



Examining the Role of YouTube Creators in Promoting Emerging Tourism Destinations in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally transformed tourism marketing, positioning social media creators as influential actors in shaping destination awareness and travel behavior. Among various digital platforms, YouTube has emerged as a powerful medium for promoting tourism destinations through immersive visual storytelling, authentic travel experiences, and interactive audience engagement. This study examines the role of YouTube creators in promoting emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia, with particular emphasis on their contributions to destination image formation, cultural representation, and tourism motivation. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study utilizes content analysis supported by a systematic review of contemporary literature published between 2020 and 2026 on digital tourism marketing, destination branding, influencer communication, and travel vlogging. The analysis is structured around three dimensions: visual representation, narrative representation, and audience engagement. The findings indicate that YouTube creators play a significant role as destination image builders by presenting immersive visual content that enhances the visibility and attractiveness of emerging destinations such as Labuan Bajo, Likupang, Wakatobi, Sumba, and Lake Toba. Authentic storytelling and firsthand travel experiences strengthen viewers' trust while simultaneously communicating local culture, traditions, and community identity. Furthermore, parasocial relationships between creators and audiences increase destination credibility and positively influence travel intentions. The study also identifies YouTube creators as informal digital ambassadors who contribute to destination branding, tourism diversification, and regional tourism development. However, issues related to cultural commodification, stereotypical representation, and commercialization require greater attention to ensure ethical and sustainable tourism promotion. The study concludes that strategic collaboration among tourism authorities, local communities, and YouTube creators can strengthen sustainable destination marketing while encouraging responsible tourism practices and enhancing the global competitiveness of Indonesia's emerging tourism destinations.

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BACKGROUND

The rapid advancement of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the global tourism industry, reshaping how destinations are marketed, perceived, and experienced by travelers. The widespread adoption of social media platforms has shifted tourism promotion from traditional advertising and destination marketing organizations toward more interactive, user-generated, and experience-driven forms of communication. In the digital era, potential tourists increasingly rely on online content to gather information, evaluate destination attractiveness, and reduce uncertainty before making travel decisions.¹ Social media platforms provide accessible and visually engaging channels

through which tourism experiences can be shared instantly with global audiences, creating new opportunities for destination promotion and branding.^{2 3}

Among various social media platforms, YouTube has emerged as one of the most influential tools in tourism communication due to its ability to integrate visual imagery, narration, music, and personal storytelling into a single multimedia experience. Unlike static promotional materials, YouTube travel videos provide immersive and dynamic representations of destinations that allow viewers to virtually experience places before physically visiting them. Recent studies have shown that travel-related video content significantly influences destination awareness, perceived authenticity, destination image formation, and travel intention.^{4 5} The

platform's algorithmic recommendation system further amplifies the visibility of travel content, enabling creators to reach millions of viewers worldwide and exert substantial influence on tourism consumption behavior.⁶

The growing prominence of YouTube travel creators reflects broader changes in tourism marketing and consumer behavior. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences and peer-generated information rather than relying solely on official tourism advertisements. Consequently, travel vloggers and digital content creators have become influential intermediaries between destinations and potential visitors. Through firsthand experiences, personal narratives, and emotional storytelling, creators shape audience perceptions of destinations while

simultaneously constructing meanings associated with culture, heritage, nature, and local lifestyles. Research suggests that audiences often perceive travel influencers as more trustworthy than traditional marketing campaigns because their content appears spontaneous, experiential, and relatable.⁷

This transformation is particularly relevant for Indonesia, one of the world's most culturally diverse tourism destinations. As an archipelagic nation comprising more than 17,000 islands and hundreds of ethnic groups, Indonesia possesses extensive tourism resources including natural landscapes, cultural heritage, indigenous traditions, culinary diversity, and marine ecosystems. While destinations such as Bali have achieved global recognition, many regions remain relatively underrepresented in international tourism markets despite their considerable tourism potential. Recognizing this imbalance, the Indonesian government has actively promoted several emerging destinations through initiatives such as the "Ten New Balis" program and sustainable tourism development strategies. Destinations including Lake Toba, Labuan Bajo, Mandalika, Likupang, Wakatobi, Borobudur, and Sumba have been prioritized as alternative tourism hubs capable of supporting regional economic development and reducing tourism concentration in Bali.⁹

Despite significant government investment in infrastructure and destination development, many emerging tourism destinations continue to face challenges related to limited international visibility, restricted promotional budgets, and relatively weak destination branding compared with established tourism centers. In this context, digital content creators offer an alternative mechanism for destination promotion by generating organic exposure through social media platforms. Travel creators frequently introduce lesser-known destinations to international audiences, producing content that combines entertainment, information, and cultural interpretation. Such content can increase destination awareness while simultaneously enhancing the perceived attractiveness of emerging destinations.

The influence of YouTube creators can be understood through destination image theory. Destination image refers to the collection of beliefs, impressions, emotions, and expectations that individuals associate with a particular destination.¹ Destination image plays a critical role in tourism decision-making because it shapes tourists' perceptions before travel and influences destination choice behavior. In digital environments, destination image is increasingly constructed through user-generated content rather than official marketing messages. Travel videos contribute to both cognitive image formation, involving knowledge and beliefs about a destination, and affective image formation, involving emotional responses and feelings toward a place.⁵ Through visual representation, storytelling, and experiential narratives, YouTube creators actively participate in shaping how destinations are understood and imagined by prospective travelers.

The growing influence of travel creators can be explained through parasocial interaction theory. Originally developed by Horton and Wohl (1956), the theory has gained renewed relevance in social media environments where audiences engage continuously with digital personalities. Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided emotional bonds that audiences develop with media figures despite the absence of direct interpersonal interaction. Recent studies demonstrate that parasocial attachment significantly affects viewers' trust, engagement, and behavioral intentions in tourism contexts.⁷ Through repeated exposure to creators' personalities, lifestyles, and travel experiences, viewers often develop perceptions of friendship and familiarity. As a result, recommendations made by travel vloggers may carry greater persuasive power than conventional tourism advertisements. When creators share emotional reactions, cultural encounters, and interactions with local communities, audiences become more emotionally invested in the destination experience, increasing the likelihood of destination interest and visitation intentions.⁴

In addition to their marketing function, YouTube creators increasingly

operate as cultural mediators and informal destination ambassadors. Their content not only promotes tourist attractions but also interprets local culture, traditions, culinary practices, and community life for global audiences. Through digital storytelling, creators contribute to destination branding by constructing narratives that connect places with particular values, identities, and experiences. This role is particularly significant for emerging tourism destinations that often lack strong international recognition and depend on external narratives to establish their position within global tourism markets.

The increasing influence of YouTube creators also raises important questions regarding authenticity, representation, and tourism sustainability. While creator-generated content can enhance destination visibility, it may simultaneously simplify cultural complexity, prioritize spectacle over substance, or reproduce stereotypical representations of local communities. Furthermore, the commercial nature of influencer marketing may create tensions between authentic storytelling and promotional objectives.¹⁰ Understanding how creators balance these competing demands is therefore essential for assessing their broader contribution to tourism development.

Despite the rapid growth of influencer-mediated tourism promotion, scholarly understanding of how YouTube creators contribute specifically to the promotion of emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on influencer effectiveness, social media engagement metrics, or consumer behavior outcomes. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how creators function as destination image builders, cultural interpreters, and informal tourism ambassadors for lesser-known destinations. Moreover, few studies have explored how digital storytelling strategies shape perceptions of emerging Indonesian destinations among domestic and international audiences.

This study investigates the role of YouTube creators in promoting emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia. Specifically, it examines how creators construct destination images through digital storytelling, represent local culture

and tourism experiences, and engage audiences through audiovisual content. By exploring these dimensions, the study contributes to the growing literature on digital tourism marketing, destination branding, and social media-mediated tourism development in emerging destinations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using content analysis supported by a systematic review of contemporary literature on digital tourism, social media marketing, destination branding, and influencer-mediated tourism communication. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for examining how meanings, representations, and tourism narratives are constructed through digital media content, allowing researchers to explore the symbolic and communicative dimensions of tourism promotion beyond quantitative engagement metrics.^{11 12}

The study adopts an interpretivist perspective, which assumes that tourism destinations are socially constructed through communication processes, media representations, and audience interpretations. Within this framework, YouTube travel videos are understood not merely as promotional tools but as cultural texts that shape perceptions of destinations through visual imagery, storytelling, and emotional engagement.⁵ The research therefore seeks to understand how YouTube creators contribute to destination image formation and tourism promotion through the production of digital travel narratives.

Secondary data constitute the primary source of analysis. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, tourism reports, and recent scholarly studies published between 2020 and 2026. Particular attention was given to literature discussing YouTube travel vlogs, travel influencers, destination image construction, digital storytelling, parasocial interaction, tourism branding, and emerging tourism destinations. The use of secondary data enables a comprehensive understanding of current academic debates regarding the role of social media creators in contemporary

tourism promotion.¹

The analytical framework is structured around three interrelated dimensions: visual representation, narrative representation, and audience engagement. These dimensions were developed from previous studies on multimodal tourism communication, destination image formation, and social media influence.^{5 13}

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely employed qualitative technique for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within textual and visual data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis allows researchers to examine how different studies collectively describe the role of YouTube creators in tourism promotion and destination branding.

The analysis was conducted through four stages. First, relevant literature was reviewed and categorized according to the three analytical dimensions. Second, key concepts, findings, and theoretical perspectives were coded and organized into thematic categories. Third, recurring patterns across studies were identified and compared to reveal common mechanisms through which YouTube creators influence tourism perceptions. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted within broader discussions of destination image formation, digital tourism marketing, and influencer-mediated communication.

The analysis particularly focused on understanding how YouTube creators contribute to promoting emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia by increasing destination visibility, constructing destination narratives, facilitating cultural representation, and generating audience engagement. Through this interpretive process, the study identifies the multifaceted role of creators as destination image builders, cultural mediators, and informal tourism ambassadors.

DISCUSSION

YouTube Creators as Destination Image Builders

One of the most significant findings of this study is the increasingly important role of YouTube creators in constructing and disseminating destination images for emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia. In contemporary tourism

environments, destination image is no longer formed solely through official tourism campaigns or traditional media channels. Instead, destination perceptions are increasingly shaped by user-generated content and social media narratives that provide more experiential and personalized representations of places.¹ YouTube creators have become influential actors in this process because they combine visual storytelling, personal experience, and audience interaction to communicate destination attractiveness.

For emerging tourism destinations such as Labuan Bajo, Sumba, Wakatobi, Likupang, and Lake Toba, digital visibility remains a significant challenge. Compared with internationally recognized destinations such as Bali, these locations often possess limited promotional resources and lower levels of global awareness. YouTube creators help bridge this gap by exposing lesser-known destinations to large domestic and international audiences. Through travel vlogs, destination reviews, and experiential storytelling, creators transform unfamiliar locations into recognizable tourism products that can compete within increasingly crowded tourism markets.⁵

The effectiveness of YouTube in destination image construction is closely linked to its multimodal communication capabilities. Travel videos simultaneously integrate visual imagery, narration, music, editing techniques, and emotional expression to create immersive destination experiences. According to Chen et al. (2025), multimodal tourism communication strengthens both cognitive and affective destination image formation. Cognitive image refers to tourists' knowledge and perceptions regarding destination attributes, while affective image relates to emotional responses and feelings toward a destination. Through cinematic landscapes, drone footage, and first-person travel experiences, YouTube creators stimulate both dimensions simultaneously, making destinations appear more attractive, accessible, and memorable.

Moreover, visual storytelling reduces uncertainty associated with travel decisions. Potential tourists can observe transportation conditions,

accommodation options, cultural activities, and environmental settings before visiting a destination. This informational function is particularly important for emerging destinations where reliable tourism information may be limited. As a result, YouTube creators contribute not only to destination awareness but also to destination familiarity and perceived accessibility, both of which are important predictors of travel intention.⁴

Authenticity and Cultural Representation

The findings further demonstrate that authenticity serves as a central factor explaining the effectiveness of YouTube-based tourism promotion. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences that provide meaningful engagement with local culture, heritage, and communities rather than standardized tourism products. Consequently, authenticity has become a highly valued characteristic within tourism communication and destination branding.

Unlike official promotional campaigns that often present idealized destination images, YouTube creators typically communicate destinations through personal experiences and spontaneous encounters. Travel vloggers frequently document challenges, unexpected events, local interactions, and emotional responses during their journeys. These elements create perceptions of transparency and credibility that strengthen audience trust.

In the Indonesian context, authenticity is particularly significant because many emerging tourism destinations possess unique cultural identities rooted in indigenous traditions, local customs, and community-based heritage practices. YouTube creators often showcase traditional ceremonies, local culinary practices, handicrafts, agricultural systems, and community lifestyles. Such representations contribute to destination differentiation by emphasizing cultural uniqueness rather than merely highlighting physical attractions. Through digital storytelling, creators help communicate local identities and strengthen the cultural dimensions of destination branding.

However, the increasing commercialization of influencer marketing

also raises concerns regarding cultural representation. To maximize audience engagement, creators may prioritize visually appealing or sensational content that simplifies complex cultural realities. This tendency can lead to selective representation, cultural commodification, or the reinforcement of exotic stereotypes associated with local communities.¹⁰ In some cases, local cultures may be portrayed primarily as tourism attractions rather than living social systems with their own values and historical contexts.

These findings suggest that YouTube creators function as cultural intermediaries whose representations influence how audiences understand destinations and local communities. Consequently, creators bear ethical responsibilities in ensuring accurate, respectful, and culturally sensitive portrayals. Sustainable destination promotion requires balancing attractive storytelling with responsible cultural representation to avoid reducing cultural heritage to consumable tourism spectacles.

Parasocial Relationships and Tourism Motivation

Another important finding concerns the role of parasocial relationships in influencing tourism motivation and travel behavior. Parasocial interaction theory provides a useful framework for understanding why YouTube creators often exert stronger influence on audiences than traditional tourism advertisements. Through repeated exposure to creators' personalities, lifestyles, and experiences, audiences develop one-sided emotional relationships characterized by trust, familiarity, and perceived intimacy.

In tourism contexts, these relationships can significantly affect destination perceptions and travel intentions. Viewers often regard travel creators as trusted friends whose recommendations are perceived as more reliable than commercial advertisements. This trust emerges because creators frequently share personal opinions, emotional reactions, and authentic experiences rather than formal promotional messages. As a result, audiences may interpret destination recommendations as genuine advice rather than marketing communication.^{7,14}

The findings indicate that emotional engagement is a critical mechanism through which YouTube creators influence tourism decision-making. When creators express excitement, surprise, admiration, or emotional attachment toward a destination, viewers often experience similar emotional responses. Such emotional transfer processes strengthen destination desirability and contribute to travel motivation. Recent tourism studies have demonstrated that emotional engagement generated through social media content significantly predicts destination interest, destination attachment, and future visitation intentions.

For emerging tourism destinations, parasocial influence is particularly valuable because audiences may have little prior knowledge about the destination. In such situations, creators effectively serve as trusted information sources who reduce uncertainty and increase destination attractiveness. Therefore, the promotional effectiveness of YouTube creators extends beyond information dissemination and includes emotional persuasion, relationship building, and experiential simulation.

Digital Ambassadors for Emerging Tourism Destinations

The findings suggest that YouTube creators increasingly function as informal digital ambassadors for emerging tourism destinations. Traditionally, destination ambassadors consisted of government representatives, celebrities, or tourism professionals formally appointed to promote destinations. However, digital media environments have expanded this role to include independent content creators who possess substantial audience reach and influence.³

As digital ambassadors, YouTube creators contribute to destination branding by creating narratives that communicate destination identity, uniqueness, and attractiveness. Their influence extends beyond tourism promotion because they also shape broader perceptions regarding local culture, community values, environmental resources, and national identity. Through continuous content production, creators contribute to

the symbolic construction of destinations within global tourism imaginaries.^{15 16}

This role is particularly important for Indonesia's emerging tourism destinations. Government tourism campaigns often face budgetary limitations and difficulties reaching highly segmented digital audiences. In contrast, YouTube creators can effectively target niche travel communities, adventure tourists, cultural tourists, culinary tourists, and environmentally conscious travelers. Their ability to communicate directly with specific audience groups enhances promotional efficiency and audience engagement.

Furthermore, creator-generated content supports destination diversification strategies. Indonesia has long faced tourism concentration challenges, with Bali attracting a disproportionate share of international arrivals. By highlighting alternative destinations, creators can contribute to a more balanced distribution of tourism flows across different regions. This diversification supports regional economic development, creates new employment opportunities, and reduces overtourism pressures in heavily visited destinations.¹⁵

Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development

The growing influence of YouTube creators carries important implications for sustainable tourism development and destination governance. Tourism stakeholders increasingly recognize that social media creators are not merely marketing channels but active participants in destination development processes. Their content influences visitor expectations, tourist behavior, and destination reputation, making them important stakeholders within tourism ecosystems.

From a sustainability perspective, creator collaborations should move beyond short-term promotional objectives and prioritize responsible destination representation. Tourism authorities should encourage creators to highlight environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community participation, and responsible tourist behavior alongside destination attractions. Such an approach

aligns with contemporary sustainable tourism frameworks that emphasize social, cultural, environmental, and economic sustainability.³

Community-based tourism initiatives in Indonesia can particularly benefit from partnerships with socially responsible creators. By documenting local entrepreneurship, cultural preservation efforts, and community participation in tourism development, creators can support more inclusive and equitable tourism growth. Such representations may attract tourists who value meaningful cultural engagement and responsible travel experiences.

At the same time, tourism policymakers should establish ethical guidelines for influencer collaborations to minimize risks associated with overtourism, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation. Transparent sponsorship disclosure, cultural sensitivity training, and sustainability-oriented content standards could help ensure that creator-generated promotion contributes positively to destination development outcomes.¹⁰

The findings suggest that YouTube creators possess considerable potential to support sustainable tourism development in Indonesia. When integrated strategically into destination management frameworks, creators can enhance destination visibility, strengthen cultural appreciation, encourage responsible tourism behavior, and contribute to more balanced regional tourism development. Their influence demonstrates how digital storytelling has become an increasingly important component of contemporary tourism governance and destination branding strategies.

CONCLUSION

YouTube creators have become influential actors in contemporary tourism promotion, particularly for emerging tourism destinations in Indonesia. Through visual storytelling, authentic experiences, and audience engagement, they significantly contribute to destination image formation and tourism awareness. Their ability to combine entertainment, information, and personal narratives enables them to reach audiences in ways that traditional tourism marketing often

cannot achieve.

The study demonstrates that YouTube creators serve multiple functions, including destination image builders, cultural mediators, and informal digital ambassadors. Through parasocial relationships and immersive storytelling, creators influence perceptions, inspire travel intentions, and enhance the visibility of lesser-known destinations.

For Indonesia, strategic collaboration between tourism stakeholders and content creators can strengthen destination branding and support regional tourism development. Nevertheless, such collaborations should prioritize authenticity, cultural respect, and sustainability to ensure that digital promotion contributes positively to both local communities and long-term tourism growth. As digital media continues to shape tourism consumption patterns, the role of YouTube creators will likely become increasingly important in promoting emerging destinations and shaping global tourism narratives.

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