

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND TRUST IN BATIK SOLO TRANS: A TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

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Accepted 22 December 2025

Revised 29 August 2026

Approved 29 August 2026

ABSTRACT

In Surakarta, Batik Solo Trans (BST) forms the foundation of a social movement and urban identity. However, recent subsidy cuts and operational changes have led to a decline in service quality, eroding public trust. This paper examines public perceptions to develop a rebranding strategy based on Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and the ‘If I Were Them’ Perspective-Taking Theory. Data collection was based on a case study design, in which an online questionnaire was used to gather data between November and December 2025, covering 32 purposively selected respondents in the Greater Surakarta area. Descriptive quantitative data analysis showed that, whilst staff professionalism was appreciated, the unavailability of routes and unpredictable timetables were the main barriers to usage. Furthermore, it was found that there remains a significant degree of one-way communication between operators and the public. This study concludes that a change in visual branding alone is insufficient; to regain trust, strategic measures are required that focus on symmetrical two-way communication and adopting a perspective aligned with users’ actual needs. These findings offer a framework for how the Department of Transport can make the BST a more participatory and community-oriented service.

Keywords: Batik Solo Trans, perspective-taking, public trust, rebranding strategy, Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

INTRODUCTION

In the context of developing medium-sized cities in Indonesia, transportation is not only a means of movement but also the indicator of the capability of a city to serve its people. In the case of a city such as Surakarta (Solo) that is emerging in terms of cultural and economic power, the integrity of the transport is directly related to how the people perceive the performance of the city government. When the transportation system is effective, then it represents a contemporary, non-discriminative city. Nonetheless, in case of failure, it leaves a bad image not only of the vehicle but also of the institution that is operating it. Batik Solo Trans (BST) was established to be the backbone of this mobility, representing the city’s commitment to providing a safe, affordable, and integrated transit system. As the “face” of public service in Solo, BST holds a symbolic role; its performance is often seen by the public as a direct indicator of the local government’s quality of service. However, the reality of BST’s operation in recent years has shown a concerning disconnect between this ideal image and the passenger experience. Empirical data and the new analysis reveal the deterioration of the service quality,

specifically in the improper schedule and path that does not satisfy the passengers with their destination (Rahmawati et al., 2023; Mahendra, 2024). Such are not operational technological problems but failures of communication. Passengers will take it as an indicator that the operator is not concerned about them or is not keeping a promise when a bus is late or the route does not reach a very important destination. This phenomenon has transformed the issue to a mere lack of operational deficit but a wider crisis of public trust. Without providing this loss of trust, the whole system may become unsustainable, with disappointed users choosing to use their own cars rather than use the public transport, aggravating the congestion and pollution in Solo.

A technical solution will not do to solve this crisis. This paper claims that the strategy of the communication process based on Perspective-Taking and Two-Way Symmetrical Model is necessary to restore the confidence of the population. Perspective-taking is applied here as a definition, as well as an instrument of the analysis to see the reason why the passengers are not satisfied with what is offered by the management, but how they feel about it. Added to this is the Two-Way Symmetrical Model by Grunig and Hunt (1984), that offers the structure of rebranding. This theory explains that in order to restore a brand, the organization should cease one-way promotion and begin a two-way communication where the feedback provided by the user will be taken seriously to influence the policy. In the context of BST, this means rebranding is not about changing a logo, but about proving to the public that their voices are heard and acted upon. Although this issue is very urgent, there is a considerable concept gap in literature. Previous studies on BST have been heavily dominated by technical and operational evaluations, such as analyzing load factors, headway consistency, and physical infrastructure standards (e.g., Nugroho et al., 2022; Mahendra, 2024). Although these studies elaborate on how the organization operates the buses, they do not elaborate on how the organization handles its relationship with the mass when the services are decreasing. No research papers address the gap between operational performance and strategic communication management in regards to the Indonesian regional transport.

Thus, the given research will fill this gap by answering the following key research question: How can Batik Solo Trans use a rebranding strategy grounded in the opinions of users and two-way symmetrical communication to regain the public confidence? To provide a comprehensive answer, this question is broken down into three sub-questions: (1) How do users currently perceive the service quality and institutional image of BST? (2) To what extent does the current communication model of BST accommodate public criticism and aspirations? and (3) What specific rebranding strategies can be formulated to align operational improvements with public expectations?

Responding to these questions, the research can give three separate contributions. In theory, it can enhance the body of knowledge about the management of the public transport since it confirms the importance of communication theories (Perspective-Taking and Two-Way Symmetrical Model) in the resolution of operational crises. Practically, it provides the Surakarta Department of Transportation with a concrete, evidence-based strategy to recover BST's image. Contextually, it brings out the particular issues involved in keeping the people trusting the city, in Indonesia, medium sized, providing a template, capable of being scaled to other areas with the same issues.

METHODS

This study was conducted from November to December 2025 in Surakarta City. Data were collected online using a Google Form questionnaire to allow respondents to complete the survey flexibly. The study aims to understand public perceptions of the rebranding of the Batik Solo Trans (BST) public transportation service, including service quality and public trust.

A case study research method was employed, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon, namely public experiences and perceptions of BST. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which respondents were deliberately selected from

individuals who reside or carry out activities in Surakarta and its surrounding areas and who possess knowledge of or experience with BST. This selection was based on the consideration that BST users and individuals familiar with the service are the most relevant sources for evaluating service quality, levels of trust, and the need for BST rebranding.

This research is grounded in the Two-Way Symmetrical communication model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), which emphasizes reciprocal and balanced communication between organizations and their publics. The application of this model in contemporary organizational contexts has been demonstrated in recent studies, particularly in relation to public engagement and dialogic communication practices (Girsang & Kartikawangi, 2021; Andreu Perez et al., 2022).

Within this study, the Two-Way Symmetrical model is employed as an analytical framework to interpret public feedback regarding BST services and rebranding efforts. Public responses collected through the questionnaire are treated as a basis for understanding mutual expectations and identifying areas where organizational practices may be adjusted to better align with public needs.

The questionnaire consisted of five main sections: (1) Respondent Profile (gender, age, occupation), (2) BST Usage Experience (frequency of use, travel purposes, and service barriers), (3) User Perception and Satisfaction (punctuality, comfort, cleanliness, staff professionalism, and BST's contribution to mobility and environmental sustainability), (4) Experience Using the "Teman Bus" Application (frequency of use, information accuracy, and features requiring improvement), and (5) Rebranding and Service Improvement Suggestions (trust-building factors, recommendation intentions, expectations of public engagement programs, policy support, and service improvement priorities).

A total of 32 respondents participated in this study, with characteristics including age ranges from under 15 years old to adulthood, residence in Surakarta and surrounding areas, and varying levels of engagement with BST, ranging from active users to members of the public familiar with the service. Respondents also provided information regarding usage frequency as well as complaints and suggestions related to BST services.

Data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative analysis, including percentages and response trends, to identify dominant patterns in public perceptions and experiences. To strengthen the interpretation of findings, the analysis is further supported by the "If I Were Them" perspective, an interpretive approach rooted in ethical and communicative reasoning. This perspective is conceptually inspired by the Golden Rule and its critical reinterpretation by George Bernard Shaw, who argued that individuals should not assume others share the same preferences or expectations. Applied in this study, the "If I Were Them" perspective encourages understanding BST services and communication strategies from the users' point of view rather than projecting institutional assumptions. This approach enables the identification of gaps between public expectations and actual service experiences, which becomes a central focus of the Results and Discussion sections, particularly in evaluating the effectiveness of BST's rebranding efforts and public trust-building strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study are generated from questionnaire responses gathered from BST users and the general public. These findings linked to respondent profiles, BST usage patterns, service quality perceptions, and public trust levels are presented in this section.

Rentang Usia

32 responses

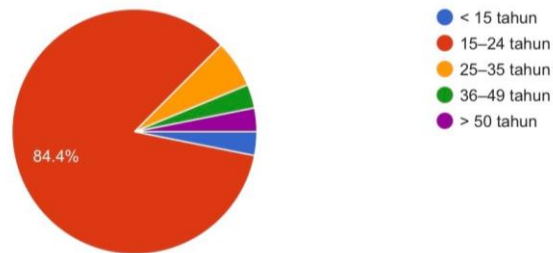


Figure 1. Age range distribution of respondents (n=32)

Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

Pekerjaan

32 responses

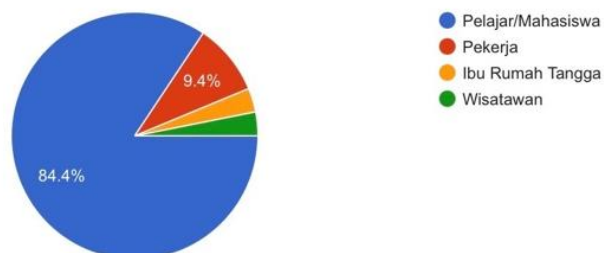


Figure 1. Occupational distribution of respondents (n=23)

Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

Jenis Kelamin

32 responses

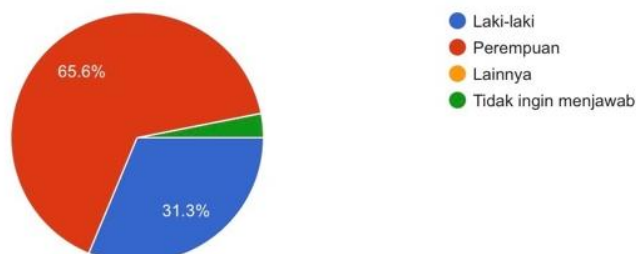


Figure 2. Respondets' Gender Distribution (n=32)

Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

The majority of the responders were within the age range 15-24 years old. Workers, tourists, and housewives made up the remaining responses, with the majority identifying themselves as students or university students. Female respondents in this questionnaire outnumbered male respondents in terms of gender distribution. This demographic distribution suggests that the data mostly reflects the perspectives of young people who are exposed or familiar with BST services.

Seberapa sering Anda menggunakan layanan BST dalam satu tahun terakhir?
32 responses

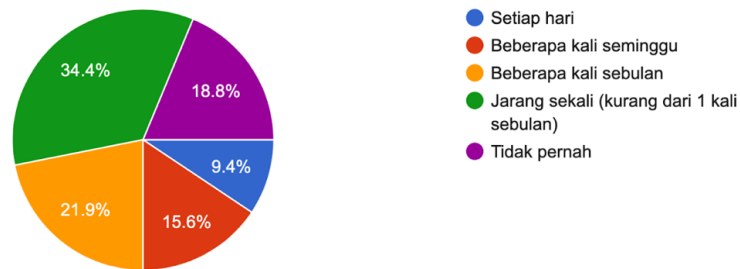


Figure 4. Respondents' frequency of BST usage during the past year (n=32)
Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

In terms of usage frequency, only few respondents said they used BST on a daily basis. Several respondents (21.9%) indicated using BST multiples times a month. However, a large amount (18.8%) of respondents claimed to have never used BST or to use it frequently, which is concerning in this case. This suggests that the majority of the respondents have not made BST as their primary transportation.

When it came to usage purposes, BST was most frequently (53.1%) (17 respondents) used for entertainment and shopping. A total of 28.1% (9 respondents) reported that BST was commonly used for educational purposes such as going to school or campus. They used BST for recreation or travelling, and 21.9% (7 respondents) said they used it for grocery shopping. The percentage of respondents that used BST for visiting friends or family was lower, at 12.5% (4 respondents). Meanwhile, two respondents or around 6.3% of the total, said they used BST to commute to work and the same number chose other unidentified uses. One respondent said they had never used BST, and the other one respondent said that they had used it for organisational or other purposes.

Bagaimana Anda biasanya mengakses halte BST?
32 responses

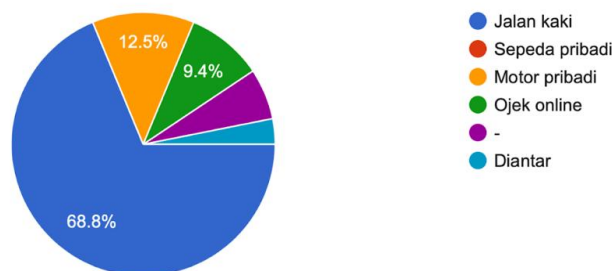


Figure 4. Respondents' modes to access to BST bus stops (n=32)
Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

According to the questionnaire about how the respondents access BST bus stop, 68.8% of respondents (22 respondents) reported accessing the bus stop by walking. Four responders, or 12.5% of the total, used their own motorcycles to get to BST bus stop. Furthermore, 9.4% (4 respondents) said they used online transportation to get there. The other responses were accounted by a lower percentage of respondents who used different forms of transport or were dropped off at the bus stops. As the questionnaire responses, 65.6% of respondents (21 respondents) stated that BST routes do not reach their destinations, which was the most commonly cited reason for using BST infrequently or never. Furthermore, personal vehicles were favored by 34.4% of respondents (11 respondents), while online transportation services were preferred by 34.4% (11 respondents).

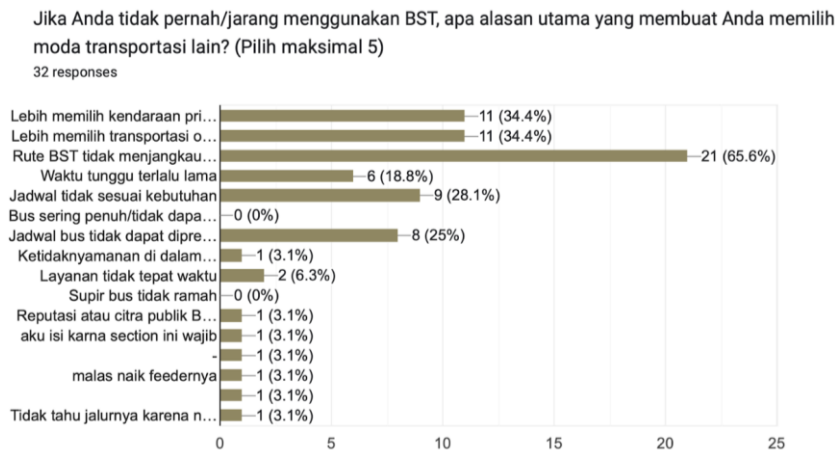


Figure 5. Respondents' primary factors for choosing alternative transportation modes instead of BST (n=32)
Source: Primary data, processed by the authors

Unpredictable bus schedules were cited by 25% of respondents (8 respondents) and schedules that are not consistent with user's activities by 28.1% of respondents (9 respondents). Additionally, six respondents or 18.8% of the sample, said that the long wait times discouraged them from using BST. Route coverage, time efficiency, and schedule consistency continue to be the major challenges to BST effectiveness as only a tiny percentage of respondents identified other minor problems, such as limited fleet availability or not enough bus stop facilities.

The findings indicate that respondents' opinion of BST service quality are vary. The results indicate that opinions of BST service quality tended to be neutral to moderate, with dissatisfaction showing up more frequently in several areas of the service. Respondents' opinions of the punctuality range from neutral to favorable 43.8% indicate satisfaction and 46.9% stated natural impressions. About 9.4% of participants had negative opinions regarding BST's punctuality. This result suggest that some customers might not view the schedule probability positively. In general, people's opinions of the bus level of comfort were neutral to positive. While 15.6% of respondents had neutral opinion, the majority 75.5% of respondents said they were satisfied with their comfort levels. Merely 9.4% of those surveyed expressed dissatisfaction. This indicates that, BST has achieved a high degree of satisfaction. More positive ratings were given to decline lines of buses and the bus stations. Well, 25% of respondent choose neutral answers, 68.8% of respondent say they were satisfied with the cleanliness conditions. There were a few negative opinions just around 6.2% respondents say they were dissatisfied. The finding show that cleanliness is not the major concern.

The professionalism and attitude of the staff we're at moderately. 71.9% expressed satisfaction, 21.9% had indifferent opinions and 6.3% had poor opinions. Staff performance was seen somewhat more favorably than other the other services. Despite this different opinions about the quality of the services, most respondents agreed that VSD is crucial for Kota Surakarta's public transport. Strong awareness of BST's value in providing public transport needs is demonstrated by the fact that 87.5% of respondents ranked it as very important.

However, opinions on how well BST met the needs of public transport were more mixed. 28.1% of respondents had slight to negative opinions, compared to 71.9% who had positive to neutral opinions. This implies an inconsistency between BST's current performance and its imagined significance.

Respondents expressed strong trust in BST's ability to lessen pollution and traffic congestion in terms of environmental impact. Just 3.1% of respondents indicated negative opinions, 31.3% chose neutral replies, and 65.7% of respondents expressed high impressions. Different levels of participation are shown by respondents' experiences using the Teman Bus application. A significant number of respondents say they use it rarely. 61.5% of respondents indicated low frequency of use. Just 15.3% of respondents claim high frequent use, while the

23.1 person replied with neutral usage frequency. this result reflects that most BST users are still not using the Teman Bus application as a regular application. Respondents' opinions were mainly unbiased about how accurate the application regarding the bus positions and arrival for information was. 43.5 of respondents had positive opinions, but nearly half of respondents 47.8% chose neutral answers. Only 8.6% of respondents express disappointment, indicating a low level of negative perceptions. Suggest that in spite of the application's popular image as dependable, users' expectations have not always been satisfied by its performance.

Respondents clearly highlighted real-time information when asked which features in the Teman bus application should be improved first. Bus arrival notifications were the most popular feature, followed by 73.9% of respondents. 52.2% offer respondents interactive road maps and passenger capacity information after this. A much smaller percentage of respondents choose other features, such as price and promotional information or user interface improvements. These results show that functional aspects that help directly in the transportation planning should be given priority.

A number of varieties were found to have an impact on public trust in BST services. 56.3% of respondents chose safety and comfort as the most important factor. Fleet availability (43.8%) and on-time bus schedule (53.1%) came next. While staff professionalism and bus cleanliness were chosen by smaller proportions of respondents (21.9%) each. Clear information about routes and schedules was also considered crucial by 44.8% of respondents. These suggest that the core operational stability is the primary factor influencing trust in BST.

Furthermore, respondents indicated that they would be highly likely to suggest BST to others if improvements to services were regularly executed over the course of the next six months. Just 9.4% of respondents said they had neutral to negative intentions to recommend BST, compared to 90.7% who said that they had enthusiastic views. This implies that the standard services could significantly increase popular support for BST. However, respondents' expectations were more fair when asked about possible public reaction in the case that BST surfaces do not improve within the next two to three years. Due to lack of options, 37.5% of respondents said they would keep using BST. In the meantime, 21.9% say they would like to go back to private vehicles, while 34.4% that they were likely to switch to online transportation services. And just 6.2% of respondents say that they were unsure or uninterested. These results show that if surface quality is unchanged, ridership could drop.

Finally, perceptions regarding whether or not public voices are actually taken into consideration in BST management, were largely neutral. Neutral replies were chosen by 62.5% of respondents, but positive and negative replies were given by 18.8% each. This shows that public involvement in BST decisions is not highly valued, showing that communication and engagement techniques could be improved.

If I Were Them Approach: User Perspectives on BST Services

The findings of this study show that Batik Solo Trans (BST) is seen as an important mode of public transport for the people of Surakarta, but it is not yet fully utilized as the primary choice for daily mobility. Although 87.5% respondents stated that BST plays a very important role in supporting the city's public transportation, the level of BST usage is still relatively low. This situation reflects a gap between the function of BST in its normative policy and its initial implementation objectives, which were expected to provide optimal services but have not been fully realized in practice, as reflected in users' experiences when accessing BST services.

Using the "If I Were Them" approach, researchers aim to understand how users assess BST based on their own needs and experiences. According to the questionnaire result, the main reasons influencing their decision to use BST are not only affordable prices or the social objectives of public transportation, but also the reliability of the service in supporting their daily activities. Meanwhile, this study also shows that limited route coverage, inconsistent bus schedules, and long waiting times are the main reasons respondents rarely use BST.

Such results are aligned with the research by Nugroho, Rahayo, and Istnabi (2022), which stated that the effectiveness of public transport is highly influenced by its ability to directly meet user's mobility needs. In addition, the findings also supported by Mahendra's (2024) evaluation of BST's operational performance also shows that punctuality and schedule consistency remain major challenges in BST services. From the user's perspective, this uncertainty can disrupt routine and time-bound activities, such as going to school, university, or work.

Nevertheless, the results of the study also show that the aspects of comfort, cleanliness, and professionalism of BST officers are rated quite well by most respondents. Previous research by Pangaribuan and Yenita (2023) claim that cleanliness and the attitude of officers are factors that support customer satisfaction. However, from the perspective of "If I Were Them," these factors are not yet able to compensate for the shortcomings in service reliability. In other words, users tend to prioritize punctuality and ease of access over comfort alone.

Two-Way Symmetrical Model: Communication Ways between BST and the Public

From a public relations perspective, communication between Batik Solo Trans (BST) and the public is an important element in building trust and shaping a positive image of public transport services. The results of this study show that most respondents gave neutral answers regarding whether the public's voice is truly taken into consideration in the management of BST. It indicates that although BST has engaged in various forms of communication with the public, the process is not yet fully perceived as effective two-way communication.

According to the two-way symmetrical communication model proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), ideal communication occurs when organizations and the public listen to each other, are open to input, and are willing to adjust policies based on mutual interests. In this context, communication not only serves as a means of conveying information, but also as a space for dialogue that allows for interaction between the organisation and its public. However, based on the results of the study, BST's communication pattern still tends to focus on one-way information delivery, such as route announcements or operational policies, rather than efforts to build active dialogue with users.

This condition is aligned with Putra and Haryono (2024)'s findings, which states that public transportation communication is still dominated by an informative approach and is not yet optimal in involving the community as the participator. As a result, the public often feels that their aspirations and complaints are not really taken into account in decision-making, even though formal communication channels are available.

The use of the Teman Bus application as a digital communication medium for BST also shows less optimal results. The research findings show that the majority of respondents rarely use the application and have a neutral assessment of the accuracy of the information presented. This supports the findings of the study Rahmawati et al. (2022), which concluded that the success of public transport applications is highly dependent on data accuracy, system reliability, and their ability to present information in real-time. When the information provided is inconsistent with conditions on the ground, user confidence in the application and the managing institution may decline.

From the user's perspective through the "If I Were Them" approach, the Teman Bus application should be the primary tool for planning daily trips. Therefore, respondents' demands for improved features such as bus arrival notifications, interactive route maps, and passenger capacity information indicate that the public expects practical communication that directly addresses their needs. This expectation reflects the public's desire to be actively involved in the service system, rather than merely being passive recipients of information.

Furthermore, a symmetrical two-way communication approach is also closely related to the formation of public image and trust. Kent and Taylor (2021) emphasize that dialogic communication in digital public relations requires organizations to provide a space for

interaction that is responsive, transparent, and sustainable. In the context of BST, the low public perception of their involvement in decision-making indicates a gap between user expectations and the communication practices carried out by managers.

Thus, the results of this study confirm that BST communication needs to be directed towards the more concrete application of the two-way symmetrical communication model, both through the optimization of digital media such as the Teman Bus application and through other public participation mechanisms. This approach is expected to not only increase communication effectiveness but also strengthen a sense of ownership, trust, and a positive image of BST as a public transport service that is responsive to the needs of the community.

Implications for Image and BST Rebranding Efforts

Findings of the study have an important impact for the image of BST and possible future rebranding strategies. Currently, it can be argued that the overall image of BST is ambiguous. On the one hand, BST is perceived as an important form of public transport that plays a strategic role in supporting urban mobility. On the other hand, inconsistent service experiences have prevented users from developing optimal trust in the brand.

Research studies on rebranding in the service sector shows that brand image can be significantly affected by the connections between the message conveyed and the experience felt by users (Nova, 2022). In the context of BST, the results of this study suggest that rebranding efforts can not only focus on visual aspects or promotional communications, but must be accompanied by real improvements in service quality. This is related with research by Alemu and Hamid (2024), which emphasises that successful image changes must be supported by operational changes that are directly felt by customers.

Meanwhile, the high intention of respondents to recommend BST if there is an improvement in service shows that BST's image can still be improved. This can be supported by research on the influence of rebranding on brand image and customer loyalty, which claims that customer satisfaction and trust are the most crucial factors to successful rebranding strategy (Nova, 2022). Conversely, the respondents' tendency to switch to online transportation or private vehicles if there is no improvement in service indicates a risk of a decline in image and loyalty in the future.

Therefore, BST rebranding should be understood as a long-term process that focuses on improving service quality, strengthening two-way communication, and adapting to user needs. By applying the "If I Were Them" approach and more symmetrical two-way communication principles, BST has the opportunity to rebuild public trust and strengthen its image as a modern, reliable, and community-oriented public transport system in Surakarta City.

CONCLUSION

This study examined public perceptions of Batik Solo Trans (BST) in relation to service quality, public trust, and rebranding efforts. The findings indicate that BST is generally perceived as an important public transportation service in Surakarta. However, the results also show that public appreciation of BST's role does not always translate into frequent usage. Factors such as route coverage, schedule consistency, waiting time, and access to service information remain key concerns that influence users' overall experiences and satisfaction.

The relationship between theory and findings is reflected through the application of the Two-Way Symmetrical communication model and the If I Were Them perspective. The results suggest that while BST has established channels for delivering information, public feedback has not yet been fully perceived as influencing service improvement. This condition indicates that symmetrical communication, which emphasizes mutual understanding and organizational responsiveness, has not been optimally implemented. The If I Were Them perspective further reveals that users evaluate BST based on practical, experience-based considerations rather than institutional intentions, highlighting the gap between organizational assumptions and public expectations.

The findings underline the importance of rebranding BST not merely as a visual or promotional effort, but as a process closely linked to service performance and public engagement. Rebranding is perceived as meaningful only when accompanied by consistent service improvements and communication practices that reflect users' needs and experiences. Without tangible changes in reliability and accessibility, rebranding initiatives may have limited impact on public trust.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that BST prioritize service reliability, improve access to clear and accurate information, and strengthen participatory communication mechanisms that allow public feedback to inform decision-making. Enhancing two-way dialogue with users and aligning rebranding strategies with actual service experiences may contribute to stronger public trust and more sustainable use of public transportation in Surakarta.

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