



Digital Branding Strategies for Tourism Destinations in Luwuk Banggai: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Objectives: This study analyzes the digital branding strategies used to promote tourism destinations in Luwuk Banggai and examines the challenges and opportunities that shape their implementation. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative descriptive design was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, field observations, documentation, and analysis of tourism-related social media content. Participants represented the tourism office, destination management, local tourism businesses, content creators, and domestic tourists. The material was analyzed thematically through familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, cross-source comparison, and interpretation. **Results:** Instagram and TikTok were the most intensively used platforms because they supported visual storytelling, short-form video, rapid circulation, and direct audience interaction. Branding practices centered on destination photography, reels, short videos, captions, hashtags, and user-generated content. At the same time, the findings revealed a visibility-capability gap: strong platform adoption was not yet matched by consistent brand identity, coordinated editorial planning, professional content production, digital marketing competence, promotional resources, or reliable connectivity. **Opportunities** arose from expanding social media use, visitor-created content, influencer partnerships, digital tourism behavior, and community participation. **Conclusions:** Digital branding can strengthen the visibility and competitiveness of Luwuk Banggai, but sustainable results require an integrated destination identity, differentiated platform roles, systematic content governance, stronger human-resource capacity, improved infrastructure, and collaboration among public, private, community, and creator stakeholders. The study contributes a contextual explanation of how regional destinations can achieve high online visibility while still facing limited institutional branding capacity.

Keywords: Digital Branding; Destination Branding; Social Media; Tourism Marketing; User-Generated Content; Luwuk Banggai

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have changed tourism communication from a largely one-directional promotional activity into a continuous process of searching, sharing, evaluating, and co-creating destination meanings. Travelers now move between search engines, social networks, review platforms, online maps, short-video applications, and peer recommendations before, during, and after a trip; this pattern has been evident since social media became a major source of travel information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As a result, the image of a destination is no longer produced only by tourism authorities or commercial advertisers. It is negotiated among official organizations, businesses, residents, visitors, creators, and platform algorithms. This shift has made digital branding central to destination competitiveness because a place must be recognizable, credible, emotionally appealing, and easy to discover across several online touchpoints (Yu & Egger, 2021).

Destination branding is broader than the distribution of promotional information. It involves defining what a place represents, selecting the values and experiences that distinguish it, and communicating those meanings consistently to relevant audiences. In digital environments, this work includes visual identity, narrative style, platform selection, interaction, reputation management, content curation, and the coordination of official and visitor-created messages. A destination may receive considerable online attention without possessing a coherent brand if photographs, videos, captions, hashtags, and stakeholder accounts communicate unrelated promises. For this reason, digital destination branding requires both communication reach and organizational capacity. (Confetto dkk., 2023), argue that effective digital branding depends on the alignment of brand strategy, digital channels, content, and stakeholder interaction rather than on platform presence alone.

Social media has become especially important because tourism products are experiential and difficult to assess before consumption. Visual and narrative content helps potential visitors imagine landscapes, activities, hospitality, culture, and emotional experiences. Storytelling can transform a location from a list of attractions into a meaningful journey by connecting scenery with people, memories, traditions, and local values (Lund dkk., 2018). Emotional communication also matters because destination choices are rarely based only on functional information. Research on destination marketing organizations shows that the emotional values expressed in posts can influence audience response, although effectiveness varies across platforms and communication styles (Garay, 2019; Lalicic dkk., 2020; Schoner-Schatz dkk., 2021).

Instagram has been widely used for destination branding because photographs, carousels, reels, captions, and hashtags allow destinations to create a recognizable visual world. Studies show that engagement is affected not only by image quality but also by who posts the content, what is pictured, how people are positioned within the image, and whether the message enables viewers to imagine themselves at the destination (Blanco-Moreno dkk., 2024). Machine-learning studies of tourism photographs further demonstrate that color, composition, objects, and recurring visual clusters shape the perceived image of a place (Arefieva dkk., 2021; Yu & Egger, 2021). These findings suggest that successful visual branding is not achieved by uploading attractive photographs at random. It requires deliberate curation and a clear relationship between the images presented and the identity the destination intends to build.

TikTok and other short-video platforms have added a different communication logic. Short videos combine movement, sound, narration, editing, and social interaction in a format designed for rapid discovery. Their influence comes partly from vividness and partly from the platform's ability to circulate content beyond an account's existing followers. Research indicates that short-video credibility, usefulness, ease of interaction, and parasocial relationships can shape tourist attitudes and travel intention (Qiu dkk., 2024). Sensory attractiveness, vividness, character interactivity, and emotional experience can also strengthen destination-brand identification and loyalty (Z. Li & Zhang, 2023). Experimental evidence also shows that the relationship between visual perspective, content, and narration affects the persuasive power of tourism videos (Gan dkk., 2023). For regional destinations with limited conventional advertising budgets, short video therefore offers an opportunity to reach large audiences, but it also creates pressure to produce frequent, distinctive, and professionally edited content.

Another major development is the growing influence of user-generated content. Visitor photographs, videos, reviews, and travel stories can strengthen authenticity because they are perceived as records of actual experience rather than official advertising. User-generated posts can shape destination image, satisfaction, trust, and travel decisions (Huang dkk., 2024; Lam dkk., 2020; Wang dkk., 2022), while the value and involvement generated by social-media images can stimulate electronic word of mouth (A. Z. Abbasi dkk., 2023). Their influence, however, is not automatically positive. Visitors may emphasize a small set of highly photogenic places, repeat similar visual conventions, or circulate information that is incomplete or inconsistent with destination policy. Studies of natural and protected areas show that user-created images can simultaneously expand visibility and concentrate attention on specific sites or behaviors (Araujo-Battle dkk., 2023; Bhatt & Pickering, 2022). Destination managers therefore need to engage with user-generated content without attempting to eliminate the spontaneity that makes it credible.

The challenge is more complex for regional and emerging destinations. Large destination marketing organizations often have specialist teams, research budgets, content libraries, audience analytics, and formal brand guidelines. Smaller destinations may depend on a limited number of public officers, destination managers, community volunteers, business owners, or individual

creators. Digital transformation in such contexts is constrained by skills, resources, infrastructure, organizational routines, and coordination (Rupeika-Apoga & Petrovska, 2022). The problem is not simply a lack of access to social media. Stakeholders may use platforms actively while lacking the strategic capability to define target audiences, plan content, maintain visual consistency, evaluate performance, manage online reputation, and connect promotional attention with visitor services.

Luwuk Banggai has substantial potential for nature-based, coastal, marine, cultural, and community tourism. The wider area contains islands, beaches, waterfalls, lakes, underwater attractions, local culinary products, and cultural experiences that are highly suitable for visual communication. Cultural-tourism research emphasizes that contemporary visitors increasingly seek participatory, creative, and locally grounded experiences rather than passive sightseeing alone (Richards, 2018). Several destinations have gained attention through photographs, short videos, visitor recommendations, and creator accounts. Nevertheless, the online representation of the region remains dispersed. Different destinations and stakeholders often communicate independently, and the visual identity of one account is not always connected to a broader Luwuk Banggai destination narrative. This situation makes the area an important case for examining how digital visibility develops under conditions of limited institutional coordination.

Previous studies have established the value of social media, online brand experience, visual content, engagement, and user-generated communication in tourism (Harrigan dkk., 2017; Huerta-Álvarez dkk., 2020; Jiménez-Barreto dkk., 2020). Other research has proposed frameworks for digital destination branding and smart destination governance (Collado-Agudo dkk., 2023; Gelter dkk., 2022), while social-media analytics have been used to interpret destination loyalty in nature-based settings (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021). Yet much of the empirical evidence comes from mature destinations, national tourism brands, large cities, or well-resourced destination organizations. Less attention has been given to regional destinations in Eastern Indonesia where natural attractions are strong but branding resources, internet quality, professional content capacity, and stakeholder coordination are uneven. The practical dynamics of such destinations cannot be fully understood by assuming that platform adoption is equivalent to strategic branding.

This study addresses that gap by examining digital branding practices in tourism destinations in Luwuk Banggai. It asks three related questions: Which digital platforms and content formats are most prominent in current tourism promotion? What challenges limit the development of a coherent destination brand? What opportunities can be mobilized to strengthen visibility, credibility, and collaboration? The study's novelty lies in identifying a visibility-capability gap: the destination has achieved strong use of visually oriented platforms, but this visibility is not yet supported by equally strong branding governance, human-resource capacity, infrastructure, and content systems. By connecting platform use with institutional and community conditions, the study contributes a regional perspective to digital destination branding research and provides an applied basis for coordinated tourism policy and practice.

METHOD

Research design. This study used a qualitative descriptive design to examine how digital branding was understood and practiced by stakeholders involved in tourism promotion in Luwuk Banggai. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions concerned processes, experiences, meanings, and organizational conditions rather than the estimation of causal effects. The design allowed the researchers to compare what stakeholders said about branding with what was visible in destination settings, promotional documents, and social media content. The aim was not to produce statistically representative claims about all tourism actors in the region, but to develop a contextual account of recurring practices, constraints, and opportunities.

Study context and site selection. The research focused on selected tourism destinations in the Luwuk Banggai area. Sites were chosen purposively because they represented natural, coastal, marine, or cultural attractions that had public visibility and had been promoted through at least one digital channel. Selection also considered the presence of destination management activities and the availability of observable promotional material. This approach provided variation in destination type while keeping the analysis centered on places that were already participating, to different degrees, in digital tourism communication.

Participants. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct knowledge of tourism promotion or their experience of consuming and producing destination-related digital content. The participant groups included representatives of the tourism office,

destination managers, local tourism business owners, social media content creators, and domestic tourists. These groups were included because digital branding is distributed across several actors. Public institutions may define policy and formal identity; destination managers and businesses translate the brand into services and visitor encounters; creators shape visibility and narrative style; and tourists interpret, evaluate, and redistribute destination images. Bringing these perspectives together reduced the risk of describing branding solely from an institutional point of view.

Data collection. Four complementary techniques were used: semi-structured interviews, field observations, documentation, and social media content analysis. Semi-structured interviews explored platform choices, content-planning practices, intended audiences, visual identity, storytelling, audience interaction, collaboration, budget, digital competence, infrastructure, and expectations for future development. The interview format provided a common set of topics while allowing participants to explain experiences in their own terms. Follow-up questions were used to clarify examples and differences among stakeholder groups.

Field observations were conducted to examine how the online promises of destinations corresponded with visible conditions at the sites. Attention was given to signs, visual identity, information boards, visitor activities, photo points, connectivity, local business participation, and the availability of material that could support digital storytelling. Observation notes were used as contextual evidence rather than as a numerical audit. Documentation included photographs, videos, brochures, posters, event materials, and other promotional records made available during the study.

Social media content analysis covered tourism-related posts on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and official web pages associated with the selected destinations or tourism stakeholders. The review considered content format, visual subject, caption style, hashtags, frequency patterns, calls to action, interaction, cross-platform consistency, and the presence of user-generated material. The purpose was not to calculate platform-wide metrics, but to identify recurring communication practices and to compare the functional role of each platform. This distinction is important because the same destination may use one platform for visual discovery, another for community announcements, and another for formal information.

Data analysis. The material was analyzed thematically. The researchers first organized interview notes or transcripts, observation records, documents, and social media material by source. They then read and reviewed the dataset repeatedly to become familiar with the range of experiences and communication practices. Initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments, such as visual storytelling, short-video reach, inconsistent identity, limited skills, budget constraints, weak connectivity, influencer collaboration, visitor credibility, and community participation. Related codes were grouped into broader categories, compared across sources, and refined into themes. The final themes concerned platform ecology, content and storytelling practices, branding coordination, implementation challenges, and development opportunities. This process followed the general logic of thematic analysis described by (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation. Interview accounts were compared with field observations, documents, and visible social media practices. Perspectives were also compared across participant groups so that a claim made by one actor was not treated as a shared pattern unless it was supported by additional evidence. The researchers retained attention to contradictory or less common accounts during theme refinement. Dependability was supported by using the same analytical topics across data sources, while confirmability was strengthened through the connection between themes and traceable forms of evidence. These procedures are consistent with qualitative guidance on transparent thematic analysis and trustworthiness (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell dkk., 2017).

Descriptive visualization. The three figures present normalized descriptive indices on a 0–100 scale. The indices summarize the relative prominence or perceived strength of categories identified from interviews, observations, and content records. They are included to make cross-category patterns easier to interpret and were produced by applying the same conversion procedure to all categories. They should not be read as survey prevalence, population estimates, or inferential statistics. The tables and narrative themes remain the primary evidence, while the figures provide a visual summary of the qualitative pattern.

RESULTS

The analysis produced five connected findings. First, tourism promotion was concentrated on visual and short-video platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok. Second, destination photography, reels, short videos, captions, hashtags, and visitor-created posts formed the main content repertoire. Third, high platform activity did not consistently produce a unified destination identity. Fourth, limited skills, budget, infrastructure, and production capacity restricted the professionalization of branding. Fifth, social media growth, creators, visitors, and community networks offered realistic opportunities for collaborative expansion. Together, these findings reveal a gap between online visibility and the capacity to manage a coherent destination brand.

Platform use was not evenly distributed. Each platform served a different practical function, and stakeholders selected channels according to audience habits, ease of production, and the type of information being communicated. Table 1 summarizes the principal role and relative utilization of the five channels identified in the dataset.

Table 1. Digital Platforms Used in Tourism Promotion

Platform	Main function	Utilization level
Instagram	Destination photographs, reels, visual storytelling, and profile curation	High
TikTok	Short tourism videos, discovery, trends, and rapid audience reach	High
Facebook	Community interaction, announcements, and local content circulation	Moderate
YouTube	Longer destination documentation, profiles, and explanatory videos	Moderate
Official website	Authoritative destination information and travel planning	Low

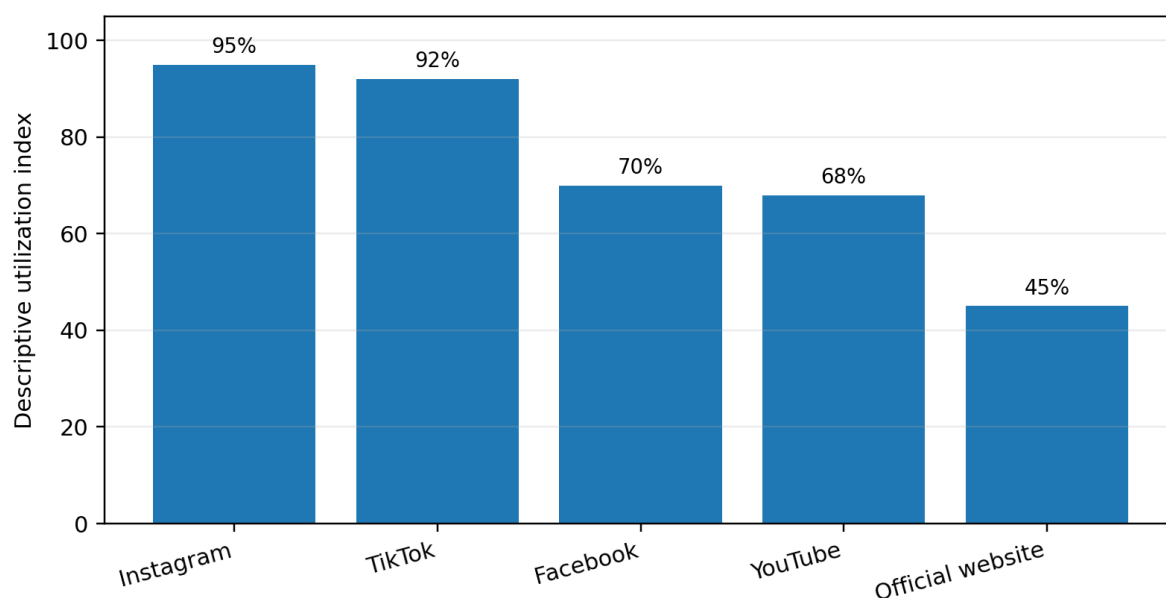


Figure 1. Relative Utilization of Digital Platforms in Tourism Promotion

Instagram received the highest descriptive utilization index at 95%, followed closely by TikTok at 92%. Facebook and YouTube occupied a middle position, with indices of 70% and 68%, whereas official websites were used least intensively at 45%. These values indicate the relative prominence of each channel within the qualitative evidence; they do not represent the percentage of all tourism actors in the region.

Instagram functioned as the most established visual portfolio for destinations. Stakeholders used photographs, carousels, reels, captions, and location tags to show landscapes, water attractions, beaches, visitor activities, food, and moments considered visually distinctive. Its practical advantage was the ability to combine an archive-like profile with rapidly circulated reels and stories. A potential visitor could browse older content to form an overall impression and then

encounter new posts through recommendations or sharing. This made Instagram useful for both identity building and continuing audience contact.

TikTok played a more discovery-oriented role. Short clips emphasized movement, scenery, transitions, music, spoken commentary, and immediate emotional appeal. The platform was particularly suitable for showing routes, panoramic reveals, water clarity, visitor reactions, or a sequence of activities within a limited duration. Participants associated TikTok with rapid reach and the possibility that content from a relatively small account could be viewed beyond its existing followers. However, the pressure to publish frequently and follow changing formats also made consistent quality difficult to maintain.

Facebook remained relevant for community circulation, announcements, event information, and the sharing of posts within local networks. Its role was less strongly associated with a carefully curated visual identity, but it helped distribute information to audiences who were already connected to community, institutional, or business pages. YouTube was used for longer documentation, destination profiles, and videos that required more explanation. Its moderate position reflected the greater time and production demands associated with filming, editing, uploading, and maintaining longer content.

Official websites were the weakest channel in terms of regular use and content renewal. Where social platforms provided immediate visual material, formal web pages were more likely to contain general information and were not always updated at the same pace. This created an imbalance. Potential visitors could discover an attraction through Instagram or TikTok but might still have difficulty locating authoritative information on access, facilities, operating conditions, safety, contact details, or travel planning. Thus, the low utilization of official websites was not only a communication issue; it also limited the conversion of social-media interest into informed travel decisions.

Content and storytelling practices. Across platforms, destination photographs and short videos were the dominant forms of communication. Posts commonly foregrounded scenery because natural and marine attractions provide immediate visual appeal. Reels and TikTok videos extended this approach by adding motion, music, transitions, and short verbal explanations. Captions and hashtags were used to identify locations, encourage visits, or connect posts to broader tourism conversations. Visitor-created content was frequently redistributed or imitated because it provided ready-made evidence of actual experience.

Despite this activity, storytelling was more developed at the level of individual posts than at the level of an integrated campaign. Some content communicated a clear emotional moment—a journey to a site, a panoramic reveal, a visitor reaction, or a local activity—but the sequence between posts was often weak. Different accounts could describe the same area with different naming conventions, visual styles, tone, or brand promises. The material therefore generated attention without always building cumulative recognition. A strong image might perform well on its own while contributing little to an enduring regional narrative.

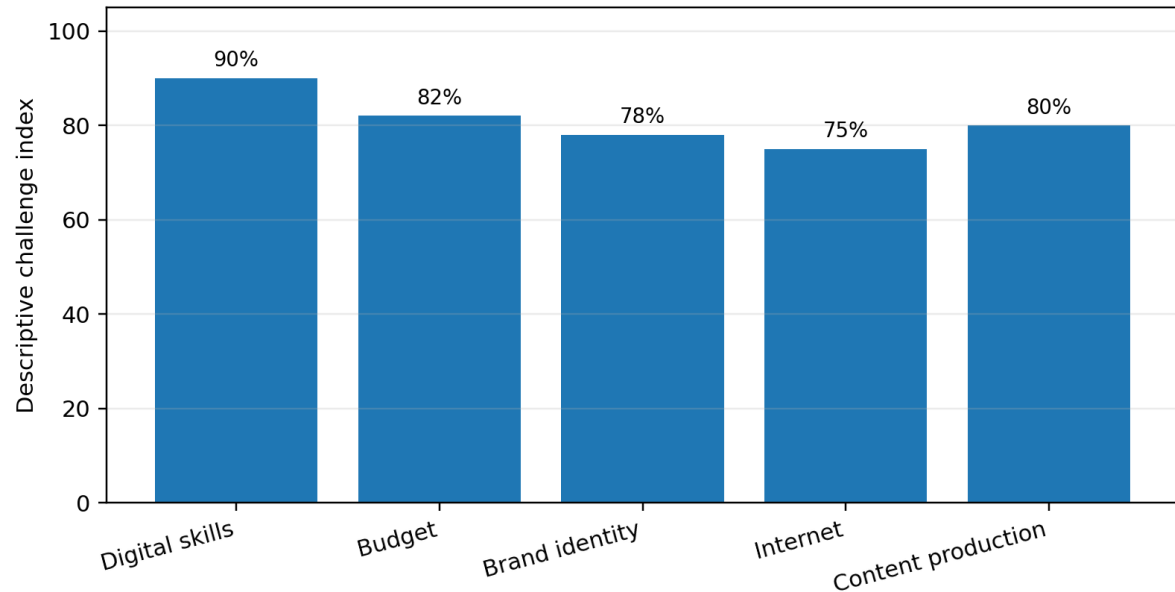
The analysis also showed that the most credible material often combined attractive scenery with evidence of use. Posts that included visitor movement, local guides, food, community activity, or practical travel information helped audiences imagine what they could do rather than simply what they could see. This suggests that destination branding in Luwuk Banggai is strongest when it moves beyond landscape display and presents a complete experience. However, such content requires coordination with service providers and communities, not only access to a camera or editing application.

Brand identity and coordination. Inconsistent branding identity emerged across visual elements, messages, and account management. Destinations did not always share a recognizable color system, logo use, typography, caption style, hashtag structure, or central narrative. The absence of a common framework made it difficult for individual attractions to reinforce an umbrella identity for Luwuk Banggai. Stakeholders were active, but activity was distributed among offices, managers, businesses, communities, and creators with different priorities and levels of skill.

This fragmentation also affected editorial continuity. Content was often linked to available material, events, visits, or individual initiative rather than to a shared calendar. When an active administrator or creator was available, posting could increase; when time, budget, or connectivity became limited, communication slowed. The finding does not imply that all accounts should become identical. Each destination requires distinctive stories. The problem was the lack of a visible relationship between local distinctiveness and a coherent regional brand architecture.

Table 2. Main Challenges in Digital Branding

Challenge	Description
Limited digital marketing skills	Stakeholders use social media but do not consistently apply audience research, campaign planning, analytics, or engagement management.
Budget limitations	Resources for production, paid distribution, travel, equipment, and specialist support are limited or irregular.
Inconsistent branding identity	Destinations use different visual styles, names, messages, and content approaches without a clear umbrella architecture.
Weak internet infrastructure	Unstable connectivity at some locations restricts uploads, interaction, real-time information, and visitor sharing.
Limited professional content production	Quality and continuity vary in photography, video, sound, editing, captions, and asset management.

**Figure 2.** Relative Strength of Digital Branding Challenges

Limited digital marketing skills received the highest challenge index at 90%. Participants recognized the importance of social media, but practical use was frequently concentrated on basic posting. More advanced capabilities—including audience segmentation, campaign planning, content testing, analytics, search visibility, community management, and conversion tracking—were less consistently available. The skill gap influenced other challenges because limited expertise made it harder to prioritize spending, organize production, and evaluate whether content achieved more than short-term views.

Budget limitations ranked second at 82%. Professional photography, video production, paid distribution, creator partnerships, transport to dispersed sites, equipment, and staff time all require resources. When promotional budgets were small or irregular, stakeholders depended on personal devices, voluntary contributions, and opportunistic content. These practices could produce valuable authentic material, but they were difficult to sustain as a professional branding system.

Limited professional content production reached an index of 80%. The issue was not a complete absence of attractive content; many destinations were visually strong. Rather, production quality varied across accounts and over time. Differences in resolution, sound, stabilization, editing, caption quality, language, and brand elements reduced consistency. Content assets were also not always organized in a shared library, which meant that useful photographs or footage could remain with individual actors and not be available for coordinated campaigns.

Inconsistent branding identity followed at 78%. This challenge was closely connected to decentralized account management. Without common guidelines, destinations could use unrelated messages and styles, making recognition dependent on the attraction itself rather than on the wider region. Weak internet infrastructure received an index of 75%. Although it ranked slightly lower than the other challenges, its practical effect was significant at locations where unstable access delayed uploads, reduced real-time interaction, and limited visitors' ability to share experiences while on site.

The challenge pattern shows that digital branding constraints are interdependent. Infrastructure affects production and visitor sharing; budget affects equipment and specialist support; skills affect planning and evaluation; and weak coordination affects brand consistency. Treating any one problem in isolation would therefore produce limited improvement. A destination can purchase equipment without developing editorial capability, or create guidelines without ensuring that local actors understand and use them.

Table 3. Opportunities in Digital Tourism Branding

Opportunity	Potential benefit
Growth of social media users	Wider discovery and lower-cost access to potential visitor segments
Influencer collaboration	Audience-specific storytelling and expanded destination exposure
User-generated content	Credibility, authenticity, and peer-to-peer distribution
Digital tourism trends	Stronger interest in visual itineraries, short video, and online travel planning
Community collaboration	Locally grounded stories, wider participation, and more sustainable promotion

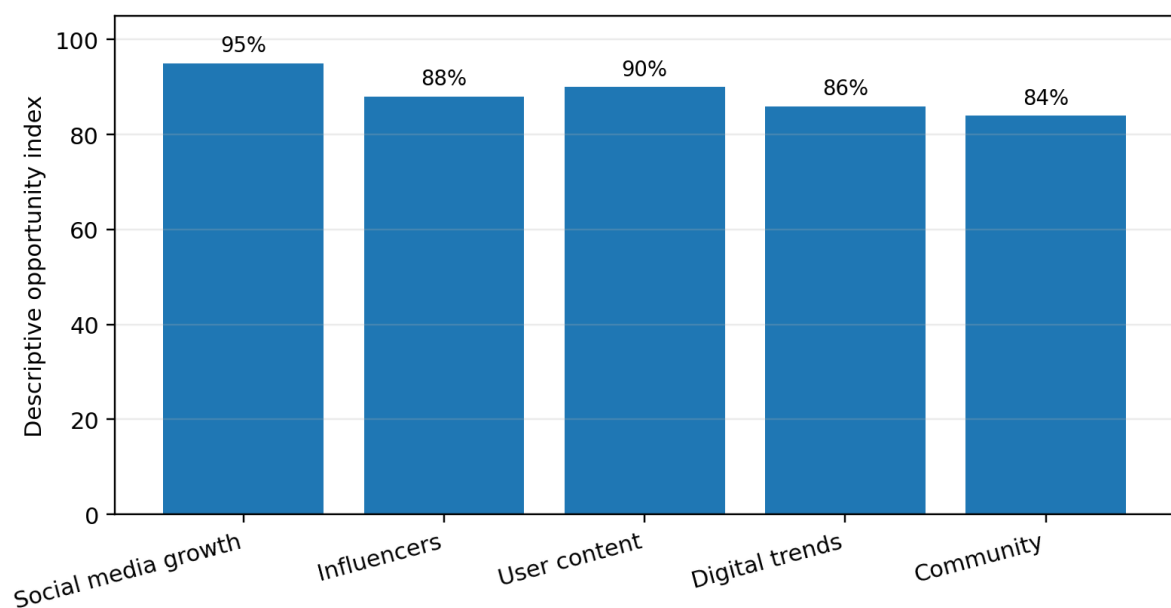


Figure 3. Relative Strength of Digital Branding Opportunities

The growth of social media users received the highest opportunity index at 95%. This reflects a broad shift in travel discovery and communication. The opportunity is especially important for regional destinations because digital distribution can reduce dependence on expensive mass-media campaigns. Nevertheless, audience growth becomes valuable only when attention is directed toward reliable information, distinctive experiences, and clear travel planning.

User-generated content ranked second at 90%. Visitors who share photographs, videos, reviews, and personal routes function as informal destination advocates. Their material can expand reach and strengthen trust because it records experiences in a voice different from official promotion. The findings indicate that Luwuk Banggai can benefit from encouraging visitors to use consistent location tags or campaign hashtags, while still allowing individual expression. Reposting with permission, acknowledging creators, and providing photogenic but safe visitor spaces could help connect spontaneous content with destination objectives.

Influencer collaboration received an index of 88%. Creators can translate destination features into narratives suited to specific audiences, particularly when they possess knowledge of travel, nature, food, or local culture. The evidence, however, suggests that collaboration should be based on audience fit and content credibility rather than follower count alone. A creator who understands local conditions and produces reusable, accurate content may provide greater long-term value than a brief high-reach post disconnected from the destination's identity.

Digital tourism trends and community collaboration received indices of 86% and 84%. These opportunities are mutually reinforcing. Digital trends create demand for short videos, itinerary

content, location-based recommendations, and authentic local experiences. Communities provide the knowledge, stories, services, and social legitimacy needed to meet that demand. When residents and local businesses participate in content planning, digital branding can distribute benefits more widely and reduce the risk that promotion presents the destination as scenery without people, culture, or local ownership.

The overall opportunity structure therefore points toward collaborative rather than exclusively institutional branding. The tourism office can provide coordination, standards, and formal information, while destination managers, businesses, communities, visitors, and creators contribute specialized knowledge and content. Such a model can expand production capacity without requiring every task to be centralized. Its success, however, depends on agreed rules for identity, accuracy, permission, credit, safety, and content reuse.

Table 4. Integrated Thematic Findings and Managerial Meaning

Theme	Evidence pattern	Interpretation
Platform ecology	Instagram and TikTok dominate; websites are less active	Discovery is strong, but authoritative planning information needs reinforcement
Content practice	Photography, reels, short videos, captions, hashtags, and visitor posts	Visual appeal is high; continuity and campaign-level storytelling are uneven
Brand governance	Many actors communicate independently	Distributed participation expands reach but weakens consistency without shared standards
Capability constraints	Skills, budget, production systems, and connectivity are limited	Professionalization requires coordinated investment rather than isolated solutions
Development opportunities	Social growth, creators, visitors, trends, and communities	Collaborative branding can scale if identity, accuracy, permissions, and roles are clear

Integrated thematic synthesis. Table 4 brings the findings together. The most important pattern is that Luwuk Banggai does not face a lack of digital activity. The central problem is the conversion of dispersed activity into a sustained destination brand. Platform adoption is high, visual resources are strong, and visitors are willing to share. At the same time, content governance, professional capability, infrastructure, and institutional coordination remain uneven.

This combination is described in this study as the visibility–capability gap. Visibility refers to the destination’s ability to appear in social feeds, creator videos, visitor posts, and platform searches. Capability refers to the organizational ability to define identity, produce and curate content, maintain accurate information, coordinate stakeholders, evaluate performance, and connect attention with a satisfactory visitor experience. The results show that visibility is developing faster than capability. Closing this gap is necessary if social-media attention is to support long-term competitiveness rather than a sequence of isolated viral moments.

DISCUSSION

Principal findings and relevance. The study found that digital branding in Luwuk Banggai is visually driven, platform-dependent, and distributed among multiple stakeholders. Instagram and TikTok dominate because their formats correspond closely with the region’s scenic assets and with contemporary travel-discovery behavior. The same evidence, however, shows that extensive platform use should not be confused with mature destination branding. Content is often attractive but episodic, official information is less prominent than social content, and the relationship between individual destination accounts and a regional identity remains weak. The key contribution of the findings is therefore the identification of a visibility–capability gap: online exposure is growing more quickly than the institutional and professional capacity needed to manage that exposure strategically.

This finding is relevant to readers and practitioners because tourism communication can appear successful when judged by the presence of posts, views, or attractive images. Such indicators reveal reach but do not necessarily demonstrate brand coherence, visitor trust, or conversion into well-informed travel. The present study redirects attention from whether regional destinations use social media to how that use is organized. It shows that the central challenge is not initial adoption, but the development of routines, roles, standards, and collaborations that turn a stream of content into a recognizable and credible destination promise.

Comparison with previous studies: visual platforms and engagement. The prominence of Instagram is consistent with previous empirical research. (Blanco-Moreno dkk., 2024), found that engagement with destination posts depends on both the sender and the visual content, supporting the present finding that official and visitor-created materials perform different but complementary functions. (Arefieva dkk., 2021) demonstrated that Instagram images can be clustered to reveal dominant destination-image patterns, while (Paül I Agustí, 2021) showed that projected and perceived city images do not always coincide. These studies help explain why the dispersed imagery observed in Luwuk Banggai matters. When official accounts, visitors, and creators repeatedly foreground different subjects, the destination image that audiences form may diverge from the identity intended by tourism managers.

The result also agrees with research showing that visual characteristics influence audience response. (Yu & Egger, 2021) identified relationships between color and engagement in tourism photographs, and (Xiao dkk., 2022) demonstrated how large collections of visitor-generated images can support differentiated destination marketing. (Bhatt & Pickering, 2022) likewise showed that online photographs provide useful insight into the destination image of a nature-based attraction. The Luwuk Banggai findings extend this literature by showing that access to photogenic resources is only one part of branding capacity. The region possesses abundant visual material, but the value of that material is reduced when there is no shared system for selection, storage, reuse, attribution, and alignment with an umbrella identity.

The dominance of TikTok and reels also corresponds with recent evidence on short-video tourism marketing. (Qiu dkk., 2024) found that technological and social characteristics of short-video platforms shape credibility, attitude, and travel intention. (Gan dkk., 2023) showed that the persuasive effect of tourism video depends on the interplay of visual perspective, content, and narration. Research on travel inspiration similarly indicates that short-form videos can move viewers from appreciation toward a desire to act (Fang dkk., 2023) The present study confirms the practical importance of these affordances in a regional Indonesian setting, where short video is valued because it can display movement, scenery, and visitor reactions quickly and can reach users beyond an account's immediate network.

Comparison with previous studies: storytelling, emotion, and brand experience. The findings support (Lund dkk., 2018), who emphasized the power of social media storytelling in destination branding. In Luwuk Banggai, posts that linked scenery with a journey, local activity, visitor reaction, or cultural element provided a stronger sense of experience than isolated landscape images. This pattern is also compatible with (Schoner-Schatz dkk., 2021), who connected destination social-media communication and emotion with visit intentions and word of mouth. (Lalicic dkk., 2020) found that destination organizations differ in their ability to communicate emotional brand values successfully. The uneven narrative quality observed in the present study suggests that emotion is already present in individual content, but it has not yet been translated into a consistent regional brand voice.

Online destination brand experience is important because audiences evaluate more than information. Behavioral research also links destination evaluation and related attitudes with intentions to return, indicating that digital communication should be assessed beyond immediate engagement. (G. A. Abbasi dkk., 2021; Jiménez-Barreto dkk., 2020), found that online brand experience and credibility are connected with behavioral intentions. (Huerta-Álvarez dkk., 2020) likewise demonstrated relationships among social-media communication, brand equity, and engagement in an emerging economy. These findings help interpret the practical weakness of low official-website use in Luwuk Banggai. Social posts may create inspiration, but visitors also require credible information to plan access, assess facilities, and understand what the destination offers. When formal information is incomplete or difficult to find, the emotional promise created on social media may not be matched by informational confidence.

Comparison with previous studies: user-generated content and co-creation. The strong opportunity assigned to user-generated content is consistent with (Lam dkk., 2020) who showed that content platforms contribute to co-created online experiences, destination image, and satisfaction. (Wang dkk., 2022) found that user-generated travel posts influence decision making, although effects can vary between platforms. (Berhanu & Raj, 2020) also emphasized the importance of trustworthiness in social-media travel information. In Luwuk Banggai, visitor posts were valued precisely because they provided evidence of actual experience and circulated beyond official networks. This credibility is a strategic asset for a destination whose formal promotional resources are limited.

The findings also support work showing that user-generated content requires active management rather than passive celebration. Recent analysis of destination activities further shows that the decision to post and rate online reviews is shaped by what travelers encounter across booking, consumption, and post-consumption stages (H. Li dkk., 2023; Nicolau dkk., 2025), concluded that tourist-generated photographs are a major source for understanding destination perceptions, while (Kitsios dkk., 2022) showed that information trust influences user behavior in digital tourism services. (Araujo-Batlle dkk., 2023) demonstrated that visitor imagery can affect the representation of protected natural spaces. These studies suggest that visitor content can widen recognition but may also narrow the public image to a small number of visually popular sites. For Luwuk Banggai, an effective approach would not attempt to control every visitor narrative. It would instead provide accurate tags, suggested routes, safety information, ethical guidance, and diverse story prompts that encourage wider representation of communities and attractions.

Comparison with previous studies: influencers and stakeholder participation. The opportunity for influencer collaboration parallels the finding of (Palazzo dkk., 2021) that influencers can shape how urban and rural destinations are represented in sustainable-tourism conversations. (Manthiou dkk., 2024) further showed that travel influencers constitute a distinct source whose credibility and relationship with audiences require careful assessment. The Luwuk Banggai evidence adds a practical qualification: collaboration is likely to be most useful when creators fit the destination's audience and values, understand local conditions, and produce assets that can be reused across channels. A high follower count alone does not guarantee an accurate or durable contribution to brand identity.

Community participation also aligns with research on social-media co-creation. (Huang dkk., 2024) conceptualized tourism experiences on social media as products of interaction and information flow, which closely matches the distributed contribution observed in Luwuk Banggai. (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022) found that interactive tourism groups can facilitate engagement, and (Cuomo dkk., 2021) highlighted the role of social data and co-design in cultural tourism planning. (González dkk., 2021) showed that Instagram data can inform local experience design. These studies reinforce the present conclusion that branding cannot be separated from the experience delivered by residents, guides, businesses, and destination managers. Community collaboration is not only a means of producing more content; it is a way of ensuring that the online brand reflects experiences that can actually be provided and that benefits are connected to local actors.

Explaining similarities and differences. Similarities between the present findings and earlier research can be explained by shared platform affordances. Instagram favors visual curation and identity display; TikTok favors rapid discovery and audiovisual immersion; Facebook supports network-based circulation; YouTube supports longer explanation; and official websites provide authoritative information. These technological characteristics operate across countries, which helps explain why visual content, emotion, engagement, and user-generated credibility appear repeatedly in tourism studies. The experiential nature of tourism also creates a common need for prospective visitors to imagine a place before traveling.

Differences arise from context, methodology, organizational maturity, and stakeholder structure. Many previous studies analyze large datasets from established destinations, test consumer models through surveys or experiments, or examine professional destination marketing organizations. This study used interviews, observations, documents, and qualitative content analysis in a regional destination where branding functions are dispersed. The result is a closer view of the organizational work behind digital content. Rather than measuring only how audiences react, the study shows why consistent content may be difficult to produce: the actors responsible for tourism promotion have unequal skills, resources, equipment, connectivity, and authority.

The regional context also helps explain why official websites were less prominent than social platforms. Maintaining a website requires technical administration, current databases, routine verification, and coordination across units, whereas a social post can be produced quickly by one person with a mobile device. In a resource-constrained setting, the lower entry cost of social media encourages adoption. However, this convenience may create a structural imbalance in which inspiration grows faster than authoritative visitor information. The difference is therefore not evidence that websites have become irrelevant; it reflects the organizational effort required to keep them useful.

Infrastructure is another contextual factor. Studies of destination organizations during crisis periods show that digital communication strategies must adapt as audience needs and institutional conditions change (Mele dkk., 2023; Pachucki dkk., 2022). Smart-destination research often

assumes that data systems, connectivity, and organizational networks can be integrated to improve visitor experiences (Collado-Agudo dkk., 2023; Gelter dkk., 2022). (Sustacha dkk., 2024) found that destination smartness can contribute to customer-based brand equity in rural tourism. In Luwuk Banggai, connectivity remains uneven in some tourism areas, so the benefits of smartness cannot be taken for granted. Weak signals affect managers who upload content, visitors who share experiences, businesses that respond to inquiries, and the collection of real-time information. The findings therefore place basic connectivity and operational capacity before more advanced digital innovation.

Novelty and theoretical contribution. The primary conceptual contribution is the visibility-capability gap. Existing frameworks correctly emphasize digital strategy, brand identity, channel management, and stakeholder engagement (Confetto dkk., 2023; Reinhold dkk., 2023). The present study adds that these elements may develop at different speeds in regional destinations. Platform visibility can rise rapidly because visitors, creators, and individual managers produce content independently. Institutional capability develops more slowly because it requires shared decisions, professional skills, budgets, information systems, and accountability. The gap explains why a destination may appear frequently online while remaining difficult to recognize as a coherent brand or difficult to plan as a trip.

A second contribution is the idea of distributed branding governance. The findings show that destination branding in Luwuk Banggai is not controlled by a single organization. It is produced through interactions among government, destination managers, businesses, communities, creators, and tourists. Distributed participation can be a strength because it expands the number of storytellers and reduces reliance on a small promotional team. It becomes a weakness when roles, standards, and information responsibilities are unclear. The theoretical implication is that regional digital branding should be evaluated not only through content outcomes but also through the governance arrangements that connect dispersed contributors.

The themes can be organized into a four-layer regional digital-branding model. The first layer is identity: the destination requires a clear value proposition, umbrella narrative, visual guidance, and relationship among individual attractions. The second is content: stakeholders need an editorial rhythm, asset standards, platform-specific formats, and a balance between inspiration and practical information. The third is participation: residents, businesses, visitors, and creators should be able to contribute within transparent arrangements for accuracy, permission, attribution, and safety. The fourth is enabling capacity: skills, connectivity, budget, equipment, data, and coordination support the other three layers. Weakness in the enabling layer reduces the effectiveness of all visible communication.

Practical implications. Tourism stakeholders should first establish a light but usable brand architecture. This does not require making every destination account look identical. It requires agreement on the core promise of Luwuk Banggai, a small set of visual and verbal elements, standardized place names, preferred hashtags, basic photography and video rules, and guidance on how individual attractions relate to the regional identity. A compact digital brand guide would help offices, managers, businesses, and creators produce distinctive content that still contributes to collective recognition.

Second, stakeholders should create a shared content operating system. An editorial calendar can coordinate seasons, events, access conditions, cultural stories, community products, and priority destinations. A cloud-based asset library can store approved photographs, video clips, logos, captions, maps, and practical information, together with creator credits and permission records. Platform roles should be differentiated: Instagram can maintain visual identity and reels; TikTok can emphasize discovery and short narratives; Facebook can support community announcements; YouTube can provide longer destination stories; and the official website can serve as the authoritative planning hub. (Hernández-Ortega dkk., 2020) showed that the timing and format of firm-generated content affect popularity, reinforcing the need for systematic rather than incidental publication.

Third, capacity building should move beyond introductory training on how to post. Stakeholders need applied learning in audience definition, story development, mobile production, editing, accessibility, caption writing, multilingual information, community management, analytics, search visibility, and crisis communication. Training should use actual destination accounts and culminate in reusable outputs, not only seminar attendance. Mentoring and peer review are likely to be more effective than one-off workshops because digital platforms and audience practices continue to change.

Fourth, creator and visitor participation should be formalized through transparent collaboration. Micro-influencers, local photographers, youth communities, guides, and business owners can be matched with specific themes and audiences. Agreements should clarify expected outputs, factual accuracy, disclosure, permissions, cultural sensitivity, safety, and rights to reuse content. Visitor campaigns can encourage common tags and diverse routes, while official accounts can repost selected material with permission and credit. The purpose is to connect authenticity with destination strategy rather than to replace visitor voices with institutional language.

Academic and policy implications. Academically, the findings encourage researchers to distinguish platform activity from branding capability. Future models should include governance, content infrastructure, and organizational learning alongside audience engagement. Comparative studies could test whether the visibility-capability gap appears in other peripheral, island, or emerging destinations and identify conditions under which it narrows. Mixed-method designs could combine thematic evidence with platform analytics, visitor surveys, and tourism-flow data to examine whether coherent branding improves trust, length of stay, dispersal across sites, or repeat visitation.

For policy makers, digital branding should be treated as part of destination management rather than as a separate publicity task. Budget decisions need to cover information maintenance, training, connectivity, asset management, and evaluation, not only campaign production. Infrastructure policies should prioritize reliable access at key tourism sites and operational centers. Destination performance indicators should include the accuracy of online information, consistency of identity, response time, stakeholder participation, content reuse, and links between digital interest and visitor services. Smart-destination development should begin with dependable basic systems before investing in complex technologies.

Limitations and directions for future research. The study is qualitative and context-specific, so the descriptive indices should not be generalized as population percentages. The research identifies recurring patterns but does not estimate the causal effect of a platform or campaign on actual visits. Social-media content also changes quickly, and the platforms visible during the study may evolve. Future research should report the exact participant profile and period of data collection in greater detail, assess sample adequacy transparently in line with qualitative guidance (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) and examine engagement data over a defined time window. Longitudinal studies could evaluate whether brand guidelines, training, and coordinated campaigns reduce the visibility-capability gap. Experimental or survey research could test how different narratives, creators, video styles, and information formats influence destination image, trust, and travel intention.

CONCLUSION

Digital branding has become a central pathway through which tourism destinations in Luwuk Banggai are discovered and imagined. Instagram and TikTok are the most prominent channels because they allow scenery, movement, emotion, and visitor experience to be communicated rapidly. Facebook continues to support local circulation, YouTube provides space for longer stories, and official websites have an important but underdeveloped role as authoritative sources of travel information. The strength of the current system lies in visual assets, growing audience participation, and the willingness of visitors and creators to share experiences.

The study also demonstrates that visibility alone is insufficient. Limited digital marketing capability, irregular budgets, uneven production quality, inconsistent identity, weak connectivity, and fragmented coordination prevent online attention from becoming a fully integrated destination brand. These constraints are connected rather than independent. Improving equipment without strengthening skills, or producing more content without establishing a common identity, is unlikely to create lasting change.

The central novelty of the study is the visibility-capability gap. In Luwuk Banggai, social platforms and distributed contributors can generate exposure faster than institutions can build the governance, information systems, and professional routines needed to manage that exposure. Closing the gap requires a four-layer approach that aligns identity, content, participation, and enabling capacity. A practical agenda includes a shared brand architecture, differentiated platform roles, an editorial calendar, a reusable digital asset library, advanced training, reliable official information, transparent creator partnerships, stronger connectivity, and routine evaluation.

These actions would allow digital branding to support more than promotional reach. They can strengthen visitor confidence, distribute attention across destinations, connect tourism stories with communities and local businesses, and improve the relationship between the online promise and the on-site experience. Future research should evaluate these interventions longitudinally and

connect digital measures with visitor behavior and regional tourism outcomes.

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