

Participatory Communication in Promoting Sustainable Tourism through the Natural Bengkulu Digital Campaign on Social Media

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Abstract

This study explores the application of participatory communication in promoting sustainable tourism through the Natural Bengkulu digital campaign organized by the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office. Grounded in Participatory Communication Theory, the research aims to analyze how government agencies, creative communities, and the public collaborate in digital-based tourism promotion to strengthen the image of Bengkulu as a sustainable destination. A qualitative descriptive approach was used with data collected through in-depth interviews and active social media users supported by digital content observation of the official Instagram account @disparprovbengkulu. The findings show that participatory communication in the Natural Bengkulu campaign manifests in three main forms. First, creative participation appears through user-generated content such as photos, videos, and narratives about tourism experiences that are reposted by the official account, expanding message diversity and audience reach. Second, dialogic participation emerges in interactive communication, comments, and discussions that create mutual engagement and encourage two-way dialogue between the tourism office and the public. Third, collaborative participation is reflected in offline tourism activities such as photo contests and community events that build collective involvement and strengthen local ownership of the campaign. These participatory practices have enhanced digital engagement, strengthened destination awareness, and supported sustainable tourism promotion considering environmental preservation and local cultural identity.

Keywords: participatory communication, sustainable tourism, digital campaign, Natural Bengkulu, destination branding

A. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector plays a crucial role in the economic and social development of Bengkulu Province. Located in the western part of Sumatra Island, with an area of approximately 19,788.70 km², Bengkulu Province borders West Sumatra, Jambi, Lampung, South Sumatra, and the Indian Ocean (Herlina, 2024). Its strategic location on the west coast of Sumatra provides Bengkulu with a wealth of natural resources, including long, charming beaches, pristine mountains, and unique flora and fauna, such as the Rafflesia Arnoldii flower, a regional icon (Novrianda & Shar, 2022). All of this potential represents a vital asset for the development of the tourism sector, providing not only economic benefits but also promoting the preservation of social and cultural values.

The Bengkulu Provincial Government has demonstrated its commitment to tourism development through various strategic policies. One such policy is the issuance of Bengkulu Provincial Regulation Number 8 of 2019 concerning the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan for 2019–2024, which emphasizes the need for integrated, sustainable, and locally-based tourism development (Putri, 2021). This policy aims to strengthen Bengkulu's tourism competitiveness, improve community welfare through job creation, and establish tourism as a leading sector in supporting regional development.

Bengkulu still faces challenges in strengthening its tourism identity and image at the national and international levels. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (Marjoyo et

al., 2024), the tourism sector's contribution to Bengkulu Province's Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) remains at 3.5%, lower than that of other provinces in Sumatra, such as West Sumatra, which reached 5.8%. This situation indicates that Bengkulu's tourism competitiveness still needs to be improved, particularly in terms of promotion and destination branding.

As global travelers increasingly seek authentic and sustainable experiences (experiential and sustainable tourism), developing Bengkulu's tourism identity has become increasingly urgent. The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy is also encouraging regions to develop destinations that are locally unique, environmentally friendly, and participatory (Mtapuri et al., 2022). In this context, Bengkulu tourism has a significant opportunity to highlight its strengths in cultural authenticity, environmental preservation, and local community participation.

Despite facing challenges in terms of identity and competitiveness, there have been positive developments that demonstrate the significant potential of the tourism sector in Bengkulu. According to data released by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) (2024), from January to October 2024, the number of domestic tourist trips to Bengkulu Province reached 3.57 million. This figure reflects a relatively high visitation trend, although there was a 5.09% decrease in October 2024 compared to the previous month. This decrease reflects fluctuations in visitation levels, but overall, tourist travel figures continue to demonstrate significant interest in Bengkulu destinations. This data provides important capital that can be utilized to develop more targeted promotional strategies to strengthen Bengkulu's identity and attractiveness as a tourist destination.

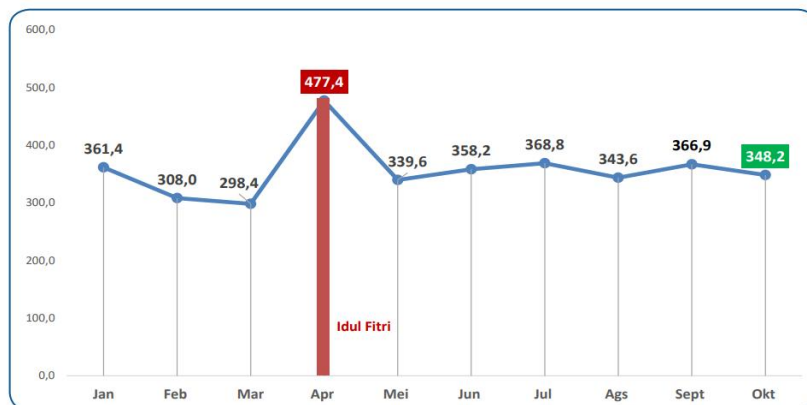


Figure 1. Development of the Number of Domestic Tourist Trips in Bengkulu Province in 2024 (BPS, 2024)

Along with the growth of the tourism sector, the development of digital technology, particularly social media, has provided significant opportunities for tourism promotion in various regions. According to data released by *We Are Social* in 2024, Indonesia recorded over 170 million internet users, and over 90% actively use social media (Sunaryo et al., 2023). This situation demonstrates that social media has become a strategic platform for shaping public perception and promoting tourist destinations. Through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, tourism promotion can be conducted in a more interactive, visual, and participatory manner, involving the public as content creators and curators.

This phenomenon has also shifted the paradigm of tourism promotion from a one-way communication model dominated by government agencies to a participatory model that engages the wider community (Adhrianti et al., 2023). Digital campaigns such as #WonderfulIndonesia from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy have become successful examples of how

digital communication strategies can expand promotional reach and strengthen the image of Indonesian tourist destinations globally (Yulliana, 2021). Inspired by a similar model, the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office launched the Natural Bengkulu digital campaign as an effort to introduce the region's tourism potential in a modern and collaborative manner.

The Natural Bengkulu campaign is not just a digital marketing strategy, but also a participatory communication initiative that invites the public to participate in building a narrative about the beauty and sustainability of Bengkulu. Through the official Instagram account @disparprovbengkulu and various other social media, the public, photographer communities, creative economy actors, and local tourists are encouraged to share their experiences through photos, videos, and travel stories using the hashtag and caption about Natural Bengkulu (Puspita et al., 2018).

This approach aligns with the principles of participatory communication proposed by Servaes (2008) and Tufte & Mefalopulos (2009), namely, communication that is dialogic, horizontal, and positions the community as the subject in the development communication process. Participatory communication emphasizes collaboration, mutual learning, and empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making and information dissemination (Toda et al., 2024). In the context of tourism, this approach is highly relevant because the success of destination management depends not only on government promotion but also on community involvement and a sense of ownership of their regional identity.

Through participatory communication practices, the Natural Bengkulu campaign is expected to build collective awareness about the importance of preserving nature and local culture as part of promoting sustainable tourism. This approach also helps create an emotional connection between the community and the tourist destination, thereby strengthening brand engagement and encouraging responsible tourism behavior (Nugroho et al., 2023). More than just a promotional campaign, Natural Bengkulu serves as a platform for creative collaboration that connects the digital world with real-life activities through various community-based activities such as photo contests, cultural festivals, and beach cleanups.

The success of participatory communication in digital tourism promotion also faces various challenges, such as limited digital literacy among rural tourism operators, a lack of consistency in messaging across platforms, and the absence of a systematic evaluation mechanism for campaign effectiveness. An in-depth analysis of participatory communication practices in the Natural Bengkulu campaign is crucial to understanding how this collaborative strategy can contribute to sustainable tourism development with a strong identity. Based on this background, the aim of this study is to analyze the application of participatory communication in promoting sustainable tourism through the Natural Bengkulu digital campaign on social media.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to understand the application of participatory communication in the Natural Bengkulu digital campaign on social media as a strategy for promoting sustainable tourism in Bengkulu Province. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings, processes, and social experiences of the actors involved in digital communication activities in a natural and contextual manner.

The research subjects consisted of parties directly involved in the implementation of the Natural Bengkulu campaign, including the official social media account manager

@disparprovbengkulu from the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office, creative economy actors and local communities who contributed to the creation of tourism content, as well as social media users who actively participated in the dissemination of the campaign content. The research location focused on Bengkulu City as the center of campaign activities, with additional observations of several leading tourist destinations that often become digital publication materials such as Panjang Beach, Lake Dendam Tak Sudah, and Fort Marlborough.

The research process was conducted in three stages: preparation, implementation, and analysis. The preparation stage included problem identification, determining the research focus, and collecting initial data through social media searches and policy documents related to Bengkulu tourism development. The implementation stage included data collection through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. The analysis and interpretation stage involved organizing the interview and observation data, interpreting it based on participatory communication theory, and drawing conclusions relevant to the research objectives.

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four key informants: a digital campaign manager, a local photographer, a tourism community representative, and an active social media user. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from supporting documents such as Tourism Office reports, archived social media posts, online news reports, and various relevant academic literature. Interviews were conducted both in person and online using a semi-structured interview guide to provide flexibility in gathering broader information. All interviews were recorded with the informants' consent, then transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis techniques. Data analysis was conducted following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and simplifying data according to the research focus, then presenting it in descriptive narrative form to identify emerging patterns of communication participation. The verification process was carried out repeatedly to ensure consistency of findings and maintain data validity. To increase the credibility of the research results, source and method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation to obtain accurate and accountable data.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that the application of participatory communication in the *Natural Bengkulu digital campaign* on social media has been an effective strategic approach in strengthening the promotion of sustainable tourism in Bengkulu Province. The communication process built through this campaign is not top-down like conventional government communication patterns, but rather inclusive and horizontal by involving the community, creative communities, and local tourism industry players as the main actors in the production and dissemination of messages (Sari, 2020). The findings of this study confirm that the forms of public participation in the *Natural Bengkulu digital campaign* are manifested in three main forms, namely creative participation through user-generated content, dialogic participation through digital interactions, and collaborative participation through offline-based community activities.

1. Creative Participation through User - Generated Content

Creative participation is the main foundation in the implementation of participatory communication in the *Natural Bengkulu digital campaign*. Through the strategy of utilizing the

official hashtags #NaturalBengkulu and #DiBengkuluAjo, the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office actively invites the public, tourists, and creative communities to participate in creating and sharing digital content about their experiences while traveling in Bengkulu. Various prime destinations such as Panjang Beach, Lake Dendam Tak Sudah, Fort Marlborough, Curug Embun Waterfall, and the habitat of the rare flower *Rafflesia Arnoldii* are the main objects most frequently featured by users.

This public participation is realized through various forms of user-generated content (UGC) such as photos of tourist destinations, travel videos, short reels, reviews of personal experiences, and even reflective quotes about the natural beauty and hospitality of local people (Aditia & Hektanti, 2023). All of this content is then curated and reposted by the official Instagram accounts @disparprovbengkulu and @naturalbengkulu, with credit to the original creators. This practice demonstrates that promotional communication is no longer a one-way process from the institution to the public, but has shifted to a model of co-creation of content between the government and the public, where the public plays both a producer and a communicator of tourism messages.

Based on observations of official account posts, approximately 60% of the total content published between January and July 2025 was UGC. This figure indicates a high level of community involvement in the production of digital promotional messages, marking a transformation in communication from an informative to a collaborative approach. From the perspective of participatory communication theory proposed by Servaes (2008), community participation is not merely a development communication tool, but a social process that positions citizens as active agents in defining the meaning and values to be conveyed. Thus, the Bengkulu community and tourists are not merely targets of promotion but also play a role in shaping the destination narrative through visual representations and their real-life experiences.

User-generated content also enriches the visual and narrative dimensions of Bengkulu's representation. For example, a post by a local tourist depicting an afternoon cycling trip along Panjang Beach, accompanied by a personal narrative about the serenity and cleanliness of the beach, creates a stronger emotional appeal than a formal promotional post from a government agency. These narratives reflect what Santos (2022) call authentic storytelling, a communication strategy that emphasizes real experiences, emotions, and personal connection to build trust and an emotional connection between the audience and the destination.

In addition to contributing to an authentic and humanistic destination image, user-generated content also creates a ripple effect in the form of networked visibility. Each post with the campaign hashtag serves as a connected communication node within the digital ecosystem (Aditia & Imran, 2024). When a post receives high engagement, such as likes, comments, or shares, the message about Bengkulu as a sustainable tourism destination spreads organically to other user networks. Based on interviews with the @naturalbengkulu account manager, the average engagement rate increased by 28% during the active campaign period. This increase reflects the effectiveness of participatory strategies in expanding the reach of messages without additional promotional costs, while simultaneously strengthening Bengkulu on the national digital tourism destination map.

Participation also has significant social implications. The process of sharing tourism content fosters a sense of collective pride in Bengkulu's natural beauty and local culture (Zuiker, 2014). Many social media users outside the tourism industry have participated in this campaign, including amateur photographers, cultural activists, and students, who have shared simple

experiences such as tasting the typical tempoyak dish or attending the Tabut cultural festival. This phenomenon demonstrates that creative participation can broaden the basis of inclusive and community-based tourism promotion.

Participation through user-generated content is a concrete form of participatory communication that strengthens Bengkulu's destination image digitally. Collaboration between the Tourism Office, creative communities, and the general public not only generates broader visual exposure but also builds awareness and a sense of social ownership of the Natural Bengkulu brand as a representation of sustainable, inclusive tourism rooted in local values.

2. Dialogic Participation through Digital Interaction

The second dimension of participatory communication in this campaign is dialogic participation, manifested through active interactions between account administrators and social media users. Observations show that the comments section of posts on the @disparprovbengkulu account has become a lively two-way communication space, where users frequently ask about access to destinations, recommendations for the best times to visit, and available facilities. The account administrators' quick responses and positive interactions with users foster a sense of openness and emotional closeness between the local government and the digital public. This form of digital interaction also serves as a feedback mechanism *that* allows local governments to understand public perceptions of tourist destinations. For example, comments from users complaining about beach cleanliness or the lack of parking facilities are received as input and then passed on to destination management.

This dialogic participation implements the principles of *dialogic communication theory* proposed by Kent and Taylor (2002), where the success of organizational communication in digital media is highly dependent on the extent to which they build an open, mutually respectful, and sustainable conversation space with their public. In the case of *Natural Bengkulu*, the digital dialogue that was established not only expanded the reach of the message but also strengthened public trust in the Tourism Office as a public institution that is responsive and adaptive to citizen aspirations.

Beyond the comments section, a dialogue was also realized through the use of *Instagram Stories* and *interactive polls*, which allowed users to engage in simple decision-making processes, such as selecting a featured destination to be featured in future content. This practice not only increased interaction but also reflected emotional engagement between users and the *Natural Bengkulu account*. By involving the public in the creative process, this campaign strengthened digital social connections and built a sense of collective ownership of the regional tourism narrative.

3. Collaborative Participation through Community Activities and Offline Actions

In addition to taking place in digital spaces, participatory communication is also manifested in collaborative activities in the real world (*offline-based collaboration*). Based on the results of interviews and activity documentation, the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office regularly collaborates with local communities such as the *Bengkulu Creative Hub*, the *Bengkulu Photographer Community*, and *GenPI Bengkulu* (Generasi Pesona Indonesia) in organizing community-based tourism promotion activities. Activities such as tourism photography competitions, *photo hunts*, and *clean-up days* in the Panjang Beach area are concrete examples of collaborative participation. In these activities, the community not only plays a role as participants but also as organizers, helping to design concepts, determine activity locations, and distribute

documentation on social media using the same campaign hashtag. This collaboration strengthens communication networks between stakeholders and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for the destination's environmental sustainability.

According to participatory communication theory, such activities demonstrate a shift in the role of the community from mere recipients of messages to active social drivers in building a narrative of sustainable tourism. As expressed by (Hidayat et al., 2024), participatory communication focuses not only on information transfer but also on *an empowerment process* in which communities are given the opportunity to contribute, innovate, and influence the direction of development policies. This is evident in local community initiatives that create promotional content based on cultural and environmental values, such as documentation of Rafflesia flower conservation activities or the Tabut cultural festival uploaded to social media platforms.

This cross-actor collaboration also demonstrates the synergy between the government, the community, and the public in building a sustainable tourism promotion ecosystem (Yunilisiah & Afrita, 2023). The government provides resources and facilitation, while the community acts as a creative force, ensuring promotional content remains relevant to the local social and cultural context. Through this synergy, the *Natural Bengkulu campaign* has not only successfully increased destination awareness *but* also fostered ecological awareness and pride in Bengkulu's cultural identity.

4. The Impact of Participatory Communication on Sustainable Tourism Development

The implementation of participatory communication in the *Natural Bengkulu campaign* has had a significant impact on promoting sustainable tourism. First, from a communication and destination image perspective, public involvement in message production creates a more authentic and humanistic narrative. Bengkulu's image is no longer built solely on institutional messages, but rather on the experiences and perceptions of the public who interact directly with the destination. This strengthens the emotional appeal and audience trust in the *Natural Bengkulu brand*. Second, from a social perspective, this participatory communication practice strengthens the community's sense of community and responsibility for sustainable tourism. Offline activities such as beach cleanups or local culinary promotions serve not only as a means of publicity but also as a means of building environmental awareness and strengthening community solidarity. Third, from an economic and digital perspective, this campaign has successfully expanded tourism-based creative economic opportunities. Many local MSMEs and photographers have benefited from the destination's increased digital exposure. Thus, participatory communication within the context of *Natural Bengkulu* not only strengthens destination promotion but also encourages sustainable local economic empowerment.

The results of this study indicate that the participatory communication practices implemented in the *Natural Bengkulu digital campaign* are able to realize three important aspects of sustainable tourism development: increasing destination awareness, empowering communities, and preserving the environment. Through a participatory approach based on collaboration and dialogue, Bengkulu tourism promotion becomes not only a digital marketing activity but also a social movement that fosters regional pride and strengthens cultural identity in the digital communication era.

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that participatory communication implemented through the *Natural Bengkulu digital campaign* constitutes an effective strategy for promoting sustainable

tourism in Bengkulu Province. The campaign transforms tourism communication from a predominantly one-way institutional process into a collaborative practice involving multiple stakeholders, including local communities, content creators, and social media users. The findings identify three key forms of participation. Creative participation appears through community-generated photos, videos, and travel narratives that are redistributed by the official @naturalbengkulu account, expanding message diversity and audience reach. Dialogic participation is reflected in interactive exchanges within comment sections that enable two-way communication and shared meaning-making. Collaborative participation is reinforced through offline activities such as cultural festivals, photo competitions, and community-based tourism initiatives, which strengthen social ties and foster collective ownership of the destination brand.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to participatory communication literature by demonstrating its relevance within digital tourism promotion in a developing regional context. Practically, the findings suggest that local governments and tourism stakeholders should prioritize inclusive, transparent, and collaborative digital communication strategies to sustain community engagement in destination branding. Future research is encouraged to examine participatory dynamics across other digital platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube, and to assess the long-term sustainability of digital tourism campaigns by evaluating their influence on tourist behavior and local community well-being.

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