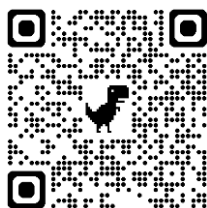


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Enhancing the Competitiveness of Heritage Tourism through Digital Marketing, Storytelling, and Augmented Reality: A Community Engagement Initiative in Lasem, Central Java

Fismayatni Cholifah¹, Usep Suhud², Doni Sugianto Sihotang³, Fajar Lestari⁴, Eriyanti Nurmala Dewi⁵, Ana Mariani⁶, Ganjar Wibowo^{7*}, Mutiawati Mandaka⁸

¹ Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Indraprasta PGRI University, Indonesia

^{2,3} Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia

⁴ Faculty of Industrial Mechanical Engineering ASTRA Polytechnic, Indonesia

⁵ Communication Science Program, Faculty of Communication and Design (FKD), Indonesian University of Informatics and Business (UNIBI), Indonesia

⁶ Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Merdeka University Malang, Indonesia

⁷ Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Al Azhar Indonesia, Indonesia

⁸ Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Pandanaran University, Semarang, Indonesia

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*Corresponding author: Ganjar Wibowo

Abstract

The objective of this community engagement program is to boost the competitiveness of heritage tourism in Lasem, Central Java, by integrating digital marketing, heritage-based storytelling, and augmented reality (AR) applications. The program employs a participatory and interdisciplinary approach, involving local stakeholders as active co-creators in a series of interactive workshops and hands-on training sessions aimed at enhancing digital content creation, narrative development, and fundamental technological skills. The outcomes show a marked improvement in participants' ability to produce short-form digital content and leverage social media platforms for destination promotion, along with a stronger capacity to convert fragmented cultural narratives into structured storytelling that reinforces destination identity and perceived authenticity. Additionally, the introduction of AR simulations raised participants' awareness of immersive technologies and their potential to enhance tourism experiences, while the incorporation of green tourism principles promoted alignment of promotional practices with sustainability values.

However, several limitations are apparent, such as the short duration of the program, inadequate technological infrastructure, and the lack of ongoing mentoring mechanisms, which could hinder long-term impact and scalability. Overall, the program contributes to bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation in heritage tourism development, providing a replicable model for community-driven digital transformation in emerging destinations.

Keywords: *heritage tourism, digital marketing, storytelling, augmented reality, sustainable tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

Heritage Tourism and the Strategic Position of Lasem

Lasem, located on the northern coast of Central Java, is a special heritage tourism site known for its blend of Javanese, Chinese, and colonial cultural elements. Its physical and non-physical heritage assets, such as traditional batik making, historic buildings, and diverse cultural stories, offer a solid base for promoting tourism. Recent research shows that heritage tourism helps boost economic diversity while also supporting the preservation of culture and a sense of identity. Reinforcement within local communities has been discussed in various studies (Morrison & Buhalis, 2024; Timothy, 2022). Despite this potential, Lasem is still not receiving enough attention in national and international tourism markets, which shows a gap between the available resources and how the destination is positioned strategically.

Challenges in Digital Visibility and Marketing Transformation

A significant challenge faced by heritage destinations such as Lasem lies in limited digital visibility and the insufficient adoption of contemporary marketing practices. The quick growth of digital platforms has changed how tourists look for, assess, and choose travel destinations, making having a strong online presence a key factor in staying competitive (Dominguez-Viera et al., 2023; Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). However, many community-based tourism initiatives still depend on conventional marketing methods, which limit their capacity to reach a broader audience. Existing studies have recognized that local communities in developing areas do not adopt digital technologies at the same rate, often due to limited technical skills and infrastructure (Prakash et al., 2020). This indicates that although digital marketing has been extensively talked about, its actual application at the local level is still not widespread.

Storytelling as a Mechanism for Value Creation

In addition to digital marketing, storytelling has become a key method for improving tourism experiences and reinforcing the unique identity of a destination. Effective storytelling allows destinations to communicate meaningful messages, inspire emotional responses, and create stronger links between visitors and cultural heritage (Bavik & Kuo, 2025; Campos et al., 2024). In the case of Lasem, there are many historical stories available, but they are usually broken into pieces and not organized in a way that supports tourism activities. Previous research has shown that storytelling can increase the feeling of authenticity and make visitors more engaged; yet there is still no clear method for effectively incorporating storytelling into community-based tourism activities. As a result, the ability of storytelling to serve as a tool for standing out and gaining a competitive edge has not been fully utilized.

Experiential Innovation through Augmented Reality

The growth of immersive technologies, especially augmented reality (AR), has created new possibilities for innovative experiences in the tourism industry. AR allows visitors to interact

with digital layers of information superimposed on physical environments, thereby enriching interpretation and engagement (Loureiro et al., 2021; Rangel-Pérez & Fernández, n.d.). While studies have increasingly investigated using AR in tourism settings, its use in smaller heritage sites is still not very common. This gap is mainly due to technological challenges, lack of skilled professionals, and insufficient resources. In the case of Lasem, the lack of augmented reality experiences shows a wider gap between new technology and its use at the local community level, showing that there is a need for easier and more useful solutions.

Green Tourism and Sustainable Destination Development

The programme is further situated within the broader framework of green tourism, which emphasises environmental responsibility, cultural sustainability, and community empowerment. Green tourism has gained increasing attention as destinations seek to balance economic development with ecological and cultural preservation (Bosangit et al., 2025; De Bruyn et al., 2023). Although the ideas of sustainable tourism have been commonly talked about in academic studies, how they are put into practice in small heritage communities is not always the same. In Lasem, the integration of green tourism principles into marketing and storytelling practices has yet to be systematically developed, indicating an opportunity to align sustainability with digital innovation.

Programme Objectives and Contribution to Community Service

In response to the identified gaps, the present community service programme aims to enhance the capacity of local stakeholders, particularly the Lasem Heritage Foundation, through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates digital marketing, storytelling, and augmented reality. The initiative is designed to provide participants with useful skills in digital content creation, storytelling techniques, and fundamental technology use help build a stronger and more lasting tourism industry. While prior research has extensively examined digital transformation and experiential tourism, there remains limited evidence of applied, community-based interventions that combine these elements within a participatory framework. Accordingly, this programme contributes by offering a practice-oriented model that bridges theoretical insights and real-world implementation, while also identifying areas that have been addressed and those that require further development in future initiatives.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF THE PROGRAMME

Digital Marketing in Heritage Tourism

Digital marketing has become a central mechanism for enhancing destination visibility, engagement, and competitiveness within the tourism industry. In the context of heritage tourism, digital platforms like social media, short-form video apps, and user-

generated content play a significant role. Content plays a crucial role in shaping how tourists perceive a destination and decide whether to visit (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Kirilenko et al., 2024). Recent research shows that digital marketing allows small destinations to connect with a wider audience, tailor their messages, and create more engaging interactions with possible visitors. However, while the theoretical significance of digital marketing is widely recognized, its actual application in community-based heritage destinations is not consistent across all cases. Many local actors do not have the necessary skills to create high-quality content, improve algorithm performance, or run digital campaigns efficiently. This suggests that although digital marketing strategies have been widely created and expanded, their application in building practical skills and support at the community level remains quite limited. The current program tackles this issue by providing practical training in creating content and using platforms, which helps to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world application.

Heritage-Based Storytelling and Experiential Value

Storytelling has become an important concept in tourism research, especially when it comes to designing experiences and building the identity of tourist destinations. Heritage-based storytelling allows destinations to share their historical and cultural stories in a way that connects emotionally with visitors, which helps increase the feeling of authenticity and makes the experience more memorable (Stoica et al., 2021). Studies have indicated that storytelling plays a role in creating shared value, as tourists actively interpret and participate in the stories that are part of cultural environments. However, existing studies have mostly concentrated on conceptual models or broad destination branding strategies, with relatively little focus on the practical implementation of these approaches' storytelling at the community level. In many heritage sites, such as Lasem, the stories and histories are not well developed or are not consistently included in the tourism offerings. Therefore, although storytelling is commonly seen as a valuable strategic tool, its use within community empowerment programs has not been thoroughly examined yet. The program helps by supporting the joint creation of stories that are rooted in local history and culture, allowing participants to turn non-physical heritage into organized digital content.

Augmented Reality and Immersive Tourism Experience

The use of augmented reality (AR) in tourism has been increasingly studied by scholars as part of the larger shift towards digital transformation in the tourism sector. Augmented reality enhances tourist experiences by placing digital information over the real world, resulting in interactive, engaging, and informative encounters (Loureiro et al., 2021; Mandal & Bag, 2023). Research has demonstrated that augmented reality can enhance visitor satisfaction, boost learning results, and foster stronger emotional ties to historical sites. Although there have been significant advancements, the use of augmented reality in small and developing destinations is still not widely adopted. Most current applications are focused on areas that have plenty of funding or are technologically developed leaving community-based destinations with limited access to these innovations. This shows a major difference between what technology can do and how easily it can be used in real situations.

Green Tourism as a Sustainability Framework

Green tourism provides a conceptual foundation for promoting environmentally responsible and culturally sensitive tourism

practices. The statement highlights the importance of combining ecological protection, cultural sustainability, and active involvement of local communities in the development of tourism (Bosangit et al., 2025; De Bruyn et al., 2023). Recent studies have emphasized the need to connect tourism marketing with sustainability principles, especially as tourists become more aware of environmental and social concerns (Alsharif). Although green tourism principles are generally recognized, their application in marketing communication and the design of visitor experiences is not always consistent. In many cases, sustainability is viewed as a secondary idea rather than a fundamental part of destination strategy. In the case of Lasem, the integration of green tourism into digital storytelling and promotional materials has not been thoroughly established yet. The program tackles this issue by incorporating sustainability stories into how content is created, ensuring that promotional activities follow the principles of green tourism.

Interdisciplinary Integration in Community Service Programmes

The complexity of challenges faced by heritage tourism destinations necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from marketing, technology, and cultural studies. Recent studies have highlighted that working together across different fields improves the success of community-based tourism projects by allowing for more complete solutions and creative ideas (Prakash et al., 2024; Sigala, 2020). Even though there is awareness of this, many community service programs are still separate and not connected, often concentrating on just one part like promotion or strengthening abilities without bringing together different areas. This limits their long-term impact and sustainability. The current program uses an interdisciplinary approach by integrating digital marketing strategies, storytelling methods, and technological innovations into one unified intervention. Although earlier research has examined these elements individually, there is not much support for their combined use in small heritage communities. Therefore, the programme shows how different fields of study can be put into practice in a real-world and collaborative way.

Synthesis: Bridging Theory and Practice

The ideas covered earlier show a clear difference between what has been widely studied in academic writing and what is still not well developed in real-world applications. Digital marketing, storytelling, augmented reality, and green tourism have each been widely studied as independent constructs, yet their integration within community-based tourism initiatives is still limited. There is a significant lack in converting theoretical concepts into practical strategies that local stakeholders with few resources can effectively apply. The program tackles these gaps by combining these ideas into a clear and practical model, focusing on learning through participation and joint creation. By doing this, it helps to strengthen community empowerment and promotes the growth of practical knowledge in the field of heritage tourism development.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Program Setting and Community Context

The program was conducted at the Lasem Heritage Foundation, a community-based organisation actively engaged in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Lasem, located on the northern coast of Central Java. As a heritage-rich locality, Lasem offers

significant potential for tourism development; however, its community actors often operate within limited digital and technological capacities. Community-based tourism literature highlights that local organisations play a pivotal role in mediating between heritage preservation and tourism innovation (Goodwin, 2022; Tuyen et al., 2025). Even though there is some awareness of this, many programs are still driven from outside and do not take into account the specific context in which they are being implemented. In this initiative, the setting was not merely treated as a venue but as an active learning ecosystem, where local knowledge and cultural assets were integrated into the training process. Although past efforts have recognized the significance of local context, the degree to which these contexts are integrated into the program design is still quite limited. This program aims to tackle this gap by placing learning activities directly in the heritage environment.

Participant Profile and Collaborative Engagement

The programme involved ten participants representing the Lasem Heritage Foundation as community partners. These participants were not seen as passive listeners but as active contributors to the knowledge-making process, showing a model of involvement that emphasizes participation and teamwork. Recent research has highlighted that involving people in the learning process leads to better results, stronger sense of responsibility, and longer-lasting community projects (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Strickland & Williams, 2024). However, in practice, many community service programs still use top-down methods, which limit genuine participation. In contrast, this program encouraged discussion, sharing of ideas, and working together to solve problems throughout the process. Although participatory frameworks have been commonly talked about in academic studies, they are not consistently used in small-scale training program.

Structure of the Programme and Learning Design

The programme was structured into a series of interconnected stages designed to facilitate experiential learning and skill development. The first stage involved interactive workshops that combined theoretical explanations with open discussions, enabling participants to place concepts within their own local context. The second stage involved practical sessions where participants put digital marketing strategies into action, created storytelling content, and tested different methods of content development. The second stage focused on hands-on practice sessions, where participants applied digital marketing techniques, developed storytelling narratives, and experimented with content creation. The third stage included the production of digital content for platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, followed by storytelling formulation rooted in Lasem's cultural heritage. The final stage introduced simple augmented reality simulations to demonstrate the potential of immersive technologies. Experiential learning theory emphasizes that being actively involved and applying knowledge in real-world situations greatly improves how well people remember information and develop skills (Kolb, 1981; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2025). Although these methods are commonly suggested, many programs continue to focus more on theory than on hands-on involvement. This initiative tackles this limitation by focusing on learning through experience as a key part of its design.

Digital Content Creation and Storytelling Practice

A key component of the programme involved guiding participants in creating digital content that integrates heritage storytelling and green tourism narratives. Participants were trained to produce

short-form videos and visual content that highlight Lasem's cultural uniqueness while incorporating sustainability messages. Research has shown that user-generated content and storytelling significantly influence destination image and tourist engagement (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Gowreesunkar et al., 2022). There is still a lack of support in providing local communities with the necessary technical and creative abilities to create such content on their own. In many cases, digital content creation is outsourced or remains inconsistent. This programme contributes by enabling participants to develop their own content, thereby fostering autonomy and long-term capability. Nevertheless, the depth of storytelling integration and consistency of content production remain areas that require further development in future initiatives.

Introduction of Augmented Reality (AR) Simulation

The program also provided participants with an introduction to the fundamental ideas and uses of augmented reality, using straightforward simulations. This component was designed to show how augmented reality can improve the visitor experience by offering interactive and immersive ways to understand and explore heritage sites. Studies have highlighted that AR can increase visitor engagement, improve knowledge acquisition, and create memorable tourism experiences (Koay et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, the adoption of augmented reality in community-based tourism remains limited.

Remains limited because of the complexity of technology and the lack of sufficient resources. The current program tackled this issue by breaking down augmented reality ideas into simpler terms and making them easier to understand. Although this introductory method effectively increased awareness, creating fully educational AR applications was not part of the program's goals. This indicates that future initiatives should focus on advancing technical implementation and collaboration with technology developers.

Reflection on Implementation: Achievements and Gaps

The programme's implementation highlights several accomplishments, especially in promoting participatory learning, improving digital skills, and introducing new ideas like storytelling and augmented reality. The inclusion of various fields of study and the focus on real-world use are important advancements in the way community service is carried out. However, several limitations remain evident. The program's brief length limits how much skill development can take place and hinders the possibility of lasting behavioural change. Another key factor is the lack of advanced technological infrastructure, which hinders the ability to scale innovations like augmented reality. Third, continuous mentoring and follow-up mechanisms were not fully established, which may affect the sustainability of outcomes. These results are consistent with earlier studies that highlight common issues faced by community-based tourism initiatives, such as maintaining long-term sustainability, limited access to resources, and difficulty in integrating new technologies (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2022; Tuyen et al., 2025). Therefore, although the programme effectively tackles current capacity-building requirements, more work is needed to guarantee lasting effects and establish it within institutions.

OUTCOMES AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

Enhancement of Digital Marketing Competence

The program led to a clear enhancement in participants' capability to create and develop digital promotional materials specifically

suited for heritage tourism. Participants showed greater skill in making short videos, telling stories through visuals, and creating content tailored to specific platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This result is consistent with recent studies that show digital literacy and the ability to create content are crucial for increasing a destination's visibility and competitiveness in the digital age (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). While earlier research has widely covered the significance of digital marketing strategies, the actual application of these skills within local communities has frequently been neglected. The current program tackles this issue by allowing participants to create their own promotional materials on their own. The consistency and long-term sustainability of content creation still need to be strengthened through ongoing guidance and well-organized planning strategies.

Application of Heritage-Based Storytelling

Participants used storytelling methods based on the historical and cultural background of Lasem, turning local stories into compelling materials for tourism. This trend shows an increasing understanding of how storytelling can improve authenticity, create stronger emotional connections, and help destinations stand out (Campos Franco et al., 2020). The program helped organize broken-down historical stories into clear, understandable narratives that can be shared through digital platforms. Although the ability to tell stories was initially developed successfully, a higher level of narrative complexity and consistency across various media platforms has not yet been fully realized. Existing literature indicates that successful storytelling needs ongoing improvement and must be combined with wider branding efforts, which is still difficult for many community-focused destinations.

Integration of Green Marketing Principles

Another important result is the incorporation of green tourism principles into digital content and marketing efforts. Participants showed a greater understanding of environmental responsibility and cultural sustainability, and they included these ideas in their storytelling and marketing communications. This matches up with recent studies that highlight the need to connect tourism marketing with sustainable practices in order to satisfy the changing desires of tourists (Bosangit and McCabe, 2022; (Alsharif et al., 2024; Bosangit et al., 2025)). However, while green marketing concepts were introduced and applied at a basic level, their deeper operationalisation, such as measurable sustainability indicators and long-term environmental practices, remains limited. This indicates that further programmes are needed to translate conceptual understanding into concrete and measurable actions.

Emergence of Digital Heritage Content and Online Visibility

The programme contributed to the creation of new digital heritage content, including videos, narratives, and visual materials that highlight Lasem's cultural uniqueness. These outputs represent an initial step towards strengthening the destination's online presence and attractiveness. Prior studies have demonstrated that user-generated content and digital storytelling significantly influence destination image and tourist decision-making processes (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Kirilenko et al., 2024). Although the program managed to create some initial content, the amount and extent of the outputs produced are still quite limited. The lack of a well-organized digital marketing plan, such as defining target audiences, using analytics effectively, and planning content schedules, indicates that more work is needed to achieve better results.

Strengthening Community Awareness and Local Identity

Beyond technical skills, the programme fostered increased community awareness of the value of heritage tourism and the importance of preserving local culture. Participants exhibited a stronger sense of ownership and pride in Lasem's cultural assets, which is consistent with findings that community engagement enhances identity formation and support for tourism development (Aleshinloye et al., 2022). However, although participants have become more aware, it is still unclear how this awareness will spread to the wider community. This shows that greater community participation and more inclusive approaches are needed in future efforts.

Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development

The outcomes of the programme indicate the potential for digital transformation to support sustainable tourism development in heritage destinations such as Lasem. Combining digital marketing, storytelling, and green tourism practices creates a solid base for improving competitiveness while preserving cultural and environmental values. Recent literature has emphasised that sustainable tourism requires not only policy frameworks but also practical, community-driven initiatives (De Bruyn et al., 2023; Prakash et al., 2024). While the programme demonstrates promising initial impacts, several gaps remain, including limited technological advancement, short-term intervention duration, and the absence of long-term evaluation mechanisms. These limitations indicate that future programmes should focus on scalability, continuity, and deeper integration of sustainability practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Contributions to Community Empowerment and Heritage Tourism

The programme demonstrates a meaningful contribution to community empowerment by strengthening the capacity of local stakeholders in adopting digital marketing, storytelling, and introductory augmented reality applications within a heritage tourism context. Through active involvement and hands-on learning experiences, participants successfully converted cultural stories into digital formats that boost the visibility and representation of the destination. This matches the ideas from community-based tourism that focus on empowerment, shared creation, and local control as important factors for sustainable development (Aleshinloye et al., 2022; Tuyen et al., 2025). In addition, the incorporation of sustainability stories shows how increasingly important it is to connect tourism marketing with environmental and cultural values (Bosangit et al., 2025). However, although the programme effectively implemented these elements, its results are still initial, showing that more work is needed to strengthen and broaden its impact.

The Role of Digital Integration in Strengthening Destination Competitiveness

The program's blend of digital marketing and storytelling highlights the importance of digital transformation in influencing tourist behaviour and enhancing the competitiveness of a destination. Previous studies have shown that tourists are becoming more dependent on digital platforms during each stage of their travel experience, including attention, searching for information, acting, and sharing their experiences, which underscores the significance of digital ecosystems in advancing tourism development (Suhud, Allan, Hoo, et al., 2024). Moreover, the

concept of “cyborg tourists,” who are highly dependent on digital connectivity, further underscores the necessity of integrating technology into tourism experiences (Suhud et al., 2023; Suhud & Allan, 2022). While the programme introduced these elements at a foundational level, the extent of digital integration remains limited, particularly in terms of data analytics, algorithm optimisation, and advanced content strategies.

Recommendations for Continuous Capacity Building

Future programs should focus on building lasting capabilities by providing ongoing training, support through mentoring, and repeated opportunities for learning and improvement. Evidence suggests that digital transformation and skill development require ongoing engagement rather than one-off interventions (Gaffar et al., 2022). In addition, the role of human resources and creativity in sustaining the creative industry highlights the importance of long-term capability development within local communities (Wolor et al., 2023). While the present programme successfully introduced new competencies, deeper mastery and behavioural change require structured follow-up activities, peer-learning systems, and institutional support mechanisms.

Advancing Technological Integration and Innovation

A key recommendation involves strengthening technological integration, particularly in relation to immersive technologies such as augmented reality. Prior research has shown that technological advancements, including AI and digital systems, can enhance organisational performance and user engagement when effectively implemented (Gathmyr et al., 2025). Furthermore, studies on tourism behaviour indicate that digital engagement significantly influences tourism consumption patterns and experiential outcomes (Suhud & Allan, 2022). Despite these insights, the programme’s technological component remains introductory. Future efforts should therefore concentrate on creating widely applicable digital tools, incorporating AR into actual tourism offerings, and promoting partnerships with technology creators.

Strengthening Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

The success of community-based tourism efforts relies on good cooperation between different groups such as government bodies, educational organizations, and businesses in the tourism sector. Research on tourism villages and community adaptation has shown that resilience and innovation are strengthened when communities collaborate with external stakeholders while maintaining cultural values (Wolor et al., 2023). In addition, research related to destination development emphasizes the significance of having well-coordinated strategies to improve the credibility and appeal of a destination (Suhud & Allan, 2022). While the programme successfully engaged local participants, broader stakeholder involvement remains limited, suggesting the need for more integrated and institutionalised collaboration frameworks.

Towards a Comprehensive Digital and Sustainable Tourism Ecosystem

Future programmes should aim to develop a comprehensive digital ecosystem that integrates marketing, storytelling, sustainability, and technology into a unified framework. Research on sustainable tourism shows that the sustainability, trustworthiness, and environmental reasons of a destination are important factors in shaping tourists' intentions. Similarly, research on tourism behaviour highlights the significance of destination image, perceived value, and experiential factors in influencing the decision to visit (Suhud, Allan, Juliana, et al., 2024). The existing program has started this integration process, but it is still

fragmented and based on individual projects. A more comprehensive approach is needed to guarantee lasting effects and ongoing success.

Replicability and Future Research Directions

The model developed in this programme demonstrates strong potential for replication across other heritage destinations in Indonesia and beyond. Its focus on learning through participation, combining different subjects, and applying knowledge in real situations matches modern methods for developing tourism. Previous research indicates that concepts like destination image, perceived value, and environmental motivation can be applied across various tourism settings, such as volcano tourism, geosites, and cultural sites (Sihotang et al., 2025; Suhud et al., 2022). However, replication needs to be adapted to the specific context, depends on the availability of resources, and relies on the institution’s preparedness. In addition, future studies should include long-term assessments to evaluate lasting effects, along with comparison analyses to improve and confirm the effectiveness of the suggested model.

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