



Social Media and Influencer Marketing Strategies in Building Sustainable Tourism Awareness in the Coastal Region of West Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze social media and influencer marketing strategies in building sustainable tourism awareness in the coastal areas of West Sulawesi. This research uses a qualitative case study method. The research location is West Sulawesi Province. Research informants consisted of the tourism office, tourist destination managers, tourists, and local influencers. A purposive sampling technique was used to determine informants based on certain criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants, direct field observations, and documentation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software. To ensure data validity, source triangulation techniques were used. The results show that social media plays a primary promotional tool capable of shaping perceptions and increasing tourist engagement in sustainable tourism awareness. Meanwhile, influencers have proven effective in conveying sustainability messages through educational content and are able to positively influence tourist behavior. This study also revealed that community involvement is still strong in aspects of destination management, but not optimal in digital promotion. Furthermore, challenges were identified in terms of facility readiness and coordination between stakeholders. This emphasizes the importance of strategic collaboration between the government, the community, and digital actors to realize sustainable tourism awareness.

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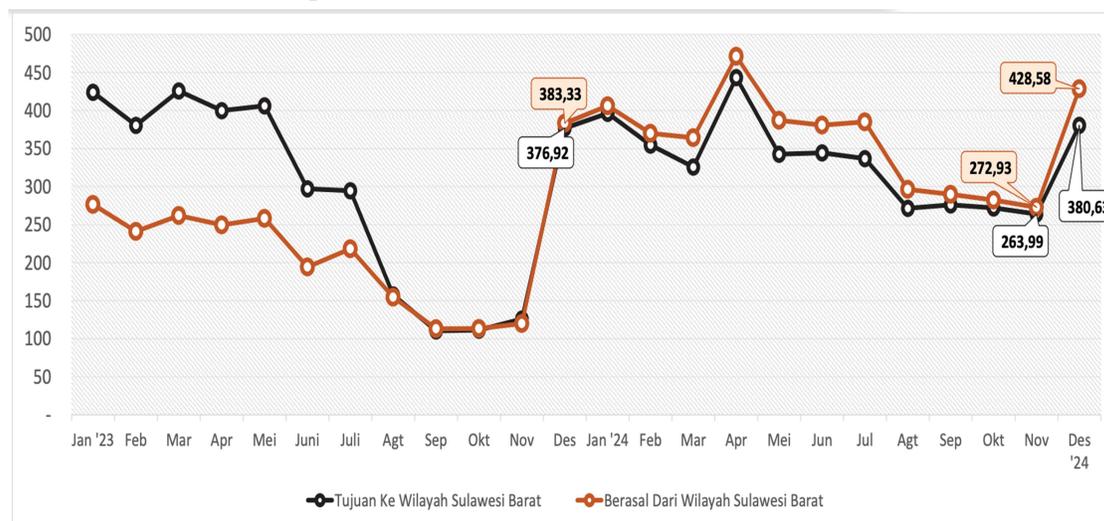


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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is becoming an increasingly important global issue as the negative impacts of tourism activities increase (UNWTO, 2022; Gössling, et al, 2020). Sustainable tourism is crucial for achieving a balance between the environment, culture, and socio-economics (Štreimikienė D., et al, 2020). This concept emphasizes the sustainable management of tourism resources without compromising the needs of future generations (Bramwell, B., &

Lane, B, 1993). In Indonesia, especially in coastal areas, including West Sulawesi, sustainable tourism has great potential for development. West Sulawesi, with its 677-kilometer coastline, has great potential in the tourism sector, rich in biodiversity and stunning natural beauty (Said F., et al, 2023). West Sulawesi, especially in coastal areas, which are rich in tourism potential but vulnerable to overexploitation, presents a challenge in sustainable tourism. Another challenge faced is the low awareness of tourists towards sustainable tourism in maintaining the sustainability of tourist destinations in the coastal areas of West Sulawesi, many coastal destinations in West Sulawesi are experiencing pressure due to resource exploitation and a lack of concern for sustainable practices (Said F., et al, 2023).



Source: BPS West Sulawesi, 2025.

Figure 1. Domestic Tourist Travel in West Sulawesi Province January - December 2024

Figure 1 shows that the number of domestic tourist trips originating from the West Sulawesi region in December 2024 was 428,584, a 57.03 percent increase compared to the 272,932 trips recorded in November 2024. Furthermore, the number of domestic tourist trips to the West Sulawesi region in December 2024 was 380,630, a 44.19 percent increase compared to the 263,986 trips recorded in November 2024 (BPS West Sulawesi, 2025). Based on these data, the increase in tourist numbers must also be accompanied by tourist awareness of sustainable tourism practices.

With the advancement of digital technology, social media has become a key tool in shaping tourists' perceptions of Sultan M. destinations (Sharmin F., et al., 2020). Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok enable rapid and widespread information dissemination, including educating tourists about sustainable tourism practices (Gretzel, U., et al., 2020). Various studies have shown that digital content depicting sustainable practices can build tourists' awareness and engagement in environmental protection (Schönherr S., et al., 2023). Digital communication strategies through social media can build widespread and rapid awareness of environmental issues and sustainable tourism practices (Duc T. and Thanh N., 2023).

Influencers also play a crucial role in marketing tourism destinations through social media (Reyes M, 2021). Influencers with high credibility and engagement with their audiences can influence tourist behavior and decisions, including those related to sustainability (Armielia

A., et al.). Influencers have the ability to shape opinions, build trust, and influence tourist behavior through authentic and engaging content (Casaló, L.V., et al., 2020). In some destinations, the use of influencers has proven effective in building tourist awareness of environmental issues and local culture (Chatterjee, J. and Dsilva, N.R., 2021).

The coastal areas of West Sulawesi, particularly Polewali Mandar, Majene, and Mamuju Regencies, still face challenges in waste management, environmental degradation, and coral reefs (Dewi, R., et al., 2024). Furthermore, coastal areas have yet to receive much positive exposure on social media, necessitating a well-planned strategy (Sunaryo S., et al., 2023). The use of social media and influencer marketing to promote sustainable tourism awareness in West Sulawesi is still relatively minimal, with many promotions focusing more on tourist attractions without considering sustainability aspects (Rubiyatno R., et al., 2021). One effective approach is influencer marketing, which utilizes public figures with a large following to convey specific messages through social media (Freberg K., et al., 2011). Social media and influencer marketing strategies can be used to educate the public about sustainable tourism practices (Rustine, M. and Indriana, I, 2023). Furthermore, this digital approach offers advantages in terms of cost, broad reach, and content flexibility that can be tailored to the characteristics of the target audience (Sarifiyono, A. P., & Lesmana, B., 2023). Based on the aforementioned background, the research problem is formulated as follows: How do social media and influencer marketing strategies build sustainable tourism awareness in the coastal areas of West Sulawesi?

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to deeply explore the role of social media and influencer marketing in supporting sustainable tourism awareness in the coastal areas of West Sulawesi. A qualitative approach was chosen because it can capture the meanings, experiences, and subjective interpretations of various informants directly involved in tourism activities. The research informants consisted of tourism office officials, tourist destination managers, tourists, and local influencers. A purposive sampling technique was used to determine the informants. The data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by semi-structured data, direct field observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted in person and transcribed. Observations focused on digital promotions, facilities, and interactions between visitors and managers.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis using NVivo software. The steps of thematic analysis included: data familiarization, initial coding, theme discovery, theme review, theme naming, and final report preparation. NVivo was used to facilitate the coding process, thematic visualization, and systematic data organization (Seals, 2024). To ensure data validity, source triangulation techniques were used. Additionally, interview results were double-checked with several informants for content validation. Thematic validity was strengthened through repeated coding and discussions among researchers regarding the consistency of the analysis results (Fuchs, 2023).

The Wordcloud above shows the most frequently occurring words across all interview transcripts. The words "influencer," "social media," "content," "promotion," "Facebook," "Instagram," and "TikTok" appear in larger sizes, indicating the dominance of these themes in the informants' narratives. Words such as "sustainability," "cleanliness," "facilities," "experience," and "environment" emphasize the importance of local social and economic dimensions in tourism management.

3. Data Validity

In this study, source triangulation was used to ensure data validity by comparing information from various types of informants with different but complementary perspectives on the phenomenon under study. The researchers conducted source triangulation by involving four main categories of informants:

a) Tourism Office

Provided perspectives on policies, promotional programs, and structural challenges in sustainable tourism development. Validation was conducted by reconfirming statistical data and digital tourism promotion policies.

b) Tourism Destination Managers

Provided insights into field operations, including facility management, local promotions, and community involvement. Their interviews were compared with direct observations to determine the alignment between narratives and actual conditions.

c) Tourists

Provided perspectives as recipients of promotions, perceptions of the destination, and travel experiences. Used to verify the effectiveness of digital promotional content and compare expectations versus reality.

d) Local Influencers

Provided perspectives as parties directly involved in the production and dissemination of digital content related to sustainability. Validation was conducted by matching the content uploaded on social media with the interview narratives.

Discussion

1. The Role of Social Media in Tourism Promotion

Social media has become a primary tool for promoting coastal tourism destinations in West Sulawesi. According to an interview with the West Sulawesi Provincial Tourism Office, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have been utilized to reach both local and international tourists. He stated that "young people today are quickest to promote through Instagram. They just show them a good photo and they're immediately curious." This demonstrates the importance of visual media in capturing audience attention.

Interviewed tourists also revealed that they learned about Dato Beach and Bahari Beach through friends' posts on social media. "I learned about Dato Beach from Instagram, a friend posted about camping." Reels and short video content have also proven to be the most effective forms of promotion according to several influencers. They emphasized the importance of narrative and natural sounds as storytelling elements.

A study by Sultan et al. (2020) emphasized that user-generated content (UGC) can foster environmental awareness and motivate responsible tourism behavior. Saniati, Assuja, and Neneng (2022) revealed that implementing e-tourism through social media significantly increased tourist exposure and participation in previously lesser-known coastal destinations. Damarawati et al. (2025) demonstrated that social media promotional strategies that visually highlight sustainability and marine beauty can increase tourist awareness of the value of marine conservation.

However, interviews also revealed that not all managers utilize social media optimally. For example, managers admitted to not actively using social media due to limited internet connections and digital literacy. This indicates a gap between social media's potential and local capabilities.

Thus, the role of social media in coastal tourism promotion is not limited to one-way communication but also creates a collaborative digital ecosystem between destination managers, local communities, influencers, and tourists. However, for a sustainable impact, a match between digital promotion and real-world conditions is needed, as well as the integration of digital strategies with media literacy training for tourism managers.

2. **Influencers as Destination Promotion Agents**

Influencers play a crucial role in shaping the image and narrative of tourist destinations in West Sulawesi. Influencers play an active role in disseminating content that depicts the beauty, serenity, and authenticity of tourist destinations. One influencer stated, "If we don't promote our own destinations, who will? There are so many beautiful places in West Sulawesi."

Influencers not only display visuals of tourist attractions but also incorporate educational messages into their content. One influencer stated, "I always say in my content: don't litter, don't damage the place, and support local MSMEs." This confirms that their content is not just promotional but also a means of spreading the values of sustainability and environmental awareness.

According to research by Hussain & Stephenson (2025), influencers play a significant role in encouraging tourists to travel responsibly and sustainably. Siregar (2024) emphasized that collaborating with influencers is one of the most effective strategies for expanding the reach of tourism promotions. Tarasiuk et al. (2025) indicate that 70% of global tourism brands now use influencer marketing strategies to reach young audiences.

Despite this, the managers expressed their joy at the viral popularity of the site, but also feared potential damage if oversight and facilities were not adequately prepared. This underscores the importance of collaboration between influencers, managers, and the government. Overall, influencers can be considered highly effective and influential promotional agents. However, this effectiveness needs to be balanced with education and ethical digital promotion practices to ensure tourism growth does not undermine sustainability. The government also needs to partner with influencers to reinforce the message of inclusive, environmentally friendly, and culturally based tourism.

3. **Challenges in Managing Sustainable Tourism Awareness**

Managing sustainable tourism awareness in coastal areas of West Sulawesi faces various structural and technical challenges. Interviews with managers revealed that they still rely on community self-help to maintain cleanliness, manage parking, and provide basic facilities. They admitted to having no formal training or a stable funding system. "We manage what we can, hopefully, in the future, there will be assistance from the government."

The limited availability of basic facilities such as public toilets, showers, and seating makes the tourist experience less comfortable. Several tourists reported a lack of places to rinse off after swimming. This was echoed by managers, who stated that there has been no external infrastructure support. The lack of facilities is a barrier to maintaining the quality of visits and encouraging repeat visits.

Taghulihi (2025) explained that one of the main challenges in developing sustainable tourism villages in coastal areas is weak long-term planning and a lack of comprehensive community participation. In their study, Merlotto et al. (2025) found that the greatest challenge in managing tourist beaches is maintaining a balance between environmental carrying capacity and mass tourism activities.

Thus, the challenge of managing sustainable tourism in West Sulawesi is not only a matter of facilities, but also involves institutional readiness, human resource capacity, and collaboration between stakeholders. Achieving sustainable tourism requires a long-term strategy that involves training, infrastructure investment, and strengthening the role of local communities as a whole.

4. Tourist Perceptions and Experiences

Tourist perceptions of coastal tourism destinations in West Sulawesi are generally very positive. Many interviewed tourists admitted to visiting for their natural attractions, tranquil atmosphere, and uncrowded nature. One tourist stated, "I like quiet places, not crowded, very quiet." This indicates a preference for authentic destinations.

Natural beauty, such as panoramic sunsets, is a major draw. Tourists expressed, "I really like watching the beautiful sunsets, especially in the evening." Authenticity and serenity are unique values not found elsewhere. These factors reinforce the positive image of the destination and contribute to visitor loyalty, leading to return visits.

This finding is supported by Sultan et al. (2020), who showed that a mismatch between expectations and actual experiences can lower tourist satisfaction and lead to negative perceptions of the destination. Collins and Ahiagbah (2025) found in their study that factors such as beach cleanliness, accessibility, and basic facilities significantly influence tourist satisfaction and perceptions. Laurentsa and Sarudin (2025) added that tourists' perceptions of the educational, historical, and aesthetic value of a destination like the Jakarta Wayang Museum significantly influence their motivation to visit.

Behaviorally, most tourists demonstrate an awareness of the importance of maintaining cleanliness and supporting the local economy. For example, tourists stated that they purchase food from local food stalls as a form of support. "I buy food from small food stalls; it's delicious and cheap, and it also helps the local economy," said one male tourist.

Thus, tourists' perceptions of coastal tourism destinations in West Sulawesi are generally positive, based on their authenticity, serenity, and local hospitality. However, improvements in service quality, cleanliness, and honest promotion are needed to ensure that the experience meets the expectations formed through social media and influencer marketing.

5. Community Participation and Involvement

Local community participation is a crucial component in the successful management of sustainable coastal tourism in West Sulawesi. Interviews revealed that most destinations are managed independently by local villagers. Managers stated that they are responsible for cleanliness, parking management, and guest reception, without direct government support. "We from the village manage it, maintain the site, manage the parking, and keep it clean.

This involvement not only demonstrates the initiative of the residents but also demonstrates a collective spirit in utilizing tourism potential to boost the local economy. Revenue generated is usually distributed to the village treasury or community groups. However, the recording system is still very rudimentary and not yet digital, resulting in incomplete transparency in financial management.

Baswarani and Novianto (2025) emphasize that community involvement in Braga Tourism Village is a key driver in preserving culture and developing local economic potential. Ntalakos et al. (2025), in their study, showed that the success of sustainable tourism initiatives depends heavily on the active involvement of local communities in cultural heritage preservation and destination governance.

Several tourists interviewed appreciated the friendliness and participation of the local community. One tourist said that interacting with local residents made them feel safer and more comfortable. "The residents are very friendly; they feel like family, not just guests," he said.

Overall, local community involvement is a key foundation for sustainable tourism. However, to prevent this participation from stagnating, support is needed in the form of management training, digital literacy, and institutional development. Collaboration between the government, the community, and the private sector will strengthen an independent and sustainable tourism ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have proven effective in attracting tourists through engaging visual content. Influencers not only help promote tourist destinations but also incorporate sustainable values into their digital narratives. Their role as digital role models can drive a shift in tourist behavior toward greater environmental and cultural responsibility. Local communities are key actors in the physical management of tourist destinations, yet their involvement in digital and managerial aspects remains limited. Limited physical infrastructure, digital access, and institutional support hinder the implementation of sustainable tourism. Rapid promotion through social media does not always align with field readiness.

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