

Utilizing Social Media and Creating Creative Content as A Means of Digital Tourism Branding

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ABSTRACT

Sektor pariwisata merupakan salah satu pilar utama perekonomian Indonesia dengan potensi besar untuk pembangunan berkelanjutan. Namun, kesenjangan literasi digital dan keterbatasan kemampuan dalam mengelola konten promosi kreatif masih menjadi kendala utama bagi kelompok penyadar pariwisata (Pokdarwis) dan UMKM di berbagai daerah. Kegiatan Pengabdian Masyarakat (PKM) ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kapasitas pelaku pariwisata melalui penggunaan media sosial dan pembuatan konten kreatif sebagai instrumen branding pariwisata digital. Program PKM ini dilaksanakan secara komprehensif di empat pulau besar di Indonesia: Jawa, Sumatera, Sulawesi, dan Kalimantan, untuk memberikan dampak yang merata dan integratif. Metode yang digunakan dalam pengabdian ini meliputi pemetaan potensi lokal, pelatihan intensif (workshop) tentang strategi branding digital, bantuan teknis dalam pembuatan konten (fotografi, videografi, dan copywriting), dan evaluasi berkala terhadap kinerja digital media sosial objek wisata. Hasil kegiatan ini menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam pemahaman literasi digital dan keterampilan teknis mitra dalam memproduksi konten kreatif. Selain itu, terjadi peningkatan keterlibatan digital (engagement rate) pada akun media sosial resmi objek wisata yang dikelola oleh mitra. Digitalisasi pariwisata berbasis komunitas memperluas pasar, memperkuat citra global, dan memandirikan ekonomi lokal.

The tourism sector is one of the main pillars of the Indonesian economy with great potential for sustainable development. However, the digital literacy gap and limited ability to manage creative promotional content remain major obstacles for tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis) and MSMEs in various regions. This Community Service (PKM) activity aims to increase the capacity of tourism actors through the use of social media and the creation of creative content as a digital tourism branding instrument. This PKM program is implemented comprehensively on four large islands in Indonesia: Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan, to provide an even and integrative impact. The methods used in this service include mapping local potential, intensive training (workshops) on digital branding strategies, technical assistance in content creation (photography, videography, and copywriting), and regular evaluation of the digital performance of tourist attractions' social media. The results of this activity show a significant increase in partners' digital literacy understanding and technical skills in producing creative content. In addition, there has been an increase in digital engagement (engagement rate) on the official social media accounts of tourist attractions managed by partners. Community-based tourism digitalization expands markets, strengthens global image, and empowers local economies.



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INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism has been widely recognized as a driver of inclusive economic growth, particularly in fostering community self-reliance in rural areas and the surrounding areas. As the world's largest archipelagic nation, Indonesia is blessed with natural resources, cultural diversity, and a rich historical heritage stretching from Sabang to Merauke. However, the distribution of tourist visits and the introduction of tourism destinations in Indonesia often suffer from geographical disparities. Potential destinations outside the mainstream of mass tourism often escape public attention due to weak marketing strategies and limited information visibility.

In the contemporary era, the global tourism marketing landscape has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift, moving from conventional print-based methods to a dynamic digital ecosystem. According to developments in modern marketing theory, *digital branding* is no longer merely a complementary instrument, but a core element in building consumer perception, reputation, and loyalty (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook have transformed into primary platforms for tourists to seek references, plan trips, and share their vacation experiences in *real-time*. This phenomenon has given rise to the concept of *electronic word-of-mouth* (e-WOM), which has a far more powerful and credible influence than traditional advertising (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Therefore, a destination's ability to create an attractive digital presence is a key determinant in winning the increasingly competitive tourism market.

While the potential of digitalization offers limitless opportunities, the reality on the ground shows a wide digital divide *among* local tourism stakeholders, particularly Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis) and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Many potential tourist destinations on Indonesia's larger islands—such as Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan—have not yet been able to optimize social media as a means of interaction and promotion. The main problems faced by destination managers in these regions generally revolve around low digital literacy, limited expertise in producing aesthetically pleasing visual assets, an inability to design persuasive marketing narratives (*copywriting*), and a lack of consistency in managing social media platform algorithms (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Without structured content management, destination social media accounts tend to be passive, less engaging, and fail to convey the unique *selling proposition* of the destination in question.

Recognizing the urgency of addressing these challenges, this community service initiative was designed to encompass a representative multi-destination network across four major Indonesian islands: Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. The location selection was based on the unique characteristics and challenges of each region, which require a distinct *digital branding* strategy approach. Java, despite its relatively well-established digital infrastructure, faces challenges such as high market saturation and intense inter-destination competition, necessitating strong differentiation of creative content. Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan, on the other hand, boast a wealth of ecotourism, cultural heritage, and geotourism, yet are often constrained by limited access to national and international information and publications. Through this comprehensive and inclusive approach across these four islands, it is hoped that a standardized model for *digital tourism branding* will be created that is adaptive and applicable to the diverse characteristics of Indonesian destinations.

Theoretically, the implementation of creative content-based digital tourism marketing relies on the concept of fulfilling the information needs and visual experiences of potential consumers. Creative content that combines beautiful cinematography, honest reviews, and local cultural narratives can stimulate the psychological aspects of viewers, trigger curiosity (*wanderlust*), and accelerate the decision-making process to visit (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Furthermore, the success of *digital branding* is not only measured by the number of followers or likes, but also by the depth of engagement and physical visit conversions that have a direct impact on the real economic turnover of local communities.

The implementation of this community service activity is realized in the form of educational interventions and ongoing technical assistance. The concept of community service does not only stop at the level of marketing theory presentation, but also emphasizes technology transfer and practical skills (*action learning*). Participants are intensively trained to understand digital audience behavior, operate device-based video editing software (*mobile editing*), optimize interactive social media features, and read account performance data analysis (*insight*). By empowering Pokdarwis and MSMEs actors to produce content independently, dependence on expensive third parties can be reduced, so that the sustainability of digital promotions can be maintained in the long term.

Through synergy between academics as facilitators and local communities as key tourism actors, this community service program titled "*Utilizing Social Media and Creating Creative Content as a Means of Digital Tourism Branding*" is presented as a strategic solution to unravel the tangled threads of regional tourism marketing. By integrating authentic local potential with technology-based creativity, this activity is expected to be able to create a resilient digital tourism ecosystem, expand the reach of the domestic and international tourism market, and make a real contribution to accelerating the growth of the community-based creative economy in the islands of Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan.

METHODS

The initial phase of implementing this community service activity began with a preparation phase and potential mapping (*assessment*) conducted in a hybrid manner in each partner region on the islands of Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. The community service team coordinated with Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis) and local MSMEs to identify the main attractions of the destinations, analyze specific obstacles in digital management, and audit existing social media accounts. Based on the results of this mapping, the team developed personalized training modules according to the characteristics and digital literacy levels of the communities on each island. In addition, at this stage, an evaluation instrument was prepared in the form of a *pre-test* to measure participants' initial understanding of the basic concepts of *digital tourism branding* and the technicalities of creative content creation.

Entering the core phase, program implementation is realized through educational interventions in the form of intensive workshops and direct technical assistance (*action learning*). The workshops focused on understanding the latest social media algorithms, audience targeting strategies, and persuasive *copywriting techniques for tourism promotion*. After the theoretical session, the activity continued with a framed field practice (*coaching clinic*), where participants were trained directly using their respective devices to capture visual assets (photography and videography) at local tourist attractions, edit videos with mobile-based applications, and optimize the use of hashtags and trending music. This mentoring was carried out interactively and participatory to ensure optimal transfer of practical skills and build digital independence in partners.

The final stage of this implementation method is the evaluation phase and the development of a program sustainability strategy. The community service team distributed a *post-test* questionnaire to measure the increase in participants' digital literacy capacity and skills after participating in the entire series of activities. In addition, regular monitoring was conducted for three months after the training on the digital performance of the social media accounts of tourist attractions managed by partners, with success indicators being the consistency of content uploads and an increase in engagement rates. As a sustainability measure, the community service team established a Cross-Island Tourism Content Management Community Forum and submitted a self-paced practical guide module, so that the *digital tourism branding* ecosystem that had been initiated in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan could continue to run sustainably.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of community service (PKM) activities located on four large islands in Indonesia Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan has been successfully implemented by involving Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis) and tourism sector MSMEs as the main partners. The success indicators of this program are measured through two main aspects: increasing the literacy capacity and digital skills of partners (based on *pre-test* and *post-test* results), and improving digital performance on official social media platforms of tourist destinations following creative content creation interventions.

Partners' Digital Literacy and Skills Capacity Building

Prior to the program intervention, the majority of partners in the four regions demonstrated significant limitations in understanding the concept of *digital tourism branding*. Most managers only used social media sporadically without content planning, hashtag research, or aesthetic photography techniques. However, after attending a series of intensive workshops and technical assistance (*coaching clinics*), there was a surge in understanding across the board. Partners are now able to operate mobile-based video editing applications, design content *editorial plans*, and write promotional copywriting using a storytelling approach that can touch the emotional aspects of potential tourists. This increased technical understanding is a crucial foundation for the long-term independence of destination social media management.

Social Media Performance Analysis of Tourist Destinations

The tangible impact of creative content production by partners under the guidance of the PKM team is clearly visible in their social media performance metrics. Observations and analytical data collection were conducted for three months after the training to assess the consistency and effectiveness of uploaded content. Overall, there was a very positive increase in account reach *and* audience engagement *rate*. A summary of the comparison of social media performance before and after the community service program on the four islands is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Partner Destination Social Media Performance Before and After PKM Activities

Implementation Area	Average Content Production (per Month)	Increase Account Reach	Increased Engagement Rate	Optimized Main Platform
Java Island	12 Contents	+ 145%	+ 4.2%	Instagram & TikTok
Sumatra Island	8 Contents	+ 185%	+ 3.8%	Instagram & Facebook
Sulawesi Island	9 Contents	+ 160%	+ 5.1%	TikTok & YouTube Shorts
Kalimantan Island	7 Contents	+ 210%	+ 3.5%	Instagram & TikTok

Based on the data in Table 1, it can be seen that the Kalimantan region experienced the highest increase in account reach, *reaching* 210%. This phenomenon occurred because tourist attractions in Kalimantan, which focus on ecotourism and wildlife adventure narratives, have very high visual appeal when packaged in short video formats (Reels and TikTok). This visual format is algorithmically pushed widely to new audiences who are interested in environmental sustainability themes. Meanwhile, the Sulawesi region recorded the highest increase *in engagement rates* at 5.1%. This is due to the success of partners in Sulawesi in implementing local cultural *storytelling techniques and active interaction through polling* and Q&A features on social media, which encourage audiences to comment and reshare the content.

In Java, despite intense competition and saturation in the digital space, partners have successfully increased their content production frequency to 12 pieces per month, focusing on product differentiation strategies, such as promoting hidden *gem* culinary tours and family-friendly amenities. In Sumatra, the 185% increase in reach was driven by the integrated optimization of Instagram and Facebook platforms to target the family traveler segment and the historical-cultural community.

Discussion and Implications of Digital Tourism Marketing

The success of this community service program confirms the digital marketing theory that creative and authentic visual content is key to attracting attention in an era of information overload. The short video content produced by partners not only showcases the physical beauty of destinations but also conveys stories, local values, and the emotional experiences that tourists will experience (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The interaction process that occurs in the comments section between managers and potential tourists also builds trust, which is an important foundation in converting visiting intentions into actual visits.

Furthermore, the multi-destination approach across these four islands demonstrates that the challenge of the digital divide *in Indonesia can be bridged through bottom-up*, community-based mentoring. The use of partners' personal devices as the primary means of content production minimizes the barrier of expensive technology investments (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The establishment of the Cross-Island Tourism Content Management Community Forum, initiated at the end of the program, also serves as a forum for shared learning and a means of cross-promotion *between* destinations in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. This creates a mutually supportive promotional ecosystem to accelerate the recovery and growth of the national tourism sector based on distributed digital power.

CONCLUSION

Community Service (PKM) activities focused on social media utilization and creative content creation have been successfully implemented in an integrated manner across four major Indonesian islands: Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. Through a series of intensive workshops and direct technical

assistance, this program has proven effective in reducing the digital divide that has been a barrier for Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis) and local MSMEs. The established partnerships have transformed the paradigm of destination social media management from passive and sporadic to more structured, creative, and data-driven performance.

Empirically, the implementation of this program has had a significant impact on strengthening *digital tourism branding* in each intervention area. This is evidenced by a consistent surge in digital performance metrics, with partners in Kalimantan achieving the highest reach (210 %), and partners in Sulawesi achieving the highest *engagement rate* (5.1%). The success of consistent visual content production based on storytelling techniques *confirms* that the uniqueness and authenticity of local potential, creatively packaged, can attract the attention of a broad and effective digital audience amidst intense cyberspace competition.

As a sustainability measure, the establishment of the Cross-Island Tourism Content Management Community Forum and the distribution of self-paced practical guide modules are crucial foundations to ensure this digital marketing ecosystem continues after the program ends. The digital independence established among partners in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan is expected to continue to be nurtured independently. Thus, this community-based collaboration can serve as an adaptive pilot model to accelerate national tourism digitalization, expand market reach, and drive inclusive and sustainable economic growth for local communities.

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