

OPTIMALISASI MANAJEMEN PEMASARAN DIGITAL EKOWISATA TAMAN NASIONAL GUNUNG LEUSER SEBAGAI UPAYA MENINGKATKAN KUNJUNGAN WISATAWAN

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Abstrak

Taman Nasional Gunung Leuser (TNGL) merupakan kawasan konservasi lintas Provinsi Aceh dan Sumatera Utara yang telah ditetapkan sebagai bagian dari Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra oleh UNESCO, dengan kawasan ekowisata Bukit Lawang dan Tangkahan di Kabupaten Langkat sebagai pintu masuk utama wisatawan yang ingin menyaksikan habitat orangutan Sumatra secara langsung. Meskipun memiliki daya tarik alam yang tinggi, pengelolaan pemasaran destinasi oleh Kelompok Sadar Wisata (Pokdarwis) dan pelaku usaha ekowisata setempat masih bersifat konvensional, mengandalkan promosi dari mulut ke mulut serta belum optimalnya pemanfaatan kanal digital seperti Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, dan Google Bisnisku. Kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat ini bertujuan untuk mengoptimalkan manajemen pemasaran digital ekowisata TNGL guna meningkatkan kunjungan wisatawan. Metode pelaksanaan meliputi sosialisasi dan identifikasi kebutuhan mitra, penyuluhan konsep pemasaran digital pariwisata, pelatihan teknis fotografi dan videografi berbasis ponsel pintar, pengelolaan akun media sosial dan platform pemetaan digital, penyusunan strategi konten dan copywriting, pendampingan lapangan, serta evaluasi menggunakan instrumen pretest dan posttest. Hasil kegiatan menunjukkan peningkatan pengetahuan dan keterampilan mitra dalam pengelolaan pemasaran digital pada seluruh aspek yang diukur, disertai peningkatan interaksi akun media sosial serta tren positif jumlah kunjungan wisatawan pada bulan-bulan setelah pendampingan. Kegiatan ini diharapkan menjadi model pemberdayaan pengelola ekowisata berbasis kawasan konservasi yang dapat direplikasi pada destinasi sejenis di Sumatera Utara.

Kata Kunci: Manajemen Pemasaran Digital, Ekowisata, Kunjungan Wisatawan.

OPTIMIZING DIGITAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT OF GUNUNG LEUSER NATIONAL PARK ECOTOURISM AS AN EFFORT TO INCREASE TOURIST VISITS

Abstract

Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP) is a cross-provincial conservation area spanning Aceh and North Sumatra that has been designated part of the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra by UNESCO, with the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan ecotourism areas in Langkat Regency serving as the main gateways for tourists wishing to observe Sumatran orangutans in their natural habitat. Despite its high natural appeal, destination marketing management by the local Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) and ecotourism business actors remains conventional, relying on word-of-mouth promotion and underutilizing digital channels such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Google Business Profile. This community service activity aims to optimize the digital marketing management of GLNP ecotourism to increase tourist visits. The implementation method includes socialization and needs assessment, extension services on digital tourism marketing concepts, technical training on smartphone-based photography and videography, social media and digital mapping platform management, content strategy and copywriting, field mentoring, and evaluation using pretest and posttest instruments. The results show an increase in partners' knowledge and skills in digital marketing management across all measured aspects, accompanied by increased social media engagement and a positive trend in tourist visits in the months following mentoring. This activity is expected to serve as a replicable model for empowering conservation-based ecotourism managers in other destinations across North Sumatra.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Management, Ecotourism, Tourist Visits.



INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is one of the strategic sectors in the national economy that is able to make a significant contribution to the country's foreign exchange income, job creation, and economic empowerment of local communities. Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 10 of 2009 concerning Tourism emphasizes that the implementation of tourism is directed to increase people's income, expand employment opportunities, and preserve nature, the environment, and resources. In the digital era, the success of the development of tourist destinations is no longer determined solely by the natural beauty and completeness of attractions, but also by the extent to which managers are able to communicate this potential to potential tourists through targeted digital channels. Digital marketing has become a key instrument in the global tourism industry because it is able to reach a wider audience at a relatively cost-efficient rate compared to conventional promotional methods. The use of social media, search engines, and digital mapping platforms allows destination managers to convey information in real-time, interactive, and measurable effectiveness. Several studies show that digital transformation in tourism needs to continue to be studied on an ongoing basis so that destinations are able to adapt to changes in tourist behavior after the pandemic who increasingly rely on digital information before deciding to visit.

Gunung Leuser National Park (TNGL) is one of the largest conservation areas in Indonesia spanning the provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra, and has been designated as part of the Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra by UNESCO due to its rich biodiversity, including the critical population of Sumatran orangutans (*Pongo abelii*). In Lalat Regency, North Sumatra, the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan areas are two of the main ecotourism entrances that offer tropical forest trekking attractions, semi-wild orangutan observations, river walking, and educational interaction with patrol elephants. The popularity of these two destinations continues to grow as tourists increase awareness of the concept of sustainable natural tourism. Despite having high potential for attraction, the results of initial observations and interviews by the service team with the management of the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) and ecotourism business actors in the TNGL buffer area show that destination marketing management is still carried out conventionally, such as the installation of banners, the distribution of brochures, and word-of-mouth promotion through tourists who have visited. Social media accounts owned by some business actors, such as tour guides and homestay owners, are generally not managed consistently, the content is not visually appealing, rarely uses interactive features, and has not utilized Google Bisnisku or Google Maps optimally, making it difficult for tourists to find location information and available services.

Based on the results of initial discussions with partners, it is known that the management of digital marketing of ecotourism destinations is still facing a number of problems. Ecotourism managers still have limited knowledge and skills in understanding concepts and implementing effective digital marketing strategies to promote natural tourism destinations. In addition, the technical ability to produce promotional content in the form of attractive photos and videos by utilizing simple devices, such as smartphones, is also still low. The management of social media accounts, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as the use of digital mapping platforms, such as Google Maps and Google Bisnisku, has not been done optimally. Another problem is the lack of managers' understanding of content strategy, copywriting techniques, and the use of appropriate hashtags to increase audience reach





and engagement. In addition, partners do not yet have a scheduled, systematic, and measurable content planning or content calendar as part of sustainable destination marketing management. This condition causes ecotourism promotion activities to not run consistently and have not been able to reach prospective tourists more widely. Based on these problems, the service team from the Hospitality Study Program, Medan Hotel School Tourism Academy considers it necessary to carry out community service activities in the form of optimizing TNGL's ecotourism digital marketing management as an effort to increase tourist visits. This activity is in line with the Tri Dharma of Higher Education, especially the dharma of community service, as well as a means of applying science in the field of hospitality and tourism directly in the midst of the community managing conservation destinations.

This activity aims to: (1) improve the knowledge and skills of ecotourism managers regarding digital marketing concepts and strategies; (2) improve the technical capabilities of partners in producing attractive promotional photo and video content; (3) optimizing the management of social media accounts and destination digital mapping platforms; and (4) encourage the preparation of scheduled and sustainable promotional content planning. The expected benefits of this activity are increasing the digital visibility of TNGL ecotourism destinations, the growth of the independence of managers in managing destination marketing independently, and the formation of a digital marketing empowerment model for conservation destinations that can be replicated in similar ecotourism areas in North Sumatra.

Ecotourism is defined as a form of responsible tourist travel to natural areas with the aim of conserving the environment, providing economic benefits to local communities, and increasing awareness and appreciation of local nature and culture. In contrast to mass tourism, ecotourism emphasizes the principles of sustainability, regional carrying capacity, and the involvement of local communities as the main subjects of management. The management of conservation areas such as ecotourism-based TNGL requires a balance between ecosystem protection efforts and meeting the economic needs of buffer communities, so that a collaborative approach between national park managers, local governments, and community groups such as Pokdarwis is the key to long-term management success. Digital marketing in the context of tourism includes all destination promotion activities that utilize internet technology, including social media, websites, search engines, mapping applications, and video sharing platforms. The study on e-tourism emphasizes that the digital transformation of post-pandemic tourism requires research and practice that continues to develop so that destinations are able to respond to changes in information search patterns and decision-making of tourists who increasingly rely on digital channels. Promotional content that is creatively and authentically packaged has proven to contribute greatly to the formation of a positive image of the destination as well as the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists. Important elements in destination digital marketing include content marketing, social media marketing, digital business directory management such as Google Businessku, as well as keyword strategies and hashtags that are relevant to the characteristics of the destination. Various studies show that social media, especially Instagram and TikTok, has a significant influence on tourists' interest in visiting a destination. Features such as hashtags, geotags, photo and video uploads, and comment interactions have been proven to help potential travelers get information about locations, attractions, and previous visitor experiences. Studies on various natural tourism destinations in Indonesia, ranging from agrotourism to outdoor tourism areas, have consistently found



that the intensity and quality of social media content are positively correlated with tourists' interest and decision to visit. In addition, the speed of account managers' responses to potential travelers' questions also affects the level of trust and the image of professionalism in destination management. The Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) is a community institution at the local level that plays a strategic role in the development and management of tourist destinations, including in promotional and marketing aspects. Through Pokdarwis, the transfer of digital marketing knowledge and skills can be carried out more effectively because its members consist of tour guides, homestay owners, attraction managers, and MSME actors who directly interact with tourists. Group-based mentoring allows for a peer learning process between members, so that the success of one member in managing his or her social media account can be a motivation and a real example for other members to help optimize their respective business digital marketing.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

Location, Time, and Target Audience community service activity was carried out in the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan ecotourism areas, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, which is the main entrance for tourists to Gunung Leuser National Park. The activity lasted in stages for approximately three months, starting from the initial socialization stage, counseling, technical training, content creation assistance, to the final evaluation. The target audience for this activity is the management and members of the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) as well as ecotourism business actors in the two areas, which amount to approximately 22 people, consisting of tour guides, homestay owners and culinary businesses, as well as river attraction managers and elephant education centers.

The problem-solving framework in this activity is prepared based on the problems of partners that have been identified at the situation analysis stage. To the problem of low knowledge of digital marketing concepts, the solutions offered are in the form of counseling and interactive discussions about the basic concepts of tourism digital marketing. To address the problem of lack of content production skills, the service team provided technical training in smartphone-based photography and videography. Regarding the problem of not optimal management of social media accounts and digital mapping platforms, the team provided training and direct assistance in creating and optimizing Instagram, TikTok, and Google Bisnisku accounts. As for the problem of the lack of content planning, the service team with partners compiled a simple content calendar example that can be applied independently and sustainably.

The method of implementing activities is arranged in stages so that the objectives of the activity can be achieved systematically and sustainably, with the following stages:

1. Socialization and Needs Identification Stage. The service team coordinated with the management of the Pokdarwis Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan to introduce the program, capture aspirations, and identify the conditions of digital marketing management that have been running. At this stage, an initial questionnaire (pretest) was also carried out to measure the level of participants' basic knowledge about digital marketing of tourist destinations.
2. Extension Stage. The service team provided counseling on the importance of digital marketing for the sustainability of ecotourism businesses, the characteristics of digital tourists, as well as an overview of the ecosystem of relevant digital platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Google Bisnisku. The

counseling was carried out using interactive lecture methods, questions and answers, and the screening of examples of promotional content from other ecotourism destinations that succeeded in increasing visits.

3. Digital Marketing Technical Training Stage. The training was conducted in a participatory manner with a learning by doing approach and included: (a) basic techniques of destination photography and videography using smartphones; (b) simple photo and video editing techniques; (c) copywriting strategies and the use of hashtags for promotional content; (d) techniques for managing and scheduling uploads on Instagram and TikTok accounts; and (e) business profile registration and optimization on Google Maps and Google My Business.
4. Content Creation and Account Optimization Assistance Stage. The service team with participants carried out direct practice of taking photos and videos at the location of tourist attractions, compiling promotional texts, and uploading content on each participant's account and official Pokdarwis account as a real example of the application of training materials.
5. Advanced Field Assistance Stage. Mentoring is carried out periodically, approximately every two weeks, to ensure consistency in account management, help overcome technical obstacles such as limited internet signals, and provide input on the quality of content that has been uploaded by participants.
6. Evaluation and Monitoring Stage. Evaluation was carried out through observation of the performance of participants' social media accounts, interviews with partners, and filling out a final questionnaire (posttest) to measure the increase in participants' knowledge compared to the results of the pretest at the beginning of the activity. The results of this evaluation are the basis for compiling program sustainability recommendations.

The success of the activity was measured using several indicators, namely: (1) an increase in the participant's knowledge score between the pretest and posttest; (2) the level of attendance and active participation of participants in each stage of the activity; (3) the increase in the number and quality of content uploaded on the participant's social media accounts as well as the registration of business profiles on Google My Business; and (4) trends in the number of tourist visits and social media account interactions before and after mentoring. The data obtained was then analyzed in a qualitative descriptive manner and presented in the form of narratives and tables to clarify the picture of the results of the activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Partner Profiles and Early Conditions of Digital Marketing

The implementation of community service activities in the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan areas received a good response from the Pokdarwis management and local ecotourism business actors. At the socialization and need identification stage, it was identified that most of the participants already had personal or business social media accounts, but the management was not consistent and was not oriented to a planned promotional strategy. The characteristics of the participants of the activity are generally presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants in Service Activities in the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan Ecotourism Areas

Yes	Participant Characteristics	Number (people)	Percentage (%)
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1	Gender: Male	14	64
2	Gender: Female	8	36
3	Age 20-35 years old	9	41
4	Age 36-50 years old	10	45
5	Age over 50 years old	3	14
6	Already have a business social media account	13	59
7	Don't have a business social media account yet	9	41

Implementation of Socialization and Counseling

The socialization activity was carried out at the Bukit Lawang Pokdarwis secretariat and was attended by Pokdarwis administrators and members from Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan, representatives of local MSME actors, and a service team from the Medan Hotel School Tourism Academy. At this stage, the service team explained the objectives, benefits, and series of activities that will be carried out. The enthusiasm of the participants seemed quite high, as shown by the many questions asked regarding how to increase the number of followers of the account, the type of content that the platform's algorithm prefers, and how to register a business on Google Maps. Furthermore, the counseling activity was delivered with the main material regarding the concept of digital marketing of tourist destinations, characteristics and behaviors of digital tourists, as well as an overview of the digital platform ecosystem that is relevant for ecotourism promotion, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Google Bisnisku. The counseling was delivered interactively by showing examples of social media accounts of other ecotourism destinations in Indonesia that have succeeded in increasing visits through consistent and interesting content management.

Digital Marketing Technical Training

The technical training was carried out in a participatory manner with a hands-on approach (learning by doing) at several tourist attractions, such as orangutan rehabilitation areas, forest trekking trails, and riverside locations. The training materials are adjusted to the basic needs of digital marketing management as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Ecotourism Digital Marketing Technical Training Materials

Yes	Training Materials	Platform/Tools	Key Achievements
1	Destination photography and videography	Smartphones	Visual content is worth uploading
2	Simple photo and video editing	Free editing app	More engaging content
3	Copywriting and hashtag strategy	Instagram, TikTok	Persuasive promotional text
4	Upload management and scheduling	Instagram, TikTok	Consistency of uploads
5	Business profile optimization	Google Maps, Google My Business	Registered & complete business profile
6	Compiling a content calendar	Simple calendar/spreadsheet	Monthly content planning

In addition to content creation techniques, participants were also trained to construct storytelling about orangutan conservation experiences and local wisdom of TNGL buffer

communities, considering that sustainability-based storytelling approaches have been proven to be able to strengthen the emotional appeal of ecotourism promotional content in various other destinations. Participants were also taught basic techniques for shooting with natural lighting of tropical forests and shooting angles that highlight the uniqueness of attractions, such as the interaction of tourists with guides during trekking and moments of observing animals from a safe distance.

Content Creation and Digital Account Optimization Assistance

Content creation assistance is carried out by assisting participants directly in producing promotional photos and videos at tourist attraction locations, then uploading them to personal and official Pokdarwis accounts. The service team also assists participants in registering and completing business profiles on Google Maps and Google Bisnisku, including adding photos, operating hours, contacts, and service descriptions, so that business information is easier to find by prospective tourists who do online searches before visiting. Through this assistance, as many as 15 out of 22 participants managed to create or update their business social media accounts with new content during the activity, while all participants who did not have a profile on Google Maps were successfully assisted to register their business. The service team also compiled a simple content calendar example containing a weekly upload schedule with a variety of content themes, such as conservation education, tourist testimonials, tour package information, and behind-the-scenes content of guide activities.

Evaluation of Participant Knowledge Improvement

The evaluation of participants' knowledge improvement was carried out through a comparison of pretest and posttest scores on several aspects of the training material. The results of the evaluation showed an increase in participants' understanding of all aspects assessed, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Scores of Participant Knowledge (Scale 0-100)

Yes	Knowledge Aspect	Pretest Average Score	Posttest Average Score	Increase (%)
1	Basic concepts of tourism digital marketing	50	83	66,0
2	Promotional photography and videography techniques	46	81	76,1
3	Copywriting and hashtag strategy	44	79	79,5
4	Instagram and TikTok account management	48	85	77,1
5	Google Maps and Google My Business optimization	35	78	122,9
6	Preparation of content planning (content calendar)	40	76	90,0

The data in Table 3 shows that the highest increase in knowledge occurred in the optimization aspects of Google Maps and Google My Business, which was 122.9 percent. This shows that the material is completely new knowledge for most of the participants, considering that most businesses have never been registered on digital mapping platforms before. A fairly high improvement was also seen in the aspect of content planning, which indicates that participants are beginning to realize the importance of

managing scheduled and consistent content, rather than just uploading content incidentally.

Impact on Social Media Account Performance and Tourist Visits

To see the initial impact of the activity on digital marketing performance, the service team conducted a simple monitoring of the performance of Pokdarwis' official social media accounts and obtained data on visits from regional postal officers before and after the mentoring period, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of Digital Performance Indicators and Tourist Visits Before and After Mentoring

Yes	Indicator	Before Mentoring	After Mentoring	Change (%)
1	Number of followers of Pokdarwis Instagram account	1.150	1.860	+61,7
2	Average interactions (likes & comments) per post	22	68	+209,1
3	Number of businesses registered on Google Maps	6	21	+250,0
4	The Frequency of Content Uploads per Month	3	14	+366,7
5	Average tourist visits per month	740	905	+22,3

The data in Table 4 shows a positive trend in all indicators monitored for approximately two months after the survey. The increase in the frequency of content uploads and account interactions is in line with the increase in the number of followers and the average number of tourist visits per month. Although the increase in tourist visits cannot be fully attributed solely to digital marketing factors given the presence of other seasonal and external factors, the trend provides a positive early indication of the contribution of digital marketing optimization to the attractiveness of destinations. These findings are in line with various previous studies that show that the intensity and quality of social media content are positively correlated with tourists' interest and decision to visit a destination.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Some of the supporting factors for the success of this activity include the high enthusiasm and active participation of Pokdarwis members, full support from the resort manager of the local Gunung Leuser National Park Center, the availability of interesting natural photo and video objects in the tourist area, and the suitability of training materials with the real needs of partners in developing their businesses. In addition, a participatory and hands-on-practice learning by doing approach has been proven to be more effective in improving participants' understanding and skills than the lecture method alone. The inhibiting factors that need to be considered in the development of future programs include the limitation of internet signals at some locations in the forest area, the limitations of smartphone devices with adequate camera specifications for some participants, and the limited time of some Pokdarwis members who have to divide their time between guiding tourists and training activities. These factors need to be anticipated through continuous assistance and adjustment of activity schedules to the daily operational conditions of partners.

Program Sustainability Impact and Potential

Overall, this digital marketing management optimization activity has a positive impact in the form of increasing the knowledge and skills of partners in managing destination digital marketing, growing awareness of the importance of consistency and quality of promotional content, and building new habits in documenting and promoting ecotourism activities digitally. Some participants have even taken the initiative to form internal communication groups to share content and upload schedules, so that digital marketing management no longer depends on a specific individual, but rather becomes a collective group culture. The potential sustainability of this program is also supported by the commitment of the Pokdarwis management to make digital content management a routine agenda for the group, including the plan to form an internal social media team that is tasked with coordinating content from all members. If managed consistently and supported by continuous assistance from universities and related agencies, digital marketing management optimization can be one of the effective strategies in supporting the increase in tourist visits in a sustainable manner in the ecotourism area of Gunung Leuser National Park.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of the implementation of community service activities that have been described, it can be concluded as follows:

1. The optimization of ecotourism digital marketing management in the Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan areas succeeded in improving the knowledge and skills of partners in photography and videography techniques, copywriting, social media account management, and digital mapping platform optimization, as shown by the increase in pretest to posttest scores on all aspects of training materials;
2. Content creation and account optimization assistance encourages an increase in the frequency of uploads, interactions, and the number of followers of Pokdarwis' official social media accounts, as well as an increase in the number of businesses registered on Google Maps and Google My Business;
3. Digital marketing optimization shows indications of a positive contribution to the trend of increasing tourist visits in the months following mentoring, although further monitoring is needed to ensure the sustainability of these trends in the long term; and
4. Institutional support from Pokdarwis and the collective commitment of members are important factors that strengthen the sustainability potential of ecotourism digital marketing programs in the buffer area of Gunung Leuser National Park.

Based on this conclusion, it is recommended that this ecotourism digital marketing optimization program continue to be developed through several steps, namely: (1) continuous assistance from the service team and related agencies, especially in overcoming technical obstacles such as limited internet signals; (2) capacity building through advanced training on social media analytics and paid digital advertising (paid promotion); (3) the establishment of an internal social media team of Pokdarwis which is tasked with coordinating content on an ongoing basis; and (4) replication of this activity model in other ecotourism areas around Gunung Leuser National Park and similar conservation areas in North Sumatra that have similar socio-economic characteristics and natural tourism potential.

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