

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN INCREASING THE NUMBER OF TOURIST VISITS TO THE BUKIT LAWANG TOURISM DESTINATION NORTH SUMATRA

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ABSTRACT

Tourism, as a key sector for global economic growth and cultural exchange, plays a crucial role worldwide. This research specifically examines the role of digital marketing in enhancing tourist visits to the destination of Bukit Lawang, North Sumatra. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, the study incorporates three case studies highlighting digitalization strategies in Village Tourism, infrastructure management, and social media optimization. Despite facing challenges of declining visits, the online approach adopted by hotels, tour agents, and the local community has proven the positive impact of digitalization. The study provides concrete recommendations for village tourism managers to improve performance through local digital initiatives, social media optimization, digital infrastructure enhancement, collaboration with the private sector, community digital training, and routine evaluation of digital marketing strategies. By integrating these measures, it is anticipated that tourism in Bukit Lawang can overcome challenges and build a robust foundation for sustainable growth. In conclusion, this research not only contributes to understanding the role of digital marketing in tourism but also offers practical guidance for stakeholders to optimize the tourism potential in this destination.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Village Tourism, Tourism Infrastructure, Social Media, Bukit Lawang, Tourism Management, Case Study, Marketing Strategy, North Sumatra Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a significant source of revenue for many countries worldwide, providing foreign exchange for development projects and mitigating trade deficits. According to Moenir et al. (2021), tourism plays a strategic role in regional economic growth and promotes cultural exchange. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (2021) recognizes the immense potential of tourism in enhancing a country's foreign exchange reserves. However, numerous tourist attractions experience a decline in visits due to products or services that lack value for visitors, as indicated by research conducted by Kurniawan et al. (2023). Beyond the services offered in tourism, the advancements in information technology and digital tools have brought about significant impacts across various sectors, including tourism. Tourism has emerged not only as a financial resource for a country but also as a strategic catalyst for regional economic growth. Its positive impact, as emphasized by Moenir and colleagues in 2021, extends beyond increased revenue to include the development of local infrastructure and cross-regional cultural exchange. However, some tourist destinations face serious challenges due to a decline in visits attributed to the perceived lack of appeal in products or services, as revealed by research conducted by Kurniawan and the team in 2023. Therefore, it is crucial for governments and stakeholders to conduct a thorough evaluation of the quality of services and products offered to ensure sustainable attractiveness. Additionally, the paradigm shift in tourism is occurring alongside advancements in information technology and digital devices, opening new opportunities in the tourist experience through the

implementation of mobile applications, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality. To meet the demands of an increasingly dynamic market, stakeholders in the tourism sector need to continuously adapt to technological developments to ensure the sector's sustainability.

Digital tourism marketing goes beyond official destination websites and travel companies, extending to campaigns strengthened by social media, search engines, and online reservation platforms. The pivotal role of digital marketing in tourism promotion is underscored by Arofah and Achsa (2022). Their research emphasizes the significance of online promotion and engaging virtual experiences, both capable of influencing an increase in tourist visits (Sigala and Gretzel, 2019). Notably, from December 2022 to January 2023, North Sumatra witnessed a substantial surge in tourist visits, as reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS: 2023). This surge indicates the effectiveness of the implemented digital tourism marketing strategy in capturing the interest and attention of tourists. With the discernible increase in visits, it can be inferred that the utilization of social media, search engines, and virtual experiences has made a significant positive impact on propelling the tourism industry in the region. Confronted by the dynamic trends of modern tourism, sustaining the implementation of digital marketing strategies becomes indispensable to consistently uphold positive growth in North Sumatra's tourism sector.

The success in attracting tourists through digital channels underscores the importance of adapting to evolving technologies and consumer behaviors. It signifies the need for ongoing innovation in digital marketing strategies to maintain relevance and effectiveness in a competitive tourism landscape. As the region continues to experience the positive outcomes of its digital tourism marketing endeavors, it reinforces the notion that a well-crafted and adaptive digital approach is a key driver for success in the contemporary tourism industry. In conclusion, the continued commitment to digital marketing strategies is imperative for North Sumatra to navigate the evolving tourism landscape and ensure sustained growth in visitor numbers. Bukit Lawang is a village located in North Sumatra, Indonesia, situated along the Bohorok River within the Gunung Leuser National Park. Renowned as a primary site for observing wild orangutans, it serves as the gateway to the tropical rainforest of Mount Leuser, one of Indonesia's largest conservation areas. However, tourist visits to Langkat, particularly in WKOB Bukit Lawang, saw a significant decline between 2014 and 2016. This decline was influenced by fiscal centralization decentralization changes, impacting local heritage attention. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2021 led to a drastic drop in tourist visits, causing a financial setback of 70-100% for the surrounding communities (Batubara et al., 2022; Susilawati, 2020). The number of visitors to Bukit Lawang also plummeted from 63,100 in 2019 to 13,400 in 2021 (Surbakti, 2022). Trekking remains one of the most popular activities for both domestic and international tourists. Facing these challenges, a collaborative approach involving the government, local communities, and relevant stakeholders becomes crucial. Joint efforts are needed to formulate and implement sustainable recovery strategies while simultaneously constructing effective tourism promotion campaigns. The government can play a role in providing policy support and regulations that bolster the local tourism industry. Meanwhile, the active participation of local communities in destination management is key, strengthening their involvement in recovery initiatives and sustainable development. Collaboration with relevant parties, including conservation institutions and private companies, must also be intensified to ensure that these collective efforts yield significant positive impacts for the recovery and growth of tourism in Bukit Lawang.

This research aims to analyze the efforts that tourism managers in Bukit Lawang should undertake to adopt digitalization for increasing tourist visits. The phenomenon indicates that tourists, both local and international, primarily acquire information about Bukit Lawang's attractions through online promotions conducted by hotels, travel agencies, and the local community, rather than from the official tourism managers (government). Therefore, this study aims to uncover suitable strategies for tourism managers to

utilize digitalization effectively in enhancing visitor numbers to attractions in Bukit Lawang. The implementation of digitalization in the tourism sector is considered a tool that provides convenience for tourists to access information about tourist destinations. Furthermore, digitalization is deemed capable of reducing costs for both organizers and managers while delivering economic benefits to tourists. This research highlights the crucial importance of digitalization strategies in promoting tourism, particularly through a digital approach, with the potential to develop the tourism potential of a village.

The implementation of digitization in the tourism sector is considered to provide convenience for tourists in accessing information about tourist destinations. Moreover, digitization is deemed capable of reducing costs for both organizers and managers, while simultaneously offering economic benefits to tourists. This research highlights the importance of digitization strategies in promoting tourism, particularly through digital approaches, which have the potential to develop the tourism potential in a village. In the context of Bukit Lawang, where online promotion has become the dominant information channel, a profound understanding of digitization strategies can be the key for tourism managers to maximize the attractiveness and sustainability of the local tourism industry.

The theoretical framework emerges from an extensive literature review, serving as the foundational structure for the examination of the case at hand. In this research endeavor, pertinent theoretical foundations are harnessed as a reference framework. This theoretical framework elucidates the conceptual groundwork for crafting research questions, hypotheses, or essential concepts intended for testing and exploration within the study. Its significance lies in its role as a guiding tool, enabling researchers to delineate variables, identify relationships among variables, and establish a robust conceptual groundwork for interpreting data. Through the incorporation of relevant theoretical foundations, this research gains a heightened focus, direction, and the potential for generating more meaningful findings. The theoretical framework stands as a pivotal instrument in structuring a resilient conceptual foundation and elucidating the key aspects to be scrutinized in the study. It is instrumental in framing the research inquiry within an established theoretical context, facilitating a more systematic exploration of the phenomena under investigation. Theoretical underpinnings not only provide a structured lens for understanding the complexities of the case but also contribute to the coherence and validity of the research outcomes. Thus, the integration of a well-considered theoretical framework serves as an indispensable component in enhancing the rigor and comprehensiveness of the study, ensuring that the research is situated within a broader intellectual framework and contributing meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge in the field. In essence, the theoretical framework functions as a cornerstone, guiding the research process and enhancing the scholarly depth of the investigation.

Table 1.1 Theoretical Basis

No	Variabel	Indikator	Parameter
1.	Tourism Village	Tourism Village Management	1. Active participation of the local community 2. Tourist attractions 3. Existence of partnership collaboration
		Availability of infrastructure	1. Good road access 2. Availability of good facilities and services for tourists

2.	Digitalization of Tourism	Forms of Tourism Digitalization	1. Online promotion media 2. Availability of information on online platforms 3. Availability of tour packages on online platforms 4. Availability of e-ticketing
		Management of Tourism Digitalization	1. Existence of management team 2. Provision of training and socialization on tourism digitalization for the community

METHOD, DATA, AND ANALYSIS

The Research Methodology is a scientific approach to obtaining data to achieve specific objectives (Sugiyono, 2014). The use of this method aims to ensure systematic stages in data collection. In this study, a secondary data collection method was employed, involving indirect data sources such as books, journals, and institutional documents. The applied analysis method is qualitative analysis, involving content analysis and/or literature review. A qualitative approach has been chosen to provide a profound and contextual understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Additionally, the sustainability of this analytical method is expected to yield interpretations that are more holistic and in depth, particularly concerning the conceptual framework employed in this research. The procedural steps of this method are anticipated to lay a strong foundation for a careful understanding and organization of research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussion in this research takes three case studies of tourism digitization in tourist villages.

1. Mumtaz, (2022)

Empowering village communities and managing local natural resources can turn a village into a tourist destination, known as a tourist village. The application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in tourist villages, especially in the marketing aspect, is often referred to as tourism digitization. Digital marketing is considered a necessity to enhance the promotion of tourist destinations. With the development of tourist villages and tourism digitization, many benefits are obtained, such as facilitating the provision of tourism services to tourists, including access to marketing organization, making it easier for tourists to access information about a tourist destination, and minimizing costs for both organizers and managers, as well as for tourists. The indirect result of digitization in tourist villages can increase community income and ultimately contribute to the economic improvement of the region. Overall, the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the management and marketing of the tourist village is a crucial key to enhancing the attraction and sustainability of the destination. Tourism digitalization brings significant benefits, not only in facilitating service provision to tourists and accessing destination information but also in reducing operational costs and increasing local community income. By creating new opportunities to reach a broader market and enhancing the tourist experience, the role of tourism digitalization has a significantly positive impact on local economic growth and the sustainable development of tourism. This conclusion emphasizes that leveraging ICT in the context

of tourist villages is not only a relevant strategy but also a key to achieving success and competitiveness in the tourism destination in this digital era.

2. Muliawanti, (2020)

The development of tourism promotion in Magelang Regency is not only focused on marketing mixes. Through advertising strategies, promotions, and various public relations activities on social media, Genpi aids the decision-making process based on user experiences, visits, and references—a highly effective promotional tool. Community-based tourism and the active role of the community in promoting tourism through digital approaches have a significant impact on the development of potential and tourism promotion in Magelang Regency. The success of this promotion can be measured by an increase in tourist visits, empowerment of the local economy, and the development of a positive destination image. By leveraging digital interactions and active community participation, Magelang Regency is capable of delivering a unique and profound tourist experience, creating sustainable appeal for tourists. Through the integration of advertising strategies, promotions, and various social media community activities, Genpi not only serves as an effective promotional tool contributing to decision-making processes based on user experiences, visits, and references but also reinforces a positive impact on the development and promotion of tourism potential in Magelang Regency. The success of these promotions can be measured through an increase in tourist visits, contributing to local economic empowerment, and enhancing the positive image of the destination. By maximizing digital interactions and engaging active community participation, Magelang Regency has successfully crafted a unique and profound tourist experience, creating a sustainable appeal for visitors. Digital innovations and community involvement stand as crucial pillars in designing memorable and enduring tourist experiences.

3. Aziz, (2022)

The implementation of digital tourism development is not merely a distant concern but must be concretely realized in conjunction with the fulfillment of facilities and infrastructure related to the internet as its main medium. The AIDDA model, developed and then adopted as a prototype, is employed in tourism marketing. The target of digitalizing tourism in this model encompasses Awareness, Interest, Desire, Decision, Action to encourage tourists to explore new destinations offered. As a result, tourists are not only presented with the enjoyment of natural tourism but are also provided with a wealth of educational information often not revealed during self-guided internet-based tourism. Guidelines for the development of digital tourism in Indonesia are based on digital tourism. Firstly, innovation in tourism through digital media is one way to appreciate the fundamental goals of national tourism development, including increasing foreign exchange earnings, expanding opportunities, including job opportunities, and promoting supporting activities and industries, among other side products. Secondly, the model that can be realized in the implementation of digital tourism in Indonesia is the digital e-tourism model. Here is a matrix of case studies containing conclusions from each case study on tourism digitalization in the tourist village. When involving the AIDDA model in digital tourism marketing, the implementation should go beyond mere theoretical consideration and be concretely realized by ensuring the availability of internet-related infrastructure and facilities as its primary medium. The AIDDA model, utilized as a prototype in tourism marketing, encompasses stages of Awareness, Interest, Desire, Decision, and Action. The objective of digitizing tourism using this model is to encourage tourists to explore new offered destinations. Consequently, tourists not only enjoy the beauty of nature but also gain a wealth of educational information that might not be revealed during self-guided internet-based tourism.

Guidelines for the development of digital tourism in Indonesia emphasize two main aspects. Firstly, tourism innovation through digital media is seen as a means to achieve the goals of national tourism development, including increased foreign exchange earnings, job opportunities, support for related activities and industries, as well as the development of ancillary products. Through this approach, the government aims to stimulate economic growth in the tourism sector and its related industries.

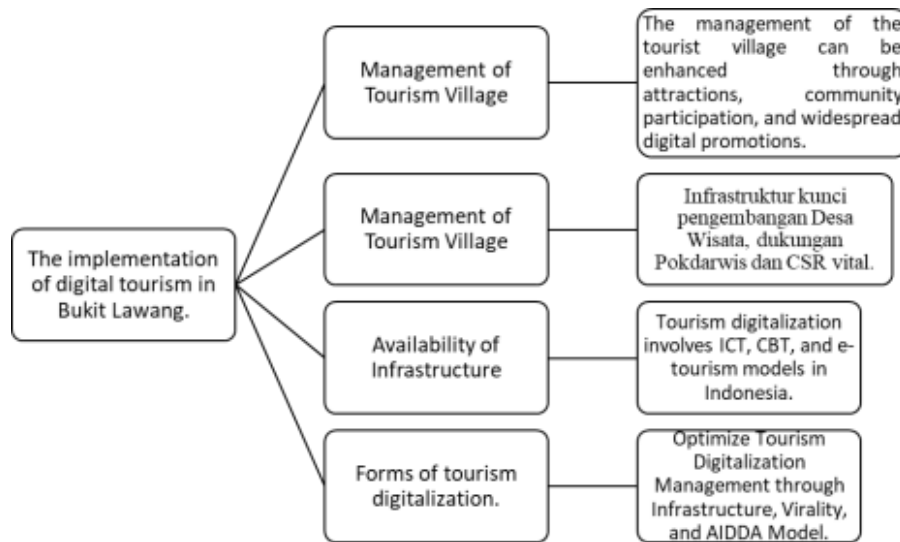
Secondly, the model that can be realized in the implementation of digital tourism in Indonesia is the e tourism digital model. This model involves the use of information and communication technology to enhance the tourist experience, promote destinations, and support various aspects of tourism. In this framework, a case study matrix is compiled to summarize the conclusions from each digital tourism case study in tourist villages. Through the implementation of the digital e-tourism model and the innovative use of digital media, it is expected that Indonesia's tourism can further thrive, attract foreign tourists, provide job opportunities, and stimulate the growth of related sectors. As part of the tourism development strategy, the use of digital technology is anticipated to help achieve national development goals while preserving Indonesia's cultural diversity and natural beauty. In conclusion, these guidelines reflect a commitment to bring digital innovation to advance Indonesia's tourism sector to a higher level.

Tabel 1.2 Case Study Matrix

No	Lokasi Studi Kasus	Variabel Desa Wisata		Variabel Digitalisasi Desa Wisata	
		Indikator	Parameter	Indikator	Parameter
1.	Desa Wisata, Mumtaz, (2022)	Tourism Village Management	Tourist attraction	Forms of tourism digitalization	The implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in tourist villages, especially in the marketing aspect, is often referred to as tourism digitalization.
		Infrastructure Availability	Development of tourist villages through village infrastructure	Tourism Digitalization Management	Improving tourism village management, tourist village infrastructure, forms of tourism village digitalization, and tourism digitalization management

2.	Candi Borobudur, Magelang Muliawanti , (2020)	Tourism Village Management	The active role of the community in promoting tourism through digital approaches in Magelang Regency.	Forms of tourism digitalization	Community-based Tourism (CBT).
		Infrastructure Availability	Facilitate the improvement of the role of community organizations (Pokdarwis) and direct community funds from private companies (CSR) for the development of community organizations in the field of tourism.	Tourism Digitalization Management	On social media, the primary objective of digitizing this destination is virality. Virality is an effective promotional strategy with an unlimited reach.
3.	Aziz, (2022)	Tourism Village Management	All promotional activities related to the development of digital tourism can target all segments of society in various layers.	Forms of tourism digitalization	The implementation of digital tourism in Indonesia is the e tourism digital model.
		Infrastructure Availability	The self empowerment tourism program is a form of synchronized effort for optimal development.	Tourism Digitalization Management	The implementation of the AIDDA model using internet elements.

CONCLUSION



Sumber :Analisi, (2023)

In the context of analyzing three case studies related to digital marketing in Bukit Lawang, it can be concluded that digital tourism management plays a crucial role in shaping and enhancing tourist visits. Despite facing challenges, such as a significant decline in visits during certain periods due to financial decentralization issues and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is evident that digital marketing strategies involving Village Tourism Management, infrastructure improvement, and social media optimization play a central role in sustaining and enhancing the destination's appeal. The Village Tourism Management has proven its success as a relevant and effective strategy in overcoming various challenges, making a positive contribution to the recovery of the tourism industry. Meanwhile, infrastructure improvement and social media optimization have become crucial pillars in maintaining the sustainability and relevance of the destination in this digital era. By adapting to changes and enhancing competitiveness through digital initiatives, Bukit Lawang has successfully embraced and retained the interest of tourists. The central role of digital marketing, involving close collaboration with various stakeholders, has a significant positive impact. Therefore, the continuous attention to the development and strengthening of more advanced digital marketing strategies, as well as the sustainability of the Village Tourism Management, is crucial to ensure that this destination continues to grow and maintains its position as a sought-after tourist destination. With a particular focus on online promotions conducted by hotels, tour agencies, and the local community, digitalization becomes a vital instrument in providing necessary information and attracting tourists. The positive role of digitalization seems to make a significant contribution to the development of the tourism sector in Bukit Lawang. Despite external dynamics such as changes in financial systems and the impact of the global pandemic, adaptive responses to digital trends have helped this destination remain relevant and attractive to travelers.

In line with this, the importance of developing digital tourism in Bukit Lawang is not only situational but also strategic and sustainable. This conclusion emphasizes the need to continue optimizing digital marketing, improving the quality of services, and maintaining environmental and cultural sustainability as crucial elements in ensuring the attractiveness and growth of tourism in this destination. Therefore, the development of digital tourism in Bukit Lawang is not just a response to challenges but a proactive step to make this destination a pioneer in keeping up with global developments and meeting the expectations of modern travelers.

Recommendations for village tourism managers in digitalizing tourism:

- 1) Local digital initiative: Intensify local digital initiatives by involving the community, hotels, and tour agents. Local involvement can enhance the destination's appeal.
- 2) Optimize social media: Utilize social media as the primary promotional tool. Online engagement can create a viral effect and increase awareness of Bukit Lawang.
- 3) Improve digital infrastructure: Ensure that digital infrastructure supports visitors, including internet access and online booking platforms.
- 4) Private sector collaboration: Build partnerships with private companies, including hotels and tour agents, to support digital promotion. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) involvement from the private sector also encourages positive outcomes.
- 5) Community digital training: Provide digital training to empower the community in online promotion. Empowering the community digitally can create a positive impact on village tourism development.
- 6) Evaluate digital strategies: Routinely evaluate and update digital marketing strategies. Follow up on technology trends and online consumer habits to enhance the destination's

Limitations of the Study

In the context of this research, several limitations arise, encompassing spatial and temporal constraints, restricted availability of historical data before the year 2014, and reliance on the use of secondary data. These limitations have implications for the scope, depth, and generalizability of the research findings. Spatial and temporal constraints introduce the possibility that the research findings may be confined to specific regions and time periods. This necessitates caution when attempting to generalize the results to a broader context. The spatial limitations may limit the applicability of the findings to specific locales, potentially overlooking variations that might exist in different geographical areas. Similarly, temporal constraints may hinder the ability to capture changes over an extended period, especially if the conditions or factors influencing the research object have evolved significantly over time. Furthermore, the limitation of historical data before the year 2014 poses challenges to the comprehensive understanding of the evolution of conditions over time. The absence of data prior to 2014 may restrict insights into the historical context and development trends, potentially overlooking crucial events or shifts in the research object. This limitation emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the gaps in historical data and the potential impact on the research's temporal depth.

The reliance on secondary data as a primary source for the research outcomes signifies a dependency on the availability and quality of pre-existing data. While secondary data can provide valuable insights, it inherently limits the researcher's ability to control the data collection process and may miss nuances or specific details not covered in the selected sources. Consequently, the research's ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of certain aspects or dynamics may be constrained. In light of these limitations, it is essential to interpret the results of this research as a valuable contribution that can be expanded and enriched through further studies. Future research endeavors could address these limitations by considering broader time frames, expanding geographical coverage, and incorporating more comprehensive data sources. By doing so, subsequent studies can build upon the current research, enhancing its generalizability and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

Implications of the Study

This study serves as a catalyst, emphasizing the imperative for more comprehensive research to delve into the vast potential and intricate challenges within the realm of digital tourism marketing. The contemporary landscape of the tourism industry demands a nuanced understanding, urging scholars to explore multifaceted dimensions. By placing a heightened emphasis on the refinement of digital

strategies, forging robust partnerships with the private sector, and fostering community empowerment through targeted digital training initiatives, future research endeavors can delve into more granular methods and practical implementations. The investigation of the pivotal application of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) principles in this context stands as an avenue for further exploration. This entails a dedicated pursuit to unearth more effective approaches to seamlessly integrate CBT, with the overarching goal of ensuring fair and sustainable economic benefits for the communities involved. The intricate interplay between digitalization and community-based approaches warrants in-depth scrutiny to identify best practices and optimize outcomes.

Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the impact and responses of tourists to various digital marketing initiatives remains a central focus for additional research. An exploration into the evolving trends and preferences of tourists in response to digital outreach efforts could provide invaluable insights. Analyzing the dynamic interactions between digital strategies and tourist behaviors can unveil patterns, informing the tourism industry of effective engagement methods. This nuanced understanding becomes pivotal for crafting tailored marketing campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences, ultimately fostering sustainable improvements in tourism promotion. In conclusion, this study underscores the intricate tapestry of challenges and opportunities within the digital tourism marketing landscape. It sets the stage for future research endeavors to navigate the complexities, fostering a more profound comprehension of evolving trends, effective strategies, and the sustainable integration of digital initiatives in the ever-evolving tourism sector.

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