

PROMOTING THE HIDDEN PARADISE OF LIKUPANG THROUGH DIGITAL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

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Likupang is located on the northern coast of North Sulawesi and has been designated as a super-priority tourist destination. It is surrounded by clear waters, white sandy beaches, green hills, and consists of several small islands. Likupang's tourism sector has significantly raised the region's income from tourist visits. Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 outbreak, the number of tourists visiting North Sulawesi has shown a slight increase during the transition period. However, it still remains far below pre-outbreak levels. Digital marketing communication is an effective promotional tool that can be maximized to reach a wider audience. This study illustrates the use of digital marketing communication to build destination image in order to attract tourists' intention to visit Likupang. The study used qualitative research methods, collecting data through observation, documentary study and interviews with informants, including local government officials, the private sector and tourists. The research results indicate that the use of digital marketing communication, particularly through social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, plays an important role in promoting Likupang. Nevertheless, the government's official tourism department websites offer limited information about the tourism sector. Furthermore, incorporating visual content such as photos and videos can significantly enhance the allure of destinations like Likupang, showcasing the picturesque coastal scenery, islands, hills, and various tourist activities. This strategy effectively builds the destination's image and serves as a compelling attraction for tourists

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1. Introduction

Tourism in Indonesia is one of the sectors that play an important role in generating foreign exchange. Tourism activities are a form of export trade in services, where the tourism sector is a sector that constantly makes a positive contribution to Indonesia's services trade balance. The tourism sector plays a vital role in a country's economy, contributing significantly to various macroeconomic indicators such as sectoral value added, wages and salaries, and employment opportunities. It is a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the national wage level, while also creating numerous job opportunities across the country. The development of tourism and its growth has become clear evidence

that the tourism industry can be used as a good supporting sector for economic development. However, the significant rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases in Indonesia has had a detrimental impact on both the tourism industry and the creative economy. Tourism Trends Book (2021) reports a sharp decline in the number of foreign tourists visiting Indonesia, starting from February 2020 and reaching its peak in April 2020, with only 158 thousand tourists.

The Central Statistics Agency or Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) reports a continuous increase in the number of foreign tourist visits to North Sulawesi Province over the five-year period from 2015, reaching a peak of 129.5 million foreign tourists in 2019 (BPS, 2020). This was influenced by the policy of the North Sulawesi Provincial Government in charter flights from China to Manado to increase the frequency of tourist visits from China. However, in 2020, the number of foreign tourist visits to North Sulawesi Province decreased dramatically to 82.23 per cent due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government regulation restricted the access in and out of Sam Ratulangi Airport to reduce the number of Covid-19.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery period, both the government and private sector are confidently pursuing various tourism development and promotion efforts. The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy is demonstrating its commitment to these efforts through the implementation of various programs. The target of foreign tourist arrivals has exceeded the 2022 target of 3.6 million. According to BPS the number of tourist visits has reached 3.92 million to Indonesia in 2022. However, this number still far away before the outbreak. Foreign tourists were dominated by Chinese citizens as many as 1,190 people (64.39 per cent), Germany 99 people (5.36 percent), American 88 people (4.76 percent) and Singapore 78 people (4.22 percent). Meanwhile, the room occupancy rate of star hotels (PER) in North Sulawesi in February 2023 reached 39.25 percent, an increase of 3.42 points compared to the PER of 35.83 percent in January 2023. The average length of stay (RLMT) of star-rated hotels in February 2023 reached 1.81 days, an increase of 0.18 points compared to January 2023. In addition, the average length of stay (Foreign RLMT) of foreign guests in star hotels reached 1.67 days in February 2023.

North Sulawesi Province is an attractive tourist destination in Indonesia, with exceptional marine natural beauty that attracts both domestic and international tourists. North Sulawesi, a province located at the northern part of Sulawesi Island with Manado City as its capital, has various types of tourism with the potential for extraordinary natural beauty. North Sulawesi is rich in natural resources, underwater beauty, lakes, mountains, community culture, arts and culture. For example, Bunaken, which officially became the Bunaken National Park in 1991 and then entered into one of UNESCO's world heritage sites in 2005, further strengthened North Sulawesi's position in the national and international tourism industry. In an effort to strengthen North Sulawesi tourism in the domestic and international arena, the North Sulawesi Provincial Government in collaboration with the Central Government and the private sector presents a new icon, Likupang, as super-priority destination. This area, which is not yet widely known by tourists, has a variety of natural tourism wealth that is still natural and worthy of development. Other tourism potentials such as water sports, cultural diversity, culinary, creative economy and performance events originating from various regions in North Sulawesi also need to be developed and integrated with Likupang. Therefore, it is expected that tourists who come can enjoy a variety of interesting experiences to enjoy tourism in North Sulawesi.

Seeing the great potential of Likupang and other areas in North Sulawesi as marine tourism areas and extraordinary nature, the Government and tourism stakeholders continue

to develop promotional strategies that can attract tourist visits. The Indonesian government is targeting the number of foreign tourist visits in 2023 to reach 7.4 million, while the movement of domestic tourists will increase to 1.4 billion people. While the North Sulawesi Provincial Government is targeting 1 million foreign tourist visits from China during 2023. To achieve this target, promotion needs to be intensively carried out according to the diversity of attractions and conditions of each super-priority destination.

The COVID 19 pandemic has created a new era called The Virtual Century which has a huge impact on human life. A new century where everyone works, learns, plays and enjoys entertainment using digital devices and online platforms. Consumers avoid physical human contact and instead use virtual media. According to Buku Tren Pariwisata (2021) the pandemic accelerated the digital migration process and created "The Renaissance of Digital Adoption". The tourism industry has undoubtedly experienced a significant increase in digital expansion in recent years. With the widespread availability of the Internet and social media platforms, travelers now have access to a wealth of information about destinations, travel bargains, transportation options, and lodging, allowing them to plan their journeys in detail. Users can confidently browse through a variety of visual content, including photos and videos showcasing various destinations, compare prices and services, make reservations and purchases of travel-related products and services, and ultimately make informed decisions about their chosen destinations.

In the digital age, one of the most prevalent communication tools is digital marketing, encompassing various strategies such as websites, content marketing (Silbert Jose, 2021), social media marketing (Wang et al., 2016), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Pay Per Click (Karjaluo & Leinonen, 2009), Affiliate Marketing, Native Advertising, Marketing Automation, and Email Marketing (Goic et al., 2021). Digital marketing is a powerful form of marketing that uses technology tools to collect consumer information and data and to drive consumer engagement and sales of products or services (Bala and Verma, 2018). Over the decade, these tools have become a key element of destination management and marketing in normal times as well as in times of crisis (Ketter, E., and Avraham, E., 2021; Yu et al., 2021) Digital marketing is a highly effective and efficient marketing strategy that utilises the internet to reach potential consumers. Research studies (Al Hadwer et al., 2021; Bala & Verma, 2018) have consistently shown that this activity has a significant impact on purchasing decisions. Conversely, certain marketing experts argue that digital marketing shouldn't be viewed merely as an extension of traditional marketing principles. Instead, it should be recognized as a distinct paradigm due to its innovative approaches and deviations from conventional practices (Bala & Verma, 2018; Olson et al., 2021).

The impact of digital innovations on the tourism industry is significant, as potential visitors are increasingly using the internet as a source of information and therefore becoming more information literate, and their needs and expectations are becoming more sophisticated (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2017). Digital marketing offers numerous advantages over traditional marketing activities. These include lower costs and improved communication efficiency between organizations and customers. Additionally, it is an interactive, two-way communication method that fosters engagement and builds lasting relationships. This means digital marketing delivers messages with high accuracy and carefully chosen combinations of images and sounds. It is not constrained by time or place and can be easily stored, saved and retrieved by the general public. Furthermore, digital marketing enables organizations to reach a vast audience rapidly while employing highly targeted advertising techniques. This is

achieved through the capability to pinpoint specific segments that the organization aims to reach, gather comprehensive data and insights about customers, solicit feedback on advertising campaigns and products, measure and analyze results such as views and viewing times, and adapt and augment content as needed (Al Hadwer et al., 2021; Bala & Verma, 2018; Korgaonkar & Smith, 2015; Varadarajan et al., 2022).

Prior research indicates that social media marketing plays a pivotal role in the adoption of digital marketing within the tourism industry (Deb, S.K., Nafi, S.M., and Valeri, M., 2022). Additionally, Alsoud, M., et al. (2023) discovered that social media marketing significantly impacts brand image and influences tourists' intentions to visit Jordan. Moreover, a study by Amalia, J., & Hanika, I. (2021) found that Instagram posts from @museum_bi and electronic word of mouth concurrently influence tourists' intentions to visit the Bank Indonesia Museum. According to Arora and Lata's (2020) study, YouTube channels play a pivotal role in supporting a traveler's visit to a destination. Travelers create their YouTube channels and share their past experiences in the form of videos, which helps other potential travelers to visit tourism destination. Understanding the characteristics of different social media platforms, whether government and other tourism stakeholders can improve marketing efforts and strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to study the factors that influence destination selection through digital marketing which includes social media marketing (YouTube and Instagram), websites, in creating a positive image of tourist destinations, thus influencing visit intention to Likupang. Then it is important to analyses how this digital marketing is used, by whom, what type of content can be promoted through this platform, and finally can influence the interest of tourist visits to visit Likupang as super priority tourist destinations.

2. Method

This research employs descriptive qualitative research methods, aiming to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon by collecting and analyzing data in depth. (Kriyantono, 2014). This research was conducted by collecting, compiling, processing and interpreting and analyzing the data under study by referring to research procedures that produce qualitative data. This research utilizes interviews, observations, and the examination of study documentation as methods for data collection. The informant of this research include government of Minahasa Utara region, private sector or travel agent, and tourist who come to visit Likupang. After the data were collected, they underwent analysis using the data analysis component, which comprises three interconnected sub-processes: data reduction, data display (presentation), and verification (Moleong, 2010). This process involved continuous verification activities throughout the research, starting from the initial phase of arriving at the research location, during data collection, and throughout the process of compiling research results. To obtain data validity, researchers used a checking technique, namely triangulation. This check is intended to avoid mistakes in interpreting the data.

3. Results and Discussion

a. YouTube as Digital Marketing Channel

Based on study documentation from the Internet, the author found social media marketing, including YouTube and Instagram as a tool to promote Likupang. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemenparekraf RI) employs

promotion through YouTube as part of its marketing strategy. Here are some examples of uploads posted on the YouTube channel:



Figure 1. Terbang Berpetualang ke Likupang (Fly adventurously to Likupang)

Firstly, on August 9th 2022, the official Kemenparekraf YouTube channel uploaded a video titled 'Terbang Berpetualang Ke Likupang', which has been viewed 667 times. The video confidently promotes Likupang as a hidden paradise with extraordinary natural beauty. It showcases many tourist destinations, including Bahoi Village, Bukit Larata, Pulisan Beach, Paal Beach, and Lihaga Island. Likupang offers beautiful beaches and a variety of culinary. The video shows the stunning scenery of the beach from the top of Larata Hill, accompanied by a traditional Minahasa dance performance known as the Kabasaran Dance. This dance, steeped in Minahasa culture, is often performed by Minahasa warriors before or after returning from the battlefield.



Figure 2. Destinasi Super Prioritas Likupang (Super Priority Destination Likupang)

Secondly, the video uploaded on the official @Kemenparekraf YouTube channel on October 9th 2021 has been viewed by 1,297 people. The theme of the video, 'Heaven Under the Sea', highlights Likupang as a heaven for beach lovers because of the incomparable beauty of the beach and the charm of the underwater world. Likupang is a sustainable dive tourism destination that offers serenity and spirituality, making it an attractive location for diving enthusiasts to enjoy the beauty of the underwater world.



Figure 3. Ada Apa Disini? (What's happening here?)

The video, posted on the official @Kemenparekraf YouTube channel on September 17th, 2022, has been viewed by 2,492 views. It highlights the natural splendor of beaches, islands, mangrove forests, and hills. The narration introduces various tourist destinations and their distinct attractions. Notably, Lihaga Island, an uninhabited 8-hectare island surrounded by white sand and diverse marine life, is showcased. Tourists can indulge in snorkeling to witness the underwater wonders. Larata Hill is also recommended, offering panoramic views of the sea and stunning sunrises and sunsets. Pulisan Beach and Paal Beach are highly praised for their crystal-clear waters and pristine white sands.



Figure 4. Fun Times for All on the Lovely Likupang

The video posted by @wonderfulindonesia effectively promotes several tourist destinations, including Tunan Talawaan waterfall, Pulau Gangga Resort, Pulisan Beach, Bukit Pulisan, and Paradise Hotel Golf and Resort, with a particular emphasis on family holidays. Budo Tourism Village is a destination famous for mangrove tourism and an alternative gateway to Bunaken Marine Park. From the shoreline of Bahoï tourist village, tourists can relish the breathtaking views of Manado Tua Island, Bunaken, and Siladen. The mangrove forest, which spans over 30 hectares, is home to a diverse range of mangrove vegetation, making it a truly unique and fascinating experience.

YouTube's significance in Indonesia continues to grow, with an increasing duration of usage each year. (Febriyantoro, M. T. 2020). Febriyantoro, M.T. (2020) conducted a study which revealed that in Indonesia, 92 percent of YouTube users primarily utilize the platform to search for video content. This suggests that users find YouTube to be a convenient platform for accessing engaging and exciting content. Online video proves to be a smart and dominant channel in terms of information and education, it has shown particular growth in the field of tourism, being intangible, inseparable and perishable, it is quite difficult to ensure the quality of tourist destinations before visiting. Social media platforms and video-sharing sites are powerful channels to promote travel destinations. Video clips of destinations are a powerful tool to build the image of the destination, which increases the number of tourist arrivals with the growth of digital marketing, tourists are gradually searching and sharing their destinations. Some informants said:

“Posts uploaded on YouTube channels especially @Kemenparekraf and @WonderfulIndonesia attract tourists, because it visualizes images, contain interesting content, sound, provide information, evoke emotions, and provide pleasure thus create an intention to visit tourist destinations”. (Informant NL, SW, AL).

This is in line with research conducted by Arora, N., & Lata, S. (2020). Their findings indicate that comprehensiveness, relevance, timeliness, source expertise, and attitude are the most influential predictors of a traveler's intention to visit a destination through the adoption of YouTube channels. The posts featured on the Kemenparekraf and Wonderful Indonesia

YouTube channels are entitled The Hidden Paradise on the Earth and Rising Star. This theme creates an attractive brand image that is easily remembered by viewers. Then, the content creates an attractive destination image, where Likupang is a tourist destination that has stunning natural beauty, has clean and beautiful beaches, with pleasant waves. It has a very beautiful island to visit surrounded by clean white sand. It has stunning underwater natural wealth with a variety of marine biodiversity, including various types of fish, coral reefs and turtles that need to be preserved. In addition, the videos on the YouTube channel are able to evoke passion and pleasant emotions, so as to attract tourist visits.

b. Instagram as Digital Marketing Channels

Likupang tourist destinations are also promoted through Instagram, harnessing the platform's potential to captivate a broad audience. Instagram is widely used by young people, making it an effective tool for digital marketing. According to We Are Social, Indonesia is ranked fourth globally for the largest use of Instagram. As of January 2023, the country boasted 167 million active social media users, spending an average of 3 hours and 18 minutes per day on social media platforms. (www.dataindonesia.co). It appears that Instagram has the potential to attract a significant audience. The effectiveness of social media in developing tourist destinations is attributed to its simplicity, flexibility, and portability. As noted by Bakti et al. (2018), social media enables the easy storage, sending, and receiving of messages.

The destination brand created on social media has its strengths, particularly in terms of its unique identity and its ability to establish itself as a popular tourist destination. Instagram holds an advantage over other social media platforms when utilized as a platform for campaigns aimed at attitude change. According to Syafrikurniasari (2020), the ubiquitous presence of gadgets in people's daily routines enables social media platforms like Instagram to broaden their reach and captivate public attention effectively. In this context, the engagement feature on Instagram could be instrumental in reaching a broader audience during attempts to alter attitudes. This assertion is supported by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), whose previous research revealed that consumers tend to favor Instagram over other social networking sites due to its emphasis on visual representation. The accounts used to promote Likupang include @pesonaindonesia, @wonderfulindonesia, @desawisatabudo, and @likupangtourism. Moreover, the significant number of Instagram users in Indonesia renders it a potent instrument for digital campaigns. Promotion can change tourist behavior in taking an attitude or action to travel, tourists will consider things and information received from the media. Based on the interview with one informant who is an Indonesian tourist. He said that:

"Instagram is an effective platform for promoting the natural beauty of Likupang as a tourist destination. Its ability to reach a wide audience, interact with potential customers, and promote special offers make it an appropriate platform for promoting Likupang as a tourist destination. The content posted on the official accounts @wonderfulindonesia and @pesonaindonesia in the form of reels, stories, and photos is particularly effective in attracting tourists to visit Likupang. Likupang boasts several stunning tourist destinations, including Paal Beach, Pulisan Beach, and Larata Hill. Tourists are sure to be drawn to the area thanks to the highly credible Instagram accounts @wonderfulindonesia and @pesonaindonesia. These accounts offer easy access to information, engaging content, and opportunities to interact with a vibrant online community. Moreover, the @casabaioparadise account successfully promotes Likupang and the amenities at Paradise Hotel Golf and Resort, situated in Desa Maen Likupang Timur". Furthermore, the informant

(LT) was inspired to visit Paal Beach and Pulisan Beach after being captivated by the content posted on Instagram.

Gaffar et al. (2022) conducted research affirming the statements. They investigated the influence of social media marketing on tourists' inclination to visit a botanical garden, a prominent nature-based tourism spot in Indonesia. Their findings suggest that social media marketing significantly improves tourist destinations' image across five dimensions: online communities, interaction, content sharing, accessibility, and credibility, consequently shaping tourists' intentions to visit nature-based tourism sites.

“Instagram accounts such as @desawisata. budo, @likupangtourism, and @disparminahasautara may not be immediately appealing to all tourists, particularly millennials or Generation Z. However, these generations can generate fresh content in the form of photos to share on social media. These destination communication activities are likely to spread rapidly among young people, who currently rely on social media as their primary communication channel. Local tourism Instagram accounts, such as @desawisatabudo, have the potential to showcase the beauty of Budo tourism village. However, it may be worth considering improving the current posts to better attract potential tourists.” This suggestion was made by the informant (SL).

Informant (AK) has reported that the Instagram account @desawisata. budo is less active in promoting tourist attractions, as evidenced by the inconsistent timing and frequency of photo and video uploads. This statement is said by informant (AL).

“The Instagram account @likupang_tourism provides useful information, although some users may find their posts less engaging. Perhaps they could consider enhancing their content by including more descriptive captions, and hashtags. This would enable users to more easily discover and learn about the various tourist attractions available. Furthermore, it appears that the decision to explore tourist destinations in Likupang is largely based on suggestions from online reviews.”

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) is a highly effective form of marketing communication in which potential and current users make positive or negative statements about a product. These statements are widely available to many people through social media on the Internet. When visitors feel uncertain about a destination, they tend to look for online comments on social media. By viewing online comments, visitors can feel more confident in their decision to visit. Clear, concise and persuasive comments based on specific facts about destinations have a positive impact on the decision to visit. However, the official account of the North Minahasa Tourism Office (@disparminahasautara) has only posted 12 times about the Likupang festival and its activities. This suggests that the website is not being utilized effectively to promote Likupang as a tourism destination. The shortage of skilled personnel to create engaging posts and content is an issue that we can confidently address. Despite the limited marketing budget caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we can still deliver impactful results. According to the North Minahasa Tourism Office staff:

“The budget for promotion during the Covid-19 pandemic has been insufficient. As a result, media coverage has been limited to magazines typically found on airplanes. Social media marketing has not yet been implemented by the office, as it has been carried out by private parties such as travel agents. Additionally, website development has been limited. Promotional activities have been centered around the organization of events, such as the Likupang Tourism Festival. The festival is an arts and cultural performance activity and is scheduled to be held for the first time on 30-31 October 2021. In 2022, it is planned to take place at Paal Beach,

Pulisan Beach, and Komang Island. The festival in 2023 is currently scheduled for the end of July 2023.” (Informant DO)

4. Conclusion

The proliferation of digital marketing and related activities has changed the tourism experience, allowing individuals to identify and access key information necessary to plan their trip to a particular destination. Social media, YouTube and Instagram campaigns are an effective channel for increasing audience awareness, shaping corporate image, improving brand image, increasing audience engagement, reducing operational costs and, of course, changing audience attitudes. Through social media, visitors can find out in advance about the conditions of tourist attractions. In addition, YouTube and Instagram have become popular platforms for campaigning for tourists to visit Likupang. However, the promotion of Likupang has not been optimal due to the limited human capital and budget of the North Minahasa Government. Therefore, it is recommended to the North Minahasa government to increase the capacity of human capital in digital marketing by routinely providing training on digital marketing strategies and techniques to conduct digital marketing.

The findings are still very limited because it only examines YouTube and Instagram as digital marketing tools to promote Likupang. Other digital marketing channels such as TikTok are very good to conduct research because of the increasing trend of using TikTok, especially among millennials. Then the content on TikTok is also very interesting, many of which are posted by travelers who have visited a destination. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers examine TikTok as a digital marketing tool, especially among millennials and Generation Z to attract tourist visits.

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