National Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPARNAS), which prioritizes cultural heritage as a key asset. Kesawan's transformation from a marginalized district into a proud urban icon illustrates how urban identity can be rediscovered through the interplay of modernization and heritage conservation.

In sum, Kesawan represents the confluence of colonial legacies, multicultural dynamics, and urban modernization. As Lowenthal (1985) argues, heritage is not merely about the past but about how the past is reinterpreted in the present. Academically, this study addresses a gap in the literature on heritage tourism in North Sumatra, a region less studied than Jakarta or Semarang. Practically, it provides insights into managing heritage areas through branding, digitalization, and sustainability. Thus, this paper examines Kesawan's revitalization between 2010 and 2025, highlighting how heritage branding and digital transformation have redefined its identity while negotiating challenges of commodification, sustainability, and authenticity.

Therefore, the core problem this study addresses is how Kesawan's revitalization between 2010 and 2025 reshaped its identity through heritage branding and digital transformation, while simultaneously confronting issues of commodification, sustainability, and authenticity. The objective is to analyze Kesawan's historical dynamics, evaluate branding and digitalization strategies, and assess their implications for sustainable heritage tourism in Medan City. In doing so, the study not only fills a gap in the literature—given that prior research has focused more heavily on Jakarta's Old Town or Semarang's Kota Lama—but also contributes theoretically to debates on heritage authenticity and digital transformation, and practically by offering insights for policymakers, communities, and stakeholders engaged in heritage tourism governance.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-historical method. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research lies in understanding the historical dynamics, policies, and development of heritage tourism in the Kesawan Area during the 2010–2025 period. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of human experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts, making it particularly suitable for exploring the historical significance and revitalization processes of heritage areas. In this context, the descriptive-historical method was applied not generically but specifically, by analyzing archival materials alongside contemporary narratives to trace how policies, branding strategies, and digital transformations shaped Kesawan's development.

This study takes the form of a case study focusing on the Kesawan Area of Medan City as its primary object. Iswadi et al. (2023) explain that case studies are appropriately used to examine contemporary phenomena in real contexts where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not always clear. Kesawan is regarded as a “unique case” because it reflects the interaction between colonial heritage, revitalization policies, and digital tourism. The choice of Kesawan as a single case also reflects its underexplored position compared to Jakarta Old Town or Semarang Old City, thereby strengthening its analytical value.

The research location was set in the Kesawan Area, Medan City, North Sumatra, particularly along Jalan Ahmad Yani and its surroundings, where historical buildings are concentrated. The study period is limited to 2010–2025, divided into two phases: 2010–2020 as the stage of revitalization and heritage branding, and 2020–2025 as the phase of digital-based revitalization and tourism strengthening. This division enabled comparative analysis between earlier branding-oriented strategies and later digital-based interventions.

The data consisted of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with stakeholders (local governments, heritage communities, tourism actors, and local communities). Secondary data included archives, policy documents, academic literature, media articles, and photographs of Kesawan's development between 2010 and 2025. The inclusion criteria for documents required explicit reference to Kesawan, Medan, or North Sumatran heritage policies, while materials unrelated to tourism or urban revitalization were excluded. Interviews were structured to represent four categories of stakeholders, ensuring balanced perspectives among policymakers, community actors, business participants, and area users.

Field observations were carried out by assessing the physical condition of buildings, tourist activities, and supporting infrastructure in Kesawan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including officials from the Medan City Tourism Office, leaders of heritage observer communities, MSME actors, and tourists. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), semi-structured interviews allow researchers to dig deeper into data while maintaining flexibility. The documentation study was conducted by reviewing government archives, media reports, academic publications, and photographic records related to Kesawan. In total, 15 interviews were conducted: five with government officials, four with heritage community leaders, three with MSME actors, and three with domestic and

international tourists. The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded, with themes inductively derived from recurring patterns across the data.

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative analysis using an interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1992), which involves three stages: data reduction, by selecting essential information from interviews, observations, and documents; data presentation, in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and visual photographs illustrating the development of Kesawan; and conclusion drawing/verification, by connecting field findings with the theories of heritage tourism, place branding, and smart tourism. The analysis emphasized how themes of branding, commodification, and digital transformation were constructed, with cross-checking between interviewees and documentary sources applied to strengthen interpretative validity.

To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques were applied. Denzin (2017) emphasizes that triangulation, which combines data from various sources (interviews, observations, and documents), ensures that findings are not dependent on a single source but are amplified through multiple perspectives. Beyond triangulation, reflexivity was also practiced by critically reflecting on the researcher's positionality and potential bias as an observer with both academic and local knowledge. Limitations of access, such as restricted availability of certain policy documents and the reliance on snowball sampling for community interviews, are acknowledged as factors that may have influenced the interpretation of results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Revitalization and Heritage Branding in Kesawan, 2010 – 2020

The period 2010–2020 marked the initial stage of the Medan City Government's policy to position Kesawan as a heritage district. Revitalization efforts were pursued through spatial improvements, the preservation of historic buildings, and the organization of annual cultural festivals. Among these, the Kesawan Festival functioned as a branding mechanism that promoted tourism while reinforcing Medan's image as a multicultural city. This heritage branding initiative created a symbolic identity for Kesawan as an icon of the city's historical legacy.

The branding strategy corresponds to the concept of place branding as articulated by Anholt (2007), which posits that urban spaces can be promoted through the mobilization of historical symbols and cultural values. In Kesawan's case, branding was not merely symbolic but a deliberate strategy to reposition the district within Medan's urban hierarchy. Compared to more established heritage destinations such as Jakarta Old Town and Semarang Old City, Kesawan's efforts remained relatively modest. Yet, they exemplified how secondary cities deploy heritage narratives to compete within Indonesia's broader tourism economy.

The findings suggest that the 2010–2020 period represented Kesawan's formative phase in constructing an identity as a heritage district. Revitalization initiatives, including cultural festivals, the preservation of colonial-era architecture, and the promotion of Kesawan as a civic icon, constituted strategic steps in developing place branding. This aligns with Anholt's (2007) theory that place branding enhances the attractiveness of destinations by deploying historical and cultural symbols.

However, theoretical integration also reveals deeper implications. While heritage branding stimulated local pride, it simultaneously provoked concerns over cultural commodification, particularly as events such as the Kesawan Festival became increasingly oriented toward attracting visitors rather than nurturing community-based preservation. This corresponds to Richards (2007), who emphasizes that culture-based events can strengthen urban identity and stimulate tourism growth, yet they also risk reducing culture into consumable spectacle. In Kesawan, heritage branding functioned not only to reintroduce historical values but also to foster local pride, thereby reflecting this dual dynamic.

At the same time, the findings highlight persistent challenges, including weak regulatory frameworks, limited conservation funding, and low levels of public awareness regarding the significance of heritage preservation. These constraints mirror the broader challenge identified by Smith (2006), namely that heritage is often perceived as a burden when not supported by effective policy structures. They also underscore a structural gap between policy ambitions and community participation, which remains a decisive factor in ensuring sustainable revitalization.

Statistical data from the Medan City Tourism Office recorded a 12% increase in visitors to Kesawan over the decade, with growth concentrated during festival periods. However, this rate lagged behind that of Jakarta Old Town (22%) and Semarang Old City (18%) during the same period. Similarly, MSME growth in Kesawan was reported at 8%, reflecting modest progress compared to more mature heritage cities. These figures underscore both the potential and the limitations of Kesawan's branding strategy during the 2010–2020 period.

Digital Revitalization and Smart Tourism, 2020 – 2025

The period 2020–2025 marked a significant transformation in the revitalization of Kesawan. The Medan City Government launched the Kesawan Old City Revitalization Program, which emphasized physical improvements, pedestrian-oriented spatial planning, and the digitalization of tourism promotion. The digital strategy was realized through the use of social media, official websites, and virtual tour applications designed to narrate Kesawan's historical heritage. This initiative resonates with the concept of Smart Tourism articulated by Gretzel et al. (2015), in which digital technology is deployed to enhance tourist experiences.

However, the discussion of smart tourism in Kesawan extends beyond the adoption of technology. While online platforms and virtual tours improved accessibility, they also raised concerns regarding the authenticity of heritage narratives. Cohen (1988) warned that cultural commodification risks reducing heritage into a consumable product. In Kesawan, digital storytelling occasionally simplifies complex colonial and multicultural histories into more easily marketable tourist content. This tension between accessibility and authenticity must be critically addressed, rather than celebrated as unqualified progress.

Findings from the study indicate a notable rise in domestic tourist arrivals to Kesawan, particularly through historical tour packages and culinary tourism promoted online. Data from the Medan City Tourism Office recorded a 15% increase in domestic visitors between 2020 and 2024, with culinary tourism accounting for nearly 40% of this growth. Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in culinary and souvenir production reported average annual revenue growth of 10%, although disparities persisted between digitally literate businesses and those excluded from digital platforms.

During this period, Kesawan's revitalization increasingly aligned with tourism digitalization. The government's adoption of social media, travel applications, and virtual tours illustrates its commitment to implementing smart tourism. Gretzel et al. (2015) explain that Smart Tourism integrates digital technology to enrich the visitor experience and enhance the efficiency of destination management. Yet the Kesawan case demonstrates that smart tourism is not merely a managerial tool but also a contested cultural process. While virtual tours increased visibility, they often privileged visually striking colonial architecture over narratives of labor, migration, and local resistance. This selective representation echoes Halbwachs' (2024) theory of collective memory, which emphasizes how social groups actively construct which pasts are remembered and which are forgotten. Consequently, digital revitalization should be understood as both a technological and political act of memory-making. The findings further indicate that this digital strategy successfully boosted domestic tourism, particularly in the historical and culinary segments, supporting Landry's (2012) theory of the Creative City, in which digital innovation revitalizes old districts into centers of creativity and economic growth.

Nonetheless, digital revitalization also exposed persistent inequalities. Many MSMEs continued to struggle with the digital divide, with only about 60% adopting online platforms for promotion by 2024. This situation confirms Coulson's (1999) observation that transitioning into a digital economy requires equitable adaptation and technological literacy to ensure inclusivity. In comparative terms, Jakarta Old Town and Semarang Old City benefited from stronger institutional support for digital integration, whereas Kesawan's progress was largely community-driven—highlighting both the resilience and the inherent limitations of its revitalization model.

Social, Economic, and Cultural Implications of Kesawan's Revitalization

The revitalization of Kesawan has generated impacts not only in the physical sphere but also across the social, economic, and cultural life of the community. Economically, the study found an increase in local economic turnover through culinary MSMEs, tour guide services, and creative products. Socially, the younger generation has developed new awareness regarding cultural heritage preservation, expressed through heritage communities and digital content

production. This aligns with the theory of Collective Memory advanced by Halbwachs (2024), which emphasizes that historical memory constitutes a shared identity transmitted through narratives and social practices.

The cultural implications, however, are more complex. While Kesawan festivals and digital storytelling fostered civic pride, certain heritage buildings risk losing their intrinsic value as they became commodified for tourism purposes. This corresponds with Cohen’s (1988) view on the dangers of cultural commodification in mass tourism. Rather than treating authenticity as a static concept, Kesawan illustrates how authenticity is constantly negotiated between commercial imperatives, local pride, and governmental branding agendas.

Table 1. Development of the Kesawan Area, 2010 – 2025

Era	Main Focus of Revitalization	Strategies Carried Out	Main Impact	Challenge
2010–2020	Revitalization & Branding Heritage	Cultural festivals, building maintenance, promotion of historical icons	Kesawan identity as a city icon	Minimal regulation, low awareness
2020–2025	Digital Revitalization & Smart Tourism	Digitization of promotions, virtual tours, pedestrian structuring	Tourists increase, MSMEs grow	Digital divide, authenticity

The revitalization of Kesawan has produced tangible benefits for the local economy. The expansion of culinary MSMEs, tour guide services, and creative industries demonstrates that heritage tourism can function as a driver of urban economic growth. According to Medan City Tourism Office data, tourist visits increased by 15% between 2020 and 2024, while culinary MSMEs reported an average turnover growth of 10%. However, compared to Jakarta Old Town (22%) and Semarang Old City (18%), Kesawan’s growth has been more modest, underscoring uneven outcomes of heritage-led revitalization across Indonesian cities.

This corresponds with Butler’s (1999) concept of sustainable tourism development, which stresses the importance of balancing cultural preservation with community welfare. Socially, the research found a rising awareness among the younger generation toward heritage preservation. This phenomenon resonates with Halbwachs’ (2024) theory of collective memory, which emphasizes that historical narratives and digital content play an essential role in sustaining a community’s shared memory.

The dissemination of narratives about Medan’s colonial history, trade legacies, and multicultural identity through digital platforms has fostered a stronger sense of belonging among the younger generation. Yet this digital memory production selectively emphasizes certain histories—such as colonial architecture and commerce—while marginalizing others, including labor struggles and minority contributions. This reflects Halbwachs’ (2024) observation that collective memory is socially constructed and contested, rather than merely preserved.

At the same time, the risk of cultural commodification in mass tourism remains salient, as Cohen (1988) warned. Certain heritage buildings are increasingly reconstructed with commercial orientations, threatening their authenticity. This risk is further exacerbated by digital marketing strategies that privilege visual appeal over historical accuracy, raising pressing questions about Kesawan’s capacity to sustain authenticity amid consumer-driven tourism pressures.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that Kesawan has been transformed from a neglected urban quarter into a branded heritage destination. The 2010–2020 phase emphasized heritage branding as a way to reintroduce Medan’s identity, while the 2020–2025 phase has centered on digitalization as a strategy for modern tourism adaptation. Kesawan illustrates how the theories of place branding Anholt (2007), Smart Tourism Gretzel et al. (2015), Creative City Landry (2012), and sustainable tourism Butler (1999) can be applied in the governance of historic cities. Yet, the challenges of the digital divide, commodification, and weak regulatory frameworks reveal that Kesawan’s revitalization is both an opportunity and a contested process. Compared with Jakarta Old Town and Semarang Old City, Kesawan’s trajectory highlights the possibilities and limits of heritage tourism in secondary Indonesian cities, underscoring the need for stronger policy support, sustained community engagement, and critical attention to authenticity.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Kesawan area has experienced two major phases of transformation between 2010 and 2025. The first phase (2010–2020) emphasized revitalization and heritage branding through building conservation, cultural festivals, and efforts to strengthen Kesawan’s identity as a historical icon of Medan. The second phase (2020–2025) was

characterized by digital revitalization and the adoption of smart tourism, with social media, virtual tours, and online platforms expanding Kesawan's visibility and supporting the growth of local creative industries. These changes not only enhanced tourism but also encouraged greater community awareness, particularly among younger generations, while at the same time raising issues such as the digital divide and risks to cultural authenticity.

Beyond documenting these developments, the study contributes to the broader discourse on heritage tourism by showing how digitalization can both empower and challenge heritage preservation. Kesawan, as a secondary heritage city often overlooked in Indonesian studies, offers valuable lessons on how urban revitalization and digital branding can stimulate economic growth while simultaneously exposing vulnerabilities related to regulation, inclusivity, and sustainability.

For future research, comparative cross-city studies would be beneficial to understand how different heritage destinations manage the balance between branding, digitalization, and authenticity. Quantitative assessments, such as tracking visitor numbers, MSME growth, and community participation, could also strengthen the evaluation of socio-economic impacts. Through such approaches, heritage tourism scholarship can move beyond descriptive accounts toward more critical and evidence-based insights into the complexities of heritage city management.

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