



Measuring the Effectiveness of Promotion Strategies in Enhancing the Distinctiveness of Mamasa Cultural Tourism: Optimization of E-WOM and Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of digital promotion strategies in enhancing the cultural distinctiveness of Mamasa as a tourism destination. It specifically examines the role of digital media and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) in shaping tourists' perceptions of cultural uniqueness. Using a qualitative approach with transcendental phenomenology, data were obtained through in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and documentation involving local tourism officials, destination managers, and tourists. Thematic analysis using NVivo 14 was applied within the EPIC (Empathy, Persuasion, Impact, Communication) framework. The results revealed six dominant themes: emotionally resonant local content enhances empathy; persuasive storytelling strengthens engagement; authentic digital narratives influence visitation intention; limited interactivity reduces communication effectiveness; strong perception of cultural distinctiveness heightens interest; and E-WOM amplifies credibility and promotional reach. The study concludes that effective cultural tourism promotion requires authentic, emotionally engaging, and participatory digital strategies supported by active two-way communication. Strengthening collaboration between local governments, tourism managers, and communities is essential to optimize the strategic potential of digital media and E-WOM in reinforcing Mamasa's cultural identity and tourism appeal.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has evolved into one of the key sectors driving regional competitiveness and sustainable economic growth, particularly in culturally rich areas such as Mamasa Regency, West Sulawesi. Cultural tourism emphasizes heritage values arts, rituals, architecture, and traditions as central elements of destination appeal. In the Indonesian context, where diversity forms a core

national identity, promoting local cultural uniqueness through tourism is not only an economic strategy but also a cultural preservation effort. According to the West Sulawesi Provincial Government (2024), Mamasa possesses 63 active cultural destinations, making it the region with the highest potential for cultural tourism in the province. Nevertheless, despite this richness, tourism revenue data show a decline in 2023, with locally generated income (PAD) from tourism reaching only IDR 1.74 billion out of a target of IDR 2.66 billion. This inconsistency indicates that current promotional efforts may not effectively translate cultural potential into sustainable economic outcomes.

In the digital era, tourist behavior in seeking information has shifted dramatically. Travelers increasingly rely on social media, video platforms, and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) rather than traditional brochures or printed advertisements. This transformation provides both an opportunity and a challenge for local tourism managers: to communicate Mamasa's cultural identity in a way that is authentic, engaging, and digitally adaptive. Hashtags such as #MamasaTourism and #MamasaCulture are organically used by the public and local authorities to shape the online narrative of cultural distinctiveness. However, the extent to which these strategies are effective in influencing tourists' perceptions and travel intentions remains unclear.

Previous research has largely focused on digital promotion and tourism branding in established destinations such as Bali and Tanjung Lesung (Bargandini & Arsawati, 2022; Martoyo et al., 2022). These studies confirmed that social media can enhance destination visibility and engagement, yet they seldom measure how digital strategies shape cultural distinctiveness or authenticity perception. Moreover, most works apply quantitative approaches that assess marketing performance without exploring tourists' lived experiences and emotional responses to digital content. This research gap highlights the need for a more interpretive and evaluative approach that integrates digital marketing effectiveness with cultural meaning construction.

Addressing this gap, the present study employs a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to explore how digital media and E-WOM influence the perception of Mamasa's cultural distinctiveness. Using the EPIC (Empathy, Persuasion, Impact, Communication) model as an analytical framework, the study evaluates the emotional, persuasive, and communicative dimensions of promotional content while integrating the variable of cultural uniqueness. Unlike prior studies that emphasize promotional reach or visual aesthetics, this research positions itself in support of previous findings on the importance of digital engagement, but seeks to refine and extend them by emphasizing the experiential and cultural depth of communication.

The novelty of this research lies in its evaluative integration of the EPIC model with digital ethnography to measure not only promotional outcomes but also the emotional and cultural resonance of tourism narratives. It contributes both theoretically and practically by proposing a model for assessing digital promotional effectiveness within the context of cultural tourism distinctiveness. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of Mamasa's digital promotion strategies—through the optimization of E-WOM and digital media in enhancing its cultural identity and attractiveness as a unique tourism destination.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to explore how digital promotion and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) shape the perceived distinctiveness of Mamasa's cultural tourism. The EPIC model Empathy, Persuasion, Impact, and Communication (Barry & Howard, 1990) was adapted as the analytical framework

to evaluate the emotional, persuasive, and communicative effectiveness of digital promotion content. The method was modified by integrating digital ethnography and website traffic analysis to assess online engagement and promotional reach.

The study was conducted in Mamasa Regency, West Sulawesi, which possesses the highest concentration of cultural destinations in the province. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, consisting of local tourism officials, destination managers, and tourists exposed to Mamasa's digital campaigns. The number of informants followed the principle of data saturation.

Data were gathered through (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews, (2) digital observation (netnography) of online platforms using hashtags such as #MamasaTourism and #MamasaCulture, (3) documentation and secondary data from official tourism reports and analytics, and (4) field notes from direct observation.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) assisted by NVivo 14. The process included transcription, open coding, theme development based on the EPIC framework, and integration of inductive findings on distinctiveness and E-WOM. Triangulation across interviews, digital data, and documentation ensured validity. Credibility and confirmability were reinforced through member checking and peer review. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was maintained. Online data were treated ethically in accordance with digital research standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed six major themes describing the effectiveness of Mamasa's digital promotion strategies in strengthening its cultural tourism distinctiveness: empathy, persuasion, impact, communication, distinctiveness, and E-WOM. These themes were derived from coding interviews, online observations, and document analysis using the NVivo 14 software within the EPIC framework.

Empathy emerged as a central factor influencing emotional connection. Digital content featuring traditional ceremonies, music, and architecture resonated deeply with audiences, creating cultural pride and attachment. This finding underscores that authenticity and emotional relevance are more persuasive than generic visual promotion.

Persuasion was strengthened by narrative storytelling and audiovisual aesthetics. Tourists reported that short videos with local language narration and community-based storytelling inspired curiosity and visitation interest. This supports the idea that cultural narratives can function as persuasive tools to enhance destination appeal.

Impact was reflected in the growing intention to visit Mamasa following exposure to authentic digital content. Campaigns such as #MamasaTourism significantly influenced travel consideration and shaped a positive image of Mamasa as a culturally rich destination.

However, the communication dimension revealed weaknesses in interactivity. Although digital content was informative, limited two-way engagement between tourism managers and online audiences reduced message effectiveness. Enhancing participatory communication is therefore crucial for sustaining visitor trust and involvement.

The theme of distinctiveness confirmed that tourists perceived Mamasa's culture as unique and different from Toraja's, especially regarding traditional architecture and spiritual values. This perception strengthens destination identity and contributes to long-term brand differentiation.

Finally, E-WOM played a significant role in extending promotional reach and credibility. Tourists trusted peer-generated content—such as reviews and vlogs—more than official promotional

posts, making E-WOM a powerful instrument for destination endorsement.

Compared to earlier studies that focused on general digital marketing in Bali and Java (e.g., Bargandini & Arsawati, 2022; Martoyo et al., 2022), this research contributes a deeper phenomenological understanding of *how* cultural emotions and authenticity shape audience responses. While previous findings emphasized the role of social media visibility, the present study demonstrates that emotional engagement and narrative authenticity are the true determinants of perceived promotional effectiveness.

The results highlight that successful cultural tourism promotion must move beyond visual exposure toward co-created digital storytelling involving local communities. This participatory model not only increases credibility but also preserves cultural values through active engagement. For practitioners, the study suggests that improving interactivity, authenticity, and user-generated content management can significantly enhance digital campaign performance.

In summary, Mamasa's digital promotion strategies are effective when grounded in local emotion, authentic narratives, and community collaboration. These findings provide a strategic framework for other culturally based destinations to optimize digital and E-WOM platforms in building distinctive and sustainable tourism branding.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the effectiveness of Mamasa's cultural tourism promotion depends on the strategic integration of authentic digital storytelling, emotional engagement, and the amplification of electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). By employing the EPIC framework through a phenomenological approach, the research reveals that empathy-driven narratives and persuasive visual content significantly influence tourists' perceptions of cultural distinctiveness and their intention to visit. Weaknesses in interactivity, however, limit communication strength, emphasizing the need for more participatory and dialogical engagement between tourism stakeholders and audiences.

Conceptually, this research reinforces that digital promotion in cultural tourism should move beyond mere information delivery toward co-created cultural communication that reflects identity, emotion, and local values. Theoretically, it extends the application of the EPIC model to the realm of destination branding, integrating emotional and cultural dimensions as key indicators of promotional effectiveness. Practically, the study offers a model for tourism stakeholders to design digital campaigns that are not only persuasive but also community-embedded and culturally resonant.

The broader impact of this research lies in its contribution to sustainable tourism development by positioning digital media and E-WOM as instruments for cultural preservation and destination differentiation. Strengthening collaboration between local governments, creative communities, and tourists in content creation can transform cultural promotion into a participatory ecosystem that sustains both cultural identity and economic vitality.

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