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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUILDING INTEREST IN HERITAGE TOURISM IN SAWAHLUNTO

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social media in fostering interest in heritage tourism in Sawahlunto City. As one of the historical cities in West Sumatra, Sawahlunto holds significant cultural and historical value through its coal mining legacy, colonial architecture, and the social life of its people that still reflects traces of the past. In the modern era, the appeal of heritage tourism no longer depends solely on physical preservation but also on effective communication and promotional strategies. In this context, social media plays an essential role as a contemporary medium to introduce heritage tourism potential to a wider audience. Through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, various visual and narrative contents about Sawahlunto have successfully attracted public attention and stimulated curiosity about its history. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method through literature review and observation of digital content. The analysis reveals that social media significantly influences the development of positive perceptions of heritage destinations, strengthens local cultural identity, and increases community engagement in tourism promotion activities. Furthermore, social media serves as a participatory space that enables collaboration among local governments, communities, and younger generations to preserve and promote Sawahlunto's heritage identity on both national and international levels.

Keywords: Social media, Heritage tourism, Sawahlunto, Tourism promotion, Local culture

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Sawahlunto, known as an old mining town and a UNESCO world heritage, has great potential as a heritage tourist destination. However, public interest in heritage tourism is often not optimal due to the lack of an attractive and adaptive promotional strategy for digital developments. In this case, the role of social media can be a communication and promotional tool that is able to strengthen the image of Sawahlunto as a cultural heritage city of historical value.

Heritage tourism or cultural heritage tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on historical relics, culture, and past values that have an important meaning for an area. These tours not only highlight physical beauties such as historic buildings, archaeological sites, and museums, but also include the traditions, art, and lifestyle of the local people who are part of the cultural identity.

According to UNESCO, cultural heritage has universal value that must be preserved as a source of knowledge and shared pride. In the context of tourism, heritage tourism serves to introduce history and culture to tourists while encouraging the preservation of these values so that they do not become extinct.

In Sawahlunto City itself, the concept of heritage tourism is very relevant because this area has a long history as a Dutch heritage coal mining town. Various old buildings, mining sites, and local community traditions are the main attractions that represent Sawahlunto's identity as a world heritage city. Through good management and promotion, heritage tourism in Sawahlunto

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can be an educational means while improving the welfare of the surrounding community.

Digital transformation in the tourism sector has caused fundamental changes in the pattern of communication, promotion, and interaction between destination managers, tourists, and local communities. Social media is an important instrument in distributing tourism information quickly and widely. Travelers today no longer rely on conventional information sources such as brochures or official institutions, but rather trust user-generated content in the form of photos, reviews, and travel videos shared by fellow users. This type of content is considered to have a high level of authenticity because it comes directly from personal experience, thus having a significant influence on tourists' perceptions and decisions in choosing destinations.

In the context of Sawahlunto City, social media plays a very strategic role in maintaining its status as a world heritage city and strengthening the attractiveness of heritage tourism. The main challenge lies in how the promotion strategy is able to balance the preservation of historical values with the need to attract the interest of the younger generation, especially Generation Z and Millennials, who are active users of social media. Therefore, the use of social media needs to be directed not only as a promotional tool, but also as a medium for forming a positive image and a space for public participation in the preservation of cultural heritage.

In this case, social media also has an important role in the development and preservation of heritage tourism. Through digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, various information about historical sites, historical buildings, and cultural traditions can be widely disseminated to the public. Content in the form of photos, videos, and stories from tourists and destination managers helps introduce the historical values and cultural uniqueness of an area to a wider audience.

Apart from being a means of promotion, social media is also a bridge of interaction between tourists, heritage site managers, and local communities. User-generated content often features an authentic experience that can enhance the positive image of a heritage destination. Thus, social media contributes greatly to attracting tourists, strengthening local cultural identity, and supporting efforts to preserve cultural heritage such as those found in Sawahlunto.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Tourism Communication.

Social media is a means of digital communication that allows users to share information, images, videos, and experiences quickly and widely. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is a group of internet-based applications that build the foundation of Web 2.0 technology and enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

In the context of tourism, social media plays an important role as a promotional and interactive communication tool between destination managers and tourists. Through digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, information about destinations can spread quickly and attract the attention of a wider audience (Putra, 2021).

Several previous studies have shown that social media has an increasingly important role in tourism communication strategies. Arianto and Prasetyo (2022) found that social media is an effective means to strengthen the image of destinations through visual content and two-way interaction with tourists. The results of their research confirm that visitor engagement in the form of comments, re-uploads, and reviews can significantly increase destination exposure.

And Fauziah (2021) highlights how heritage-based digital marketing strategies can increase tourist interest in small-town destinations. Here he explained that destination managers who consistently upload historical narratives, local culture, and tourist experiences are able to build emotional closeness with the audience, thus influencing the decision to visit.

Another study by Ramadhani (2020) shows that social media not only functions as a promotional tool, but also as a communication space between destination managers and tourists. Information about event schedules, visit routes, and visit protocols can be delivered quickly to help visitors plan their trip better.

Tourism Interests and Factors Affecting It.

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Tourist interest is defined as a person's desire to visit a tourist destination based on interest in attraction, experience, or information obtained (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Tourism interest can be influenced by various factors such as promotion, accessibility, destination image, and recommendations from others, including content on social media (Widyastuti, 2019).
Visual content such as interesting photos and videos of heritage destinations can arouse curiosity and the desire of tourists to come directly and experience the experience.
In another study by Herlina and Putra (2021), emphasizing the role of information as a determinant of tourism interest. In their research, social media, friend recommendations, and digital reviews were shown to have a great influence on the desire of tourists to come to a destination. They explained that the ease of obtaining information makes potential visitors more confident in planning a trip.

Heritage Tourism.

Heritage tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on the preservation and appreciation of historical, cultural, and architectural heritage
past. According to Timothy and Boyd (2003), heritage tourism not only offers recreational experiences, but also learning about the historical value and cultural identity of an area.
In previous research, Arianto and Prasetyo (2022) examined how social media is used in promoting heritage destinations in Indonesia. The results of their research show that historical narratives and cultural identities that are attractively packaged are able to increase the interest of tourists, especially the younger generation. This research confirms that the aspect of cultural communication is an important part of the development of heritage destinations.
Sawahlunto, as one of the UNESCO world heritage cities, has great potential in heritage tourism such as the Railway Museum, Lubang Mbah Suro, and colonial buildings relics from the coal mining period. However, this potential needs to be promoted creatively to attract the interest of the younger generation, especially through social media.

The Role of Social Media in Increasing Interest in Heritage Tourism.

In Sawahlunto, social media-based promotion strategies can increase public awareness of the city's historical value and change the perception that heritage tourism is not only for the elderly, but also relevant for the younger generation who are active in the digital world.

Previous research has shown that social media has a significant influence on tourists' decisions and interests (Nuraini, 2020; Santoso, 2021). Through user-generated content, travelers can share authentic personal experiences to create a positive image for heritage destinations.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding in depth how the role of social media in building tourist interest in visiting heritage destinations in Sawahlunto. This approach allows for the exploration of perceptions, experiences, and meanings formed from the interaction of social media users with tourism content. This research seeks to present a comprehensive understanding of heritage tourism communication and promotion strategies that are relevant to the characteristics of today's digital society.

2. Data Sources

In this study, the data sources taken are of two types, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of social media content related to the promotion of heritage tourism, and including the Tourism Office's Instagram account (sawahluntotourism), uploads with #wisatasawahlunto hashtags, and posts from local influencers (Ahmad Hafizdd). Meanwhile, secondary data came from document analysis and literature review that supported the discussion of this research. such as news articles, official reports of the Tourism Office, previous research, and online publications that discuss the promotion of heritage tourism.

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3. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is carried out by several methods. Online observation is conducted to track promotional activities and user interactions on social media, including the type of content, frequency of uploads, and audience responses such as comments or likes. In addition, documentation is used to record and collect supporting documents such as articles, official reports, and research papers relevant to the promotion of Sawahlunto heritage tourism.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data used in this study is content analysis. The data that has been collected is analyzed through several stages, namely collecting content from social media and related documents, grouping content based on themes such as destination promotion, history, culture, and interaction with tourists. Furthermore, the researcher interprets the meaning of the messages and narratives in the social media content, and draws conclusions about the contribution of social media to the promotion and development of heritage tourism image in Sawahlunto.

5. Research Location and Time

This research was carried out in Sawahlunto City, West Sumatra, with a focus on the promotion and activities of heritage tourism displayed through social media. Data collection will be carried out during September–October 2025.

DEVELOPMENT RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study applies a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, which is carried out without involving direct interviews with informants. This approach was chosen because it is interpretive, so that researchers can examine phenomena in more depth through non-numerical data, such as documents, literature, and various digital content. Data collection was carried out through literature studies, internet-based observations, and searches of various online sources—ranging from social media uploads, news, to official reports of tourism institutions related to heritage destinations in Sawahlunto. This method is in accordance with the basic principles of qualitative research that emphasizes the importance of understanding the social context, interaction, and construction of meaning in a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

The use of Social Media in the Promotion of Sawahlunto Heritage Tourism is the most effective digital communication space in introducing the historical value of Sawahlunto to the wider community. Based on the results of online observations, official accounts such as @sawahluntotourism routinely share photos of historical buildings, to narratives about the city's background displayed in language that is easily digestible by the younger generation. The dominant visual power of the content has been proven to attract the attention of users, in line with the idea of Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) regarding social media as a content sharing medium that prioritizes visual power.

In addition, the style of message delivery used tends to be relaxed and close to the audience's daily life—for example, through the use of popular hashtags and interactive captions. This pattern supports the findings of Arianto & Prasetyo (2022), who stated that two-way communication on social media is able to strengthen the formation of destination image (destination branding).

1. The Role of User-Generated Content (UGC) in Destination Image Formation

In addition to official government promotions, tourist-uploaded content (UGC) also plays an important role in expanding the reach of promotions. Based on observations of uploads with #wisatasawahlunto hashtag, many tourists share personal experiences in the form of aesthetic photos, travel videos, and positive reviews. This spontaneous and authentic content usually obtains a higher level of trust than formal promotion, in line with the concept of participatory marketing proposed by Buhalis & Law (2008). The existence of this content helps to form a positive perception of potential visitors about Sawahlunto as a unique and worthwhile destination, strengthening the theory of Baloglu & McCleary (1999) about the formation of destination images through visual representations and experiences displayed by the media.

2. Social Media and the Shift in Behavior of Young Tourists

Generation Z and Millennials are the groups that are most active in using social media and are

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a potential market for heritage tourism. Literature reviews show that these two generations tend to choose destinations that are visually appealing, have educational value, and support the need for self-expression. Sawahlunto was able to fulfill these preferences through the peculiarities of colonial architecture, the existence of Lubang Mbah Suro, old mining buildings, and the photogenic feel of the old city. The presence of social media has also changed the view that heritage tourism is ancient, more modern, aesthetic, and worthy of being recorded in the form of digital content. This change is in line with the results of research by Nuraini (2020) and Santoso (2021), which affirmed the influence of the visual appeal of social media on interest in visiting.

3. Collaboration of Government, Local Communities, and Influencers

Collaboration between local governments, local communities, and influencers is an important element in strengthening the promotion of Sawahlunto's heritage tourism. The findings of the study show that destination publication efforts do not only depend on official agencies, but are also strengthened by the role of local communities and content creators such as Ahmad Hafizdd, who present a more natural narrative, close to everyday life, and easily accepted by young audiences. This synergy has an impact on expanding the reach of promotions, presenting more creative narrative variations, increasing public trust through authentic content, and forming online communities that actively support the preservation of cultural heritage. This kind of cooperation pattern reflects the principle of community engagement in sustainable tourism as described by Timothy & Boyd (2003).

4. Heritage Promotion Challenge through Social Media

Although it is very useful, the use of social media also faces a number of obstacles. Among them is the inconsistency of official government uploads, which causes the promotional momentum to be unsustainable. In addition, some content only highlights the visual side without providing historical explanations, even though the value of heritage is highly dependent on narrative. Cooperation with national influencers is also still minimal, so the promotional reach is not optimal. Another challenge is related to the educational aspect, where viral content tends to display aesthetics alone and shift the meaning of heritage to just a photo spot. This situation is the main problem in the promotion of heritage in Sawahlunto.

5. Social Media's Contribution to Cultural Preservation and Education

The role of social media does not stop at the promotional aspect, but also penetrates the function of education and cultural preservation. Various uploads explaining the history of Lubang Mbah Suro, colonial heritage, local community traditions, and documentation of cultural activities have increased public awareness about the importance of Sawahlunto's heritage. Thus, social media functions as a digital archive, an educational space, a means of historical documentation, and a forum for the participation of the younger generation in preservation efforts. This role is in line with UNESCO's vision regarding the preservation of cultural heritage as part of a collective identity.

satisfied with the app. Improvements were made based on the feedback.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that social media plays a very significant role in fostering tourist interest in heritage destinations in Sawahlunto. Through the analysis of various digital content and literature review, it can be understood that even without conducting direct interviews, the dynamics of public perception, interaction patterns, and forms of promotion can be identified in depth. Various platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are the main spaces for the formation of destination images through visual and narrative presentations that are able to attract the attention of the younger generation.

User-generated content (UGC) also strengthens audience trust because it is considered more natural and represents an authentic experience, making it more convincing than formal promotion. This finding is in line with the concept of participatory marketing which positions tourists as parties who actively shape the reputation of a destination. Local governments and tourism managers are also increasingly emphasizing digital marketing strategies to support the sustainable development of heritage tourism.

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Overall, this study confirms that a qualitative approach based on digital content analysis is an effective method to read the dynamics of tourism communication in the new media era. The integration between user behavior, digital content characteristics, and promotional strategies is an important element in building an image while increasing the interest of visitors to the heritage city of Sawahlunto.

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