Digital Narratives and Community Engagement: How Grassroots Marketing Shapes Rural Tourism

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of grassroots marketing on the promotion and growth of community-based tourism (CBT) in Banyuwangi Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach, the research investigates how digital narratives created by social media influencers, community organizations, and local tourism stakeholders shape tourist perceptions and engagement with rural tourism experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with visitors and community tourism managers, as well as content analysis of social media posts and community-generated promotional materials. The findings reveal that grassroots marketing significantly contributes to tourists' interest in authentic, community-led tourism experiences while also influencing visitor behaviors towards more sustainable and responsible practices. The study highlights the importance of co-creating digital content with local communities to ensure authenticity and equitable benefits.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, Community engagement, Digital narratives, Grassroots marketing, Rural tourism.

Introduction

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has increasingly emerged as a strategic model for achieving sustainable development, especially in rural regions where communities face economic and social marginalization (Okazaki, 2008; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). Unlike mass tourism, which often prioritizes external profit over local welfare, CBT places local residents at the heart of tourism governance, granting them control over resources and the power to define visitor experiences. This participatory model not only generates direct income for communities but also promotes cultural resilience, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion.

Yet, while CBT provides a theoretical framework for sustainability, its practical success depends heavily on how effectively destinations communicate their values and authenticity to potential visitors. Rural tourism areas often struggle with limited marketing capacity, unequal digital access, and dependency on external promotional agents (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Pan et al., 2018). As a result, many communities remain invisible in the competitive global tourism marketplace, unable to effectively convey their cultural richness and social narratives. This communication gap has spurred growing interest in grassroots and community-driven marketing, where promotional messages originate from within the community itself, leveraging local knowledge, social networks, and storytelling traditions (Hughes, 2005; Jiang et al., 2024).

Existing studies have not sufficiently examined the intersection between digital grassroots marketing, community narratives, and tourist behavior. Previous research has largely treated CBT and digital marketing as separate domains, with CBT studies focusing on empowerment and governance (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Iqbal et al., 2022), and digital marketing studies emphasizing promotional efficiency and post-pandemic adaptation (Deb et al., 2022). Moreover, while works such as Aboalganam et al (2025) explored authenticity in digital storytelling, they mainly addressed content production and tourist perception in urban or institutional contexts. What remains underexplored is how grassroots digital narratives, those created and circulated by community members, shape tourists' perceptions, behavioral intentions, and their alignment with sustainability values in CBT destinations.

This research fills that critical gap by investigating how locally generated digital narratives influence tourists' perceptions and behaviors in community-based tourism settings, and how communities themselves engage in co-creating, managing, and sustaining those narratives. Unlike previous studies that emphasize the supply side of

tourism (i.e., stakeholder coordination or destination management), this study integrates the demand-side perspective, exploring how tourists interpret grassroots marketing messages and translate them into actions such as selecting homestays, joining cultural programs, or contributing to local sustainability practices.

Methodologically, this study is innovative in its combination of qualitative fieldwork and digital content analysis, bridging on-site perspectives from community stakeholders with digital traces from online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. This dual approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both how digital narratives are constructed and how they are received and acted upon by audiences. It captures not only the promotional dimensions of grassroots marketing but also its socio-cultural and affective impacts, how trust, authenticity, and emotional resonance emerge through narrative co-creation.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptual integration of three previously fragmented research domains: (1) Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a framework for participatory, equitable development; (2) Digital Narratives as instruments for constructing authenticity and emotional engagement; and (3) Grassroots Marketing as a community-originated communication practice that amplifies local voices in the digital ecosystem. By bringing these dimensions together, this research proposes an analytical model showing how community-generated narratives function simultaneously as marketing tools, cultural expressions, and mechanisms of empowerment.

Empirically, the study focuses on Banyuwangi Regency, an exemplary case of a rural destination where digitalization, cultural heritage, and community participation converge (Suharso et al., 2022; Hartanto et al., 2021). Banyuwangi's vibrant social media presence, youth-led tourism initiatives, and government-supported village programs provide a living laboratory for examining how grassroots digital strategies evolve within real community ecosystems.

Theoretically, this research advances the discourse on sustainable tourism by reconceptualizing authenticity as a co-created construct, shaped not only by the community's expression but also by tourists' emotional and behavioral responses. It challenges traditional notions of destination branding by demonstrating that authenticity, trust, and sustainability can be cultivated from the bottom up, through local voices rather than top-down promotional campaigns.

Practically, the findings contribute to developing more inclusive and participatory marketing frameworks, guiding policymakers and tourism practitioners in supporting digital literacy, equitable representation, and ethical collaboration between communities and influencers. This model of grassroots digital empowerment holds global relevance for rural destinations seeking visibility without cultural compromise.

This study introduces a novel, integrative perspective on the role of grassroots digital narratives in sustainable tourism. It bridges theoretical, methodological, and practical gaps by linking community empowerment with the digital marketing ecosystem. Through its focus on co-created narratives and their behavioral effects, the research not only enriches academic understanding but also offers actionable strategies for fostering authenticity, sustainability, and social equity in the evolving landscape of rural tourism.

Literature Review
Marketing in Tourism

Tourism as a strategic sector in regional and national economic development requires a marketing approach that is adaptive to social, cultural, and technological dynamics. In today's digital era, tourism marketing no longer relies on conventional methods such as printed brochures, travel exhibitions, or mass media promotions. Instead, it has undergone significant transformation through the use of information and communication technology. This transformation encompasses digital marketing strategies, including content-based marketing, social media marketing, and, most relevant to this research, grassroots marketing.

Tourism marketing is not merely about promoting destinations; it plays a role in shaping image, creating pre-departure experiences, and guiding tourist expectations (Morrison, 2013). In the context of community-based rural tourism, marketing strategies also serve as a means to strengthen local identity, introduce cultural values, and foster deeper emotional connections between tourists and local communities (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Eusébio et al., 2017). According to Hughes (2005), grassroots marketing is a marketing approach that relies on the viral spread of messages through interpersonal conversations, social media, and informal networks. This strategy is particularly relevant in rural tourism contexts, where limited formal promotional budgets can be overcome by maximizing local community participation in creating and disseminating destination narratives. Grassroots marketing also excels in generating authentic impressions and building trust, which are crucial in attracting tourists who seek to avoid commercialized and generic tourism experiences (Aboalganam et al, 2025; Jiang et al., 2024). With the increasing use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok by tourists, tourism promotion has evolved into a two-way, participatory activity. Tourists are no longer just consumers of information but also content producers who shape destination perceptions through visual posts, reviews, and testimonials (Pesonen, 2011; Nieto et al., 2014). In the context of Banyuwangi, this phenomenon is evident in the numerous tourist posts documenting their experiences in rural villages, local homestays, and community cultural activities, which in turn create a domino effect in attracting future visitors (Jauhariyah et al., 2023; Mukaffi et al., 2022).

The digital transformation that enables local communities to participate in marketing through digital narratives has marked a new era in destination marketing strategies. Digital narratives allow communities to convey their local stories in emotionally and visually compelling ways to potential tourists Sujatmiko, et al (2025). This becomes increasingly important as authenticity emerges as a key factor in tourist preferences (Aboalganam et al, 2025). In this context, grassroots marketing serves as an effective channel for organically sharing community stories without overt commercial pressure. A study by Mohr (2017) identifies three critical factors determining the success of grassroots marketing: (1) the credibility of information sources, (2) audience emotional engagement, and (3) the ease of message distribution through digital channels. These factors can be effectively achieved in community-based tourism, particularly when community members are directly involved in content creation. Communities become primary narrators sharing local stories, culture, and uniqueness, while tourists act as connectors who further disseminate these narratives through their social media accounts.

Community involvement in marketing not only enhances promotional effectiveness but also strengthens a sense of ownership over tourism activities and fosters local innovation. In Banyuwangi, promotional efforts by community members, such as homestay operators, local guides, and village youth, have not only increased the visibility of rural destinations but also reinforced collective identity through the use of local symbols like traditional batik, music, and cuisine (Hartanto et al., 2021). However, grassroots marketing is not without challenges. A major issue is the persistent digital literacy gap in many rural tourism villages. This imbalance creates reliance on a handful of actors, such as external influencers or local social media activists, who may lack sensitivity to community cultural values (Mukaffi et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2024). In some cases, influencer-generated narratives prioritize visually appealing yet culturally shallow aesthetics, overlooking sustainability messages or local values that communities aim to convey.

A similar critique is raised by Carl (2006), who emphasizes that viral marketing risks fostering cultural commodification, where local cultural elements are simplified and stereotyped to cater to market demands. Without careful management, this can alienate communities from their own heritage and diminish overall tourism experiences. Thus, a curatorial role in digital narrative creation is essential to balance promotional and cultural preservation aspects. A study by Deb et al. (2022) demonstrates that digital marketing significantly enhances tourism business opportunities in the post-pandemic era. Through adaptive approaches, digital marketing enables small and medium-sized tourism enterprises to reach global markets without relying on extensive physical infrastructure or large capital. These findings are relevant to rural tourism villages in Banyuwangi, which are increasingly leveraging digital platforms to sell tour packages, disseminate festival schedules, and promote local creative economy products. Furthermore, community-based marketing strategies emphasizing co-creation, collaborative content production between communities and tourists have proven to enhance tourist trust and engagement. This concept is supported by Fernandez-Lores et al. (2021), who found that cultural institutions like museums experienced significant visitor growth when involving audiences in digital content production. This aligns with participatory marketing approaches in rural tourism, where tourists become part of the destination's story rather than passive observers. Thus, tourism marketing, particularly in rural and community-based contexts, should adopt collaborative, digital, and sustainable approaches. Effective marketing strategies are not just about attracting tourists but also ensuring that the experiences offered align with their expectations, values, and preferences. More importantly, marketing designed with principles of equity and participation can foster inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

Local governments and other stakeholders also play a strategic role in supporting destination marketing. As explained by Cudai Nur et al. (2023), digitalization of the tourism sector by local governments creates opportunities to reach international tourists through online channels, enhances promotional efficiency, and accelerates global market exposure for local potential. Therefore, policy interventions supporting digital literacy training, internet infrastructure provision, and partnerships between communities and media professionals are crucial. In the long term, marketing strategies must shift from volume-driven to value-driven approaches. Today's tourists seek not only beautiful destinations but also meaningful, sustainable experiences aligned with their social and environmental values (Pan et al., 2018). Thus, tourism marketing in rural areas like Banyuwangi must continue evolving with approaches sensitive to local socio-cultural dynamics and responsive to global communication technology trends.

Marketing in community tourism is not merely a promotional tool but also a narrative medium, an empowerment platform, and a vehicle for conveying community aspirations and values to the wider world. Grassroots marketing and other digital strategies open new avenues for communities to take central roles in promoting their destinations, building equitable relationships with tourists, and ensuring tourism becomes a means of fair and inclusive sustainable development.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) represents a tourism development approach that positions local communities as primary actors in the planning, management, and oversight of tourism activities. Under this model, communities are not merely passive beneficiaries but active participants with control over the direction and form of destination development (Okazaki, 2008). The core principles of CBT include local empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability, making it a more equitable and inclusive alternative to conventional mass tourism, which often marginalizes community voices and interests.

CBT offers a counterbalance to tourism systems dominated by external investors and large corporations by ensuring that economic, social, and cultural benefits remain within host communities. As noted by Giampiccoli and Saayman (2018), CBT enables communities to autonomously manage local resources while reinforcing their identity and social structures. In rural contexts, CBT also holds significant potential for addressing development disparities and enhancing welfare through job creation, economic diversification, and safeguarding local heritage. Key principles of CBT include: (1) active local participation, (2) equitable benefit distribution, (3) environmental and cultural conservation, (4) tourist education, and (5) collaborative partnerships with external stakeholders (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Iqbal et al., 2022). This model requires collective ownership of tourism assets and decision-making processes that involve all community segments, including women, youth, and marginalized groups.

In Banyuwangi, CBT has become a cornerstone of the local government's strategy for sustainable village tourism development. Through community involvement in homestay management, local guiding services, cultural skills training, and nature-based attractions, rural residents have not only gained supplemental income but also strengthened their cultural identity (Jauhariyah et al., 2023; Mukaffi et al., 2022). Government support via training programs, digital infrastructure, and partnerships with private and academic sectors has further bolstered these efforts (Hartanto et al., 2021).

Research by Eusébio et al. (2017) indicates that CBT tourists exhibit stronger motivations for community-based activities, deeper interest in cultural and environmental aspects, and greater willingness to contribute to local development. Such travelers typically seek authentic, educational, and meaningful experiences, which are uniquely offered by community -managed destinations. Thus, CBT not only generates economic benefits but also promotes sustainability values within the tourism industry.

A critical success factor for CBT is inclusive and sustained participatory mechanisms. As demonstrated by Lapuz (2023), digital transformation in rural tourism requires robust community empowerment models, particularly in technological capacity, digital literacy, and local leadership. Without adequate empowerment, digitalization risks exacerbating participation gaps between tech-savvy and marginalized groups. Further, Maquera et al. (2022) highlight that community-managed digital platforms can enhance CBT sustainability, provided these systems are collaboratively designed and responsive to local needs. This underscores that technology integration in CBT is not merely about tools but also about inclusive social design adapted to local contexts. CBT implementation faces multifaceted challenges, including managerial capacity gaps, intra-community conflicts, limited resource access, and pressures from external actors (e.g., investors or culturally insensitive tourists). Many CBT in itiatives underdeliver due to weak organizational structures or inequitable benefit-sharing mechanisms (Okazaki, 2008; Saxena, 2016). Thus, long-term CBT sustainability hinges on strong local governance and openness to continuous learning and evaluation.

In Indonesia, CBT implementation often aligns with collaborative frameworks like the Penta-Helix or Quintuple-Helix models, engaging five key stakeholders: government, academia, business, communities, and media (Sumarto et al., 2020; Hartanto et al., 2021). This approach fosters multi-stakeholder synergy to support village tourism through sustainable innovation, investment, and promotion while ensuring communities retain control over destination development.

Global CBT best practices offer valuable insights. Gao & Wu (2017) document how CBT-driven revitalization of traditional Chinese villages boosted local economies and cultural identity. Similarly, Campón-Cerro et al. (2016) found that tourist satisfaction and loyalty in Spanish rural destinations correlated strongly with community participation in management, affirming CBT's core premise that direct involvement fosters ownership and long-term appeal.

Digitalization presents both opportunities and challenges for CBT. While technology enables rapid information dissemination, efficient bookings, and low-cost promotion, unequal community capacity can deepen disparities and create external dependencies. Thus, digital-era CBT strategies must prioritize ICT capacity-building and local value-centric digital governance (Ranjan & Chaturvedi, 2023; Lalisan et al., 2024). For tourism promotion, CBT can leverage digital narratives and buzz (grassroots) marketing as part of community-driven strategies (Jiang et al., 2024). Co-created content between locals and tourists can authentically showcase stories, forging emotional connections. However, as Carl (2006) cautions, narratives must avoid cultural exploitation or oversimplification for commercial gain. Banyuwangi's CBT initiatives demonstrate that digitally empowered communities, supported by progressive policies, can become agents of tourism development. By harnessing social media and local storytelling, its rural villages have attracted domestic and global tourists organically (Suharso et al., 2022; Kusumastuti et al., 2024).

CBT transcends alternative tourism models. It is a development paradigm centering on people, culture, and the environment. In an era demanding sustainability and social equity, CBT offers a viable path for responsible tourism. With technological support, sound governance, and active community participation, CBT holds immense potential as a backbone of sustainable tourism's future.

Digital Narratives and Authenticity

The advancement of digital technology has revolutionized the way society interacts, forms opinions, and disseminates information. In the context of tourism, this transformation has given rise to a new phenomenon known as digital narrative, stories conveyed through online media such as blogs, vlogs, social media, and content-sharing platforms. Digital narratives are

not merely a form of communication but also serve as cultural instruments that shape tourists' perceptions of a destination, particularly regarding the authenticity of the travel experience offered (Aboalganam et al, 2025; Sujatmiko, et al (2025).

Digital narratives encompass various forms of content, from visual storytelling (photos and videos) to personal travel accounts and testimonials shared by visitors or local communities. Their strength lies in their interactive nature, ease of dissemination, and narrative-driven rather than purely descriptive approach. This fosters an emotional connection between content creators and audiences, ultimately influencing prospective tourists' perceptions, interest, and behavior (Jiang et al., 2024). Authenticity in tourism has long been a central concern in academic literature. Experiences perceived as "authentic" by tourists encompass not only cultural genuineness but also environmental, social, and narrative dimensions (Aboalganam et al, 2025). In the digital age, authenticity is no longer solely determined by tourism providers but also by anyone who creates or shares content about a destination. Thus, digital narratives hold the power to affirm, negotiate, or even negate perceptions of a place's authenticity.

Sujatmiko, et al (2025) argue that digital narratives created by local communities are more trusted by potential tourists than formal promotions from tourism institutions or commercial agencies. This is because communities are seen as having deeper insight into local values, and their narratives tend to be more authentic, honest, and reflective. For instance, promotional content showcasing daily life in rural communities, such as traditional ceremonies, farming activities, or communal cooking, offers a more vivid and personal depiction of local culture. In practice, authentic digital narratives can be constructed through co-creation, where tourists and local communities collaboratively produce content. This approach not only yields more diverse and multidimensional stories but also strengthens a sense of shared ownership between communities and visitors (Fernandez-Lores et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2024). Co-creation also mitigates the risk of cultural misrepresentation, as the resulting content reflects perspectives from both sides. However, challenges arise when digital narratives circulating on social media diverge from local realities or prioritize aesthetics over cultural substance. Some influencers, for example, focus solely on "Instagrammable" photo spots without explaining the cultural or historical context behind them. This phenomenon raises concerns about cultural simplification and experience commodification (Carl, 2006), where local values are reduced to mere visual consumption for the sake of attracting attention.

In Banyuwangi, digital narratives have become integral to rural tourism promotion. Local communities, youth groups, and social media activists create documentary videos, cultural event photos, and tourist testimonials shared on Instagram and YouTube (Jauhariyah et al., 2023; Suharso et al., 2022). This strategy effectively expands destination visibility, particularly among younger generations who are more responsive to digital content. For example, digital campaigns featuring the Gandrung Sewu Festival and the daily life of the Osing community have garnered national and international attention. Through compelling visual storytelling, the community successfully highlighted previously overlooked cultural uniqueness. The positive impact extends beyond increased tourist visits to a growing collective awareness of cultural preservation (Mukaffi et al., 2022). Nevertheless, community participation in digital narrative creation is not always equitable. A study by Lalisan et al. (2024) highlights the digital divide in rural areas, leading to unequal representation. Certain groups, such as the elderly or women, are often less involved in content production due to limited access and technological skills. Thus, capacity-building initiatives in digital literacy are essential to ensure inclusive participation in digital storytelling.

The digitization of narratives has also transformed how tourists seek information and make decisions. Research by Deb et al. (2022) shows that modern travelers rely more on online reviews, social media content, and YouTube videos than brochures or official websites. This underscores how digital narratives not only shape perceptions but also directly influence travel decisions. In this regard, trust in narratives is critical. When tourists believe digital content reflects a destination's reality, they are more inclined to visit and even support cultural preservation efforts. Conversely, discrepancies between digital portrayals and on-the-ground experiences can lead to disillusionment and reputational damage (Jiang et al., 2024).

Authenticity in the digital context is also dynamic and subjective. According to Pellegrino (2024), authenticity is no longer solely about how "pure" a culture remains but also how it is narrated, negotiated, and received by a global audience through digital media. Thus, digital narratives serve as an arena for meaning-making between local communities and global audiences, potentially reinforcing or reconstructing cultural identities. Amid the trend of visually driven, viral tourism marketing, scholars like Mohr (2017) caution against neglecting the integrity of local narratives. In many cases, commercially motivated storytelling overlooks socio-cultural complexities and may even create distortions detrimental to communities. Therefore, mentoring communities in digital content creation is crucial to ensuring narratives remain authentic and aligned with local values. A successful example is the use of digital platforms by self-managed rural tourism communities to consistently share stories of daily life. These narratives not only highlight unique cultural aspects but also foster internal solidarity as community members take pride in promoting their identity (Maquera et al., 2022; Ranjan & Chaturvedi, 2023).

In the long term, authentically crafted digital narratives can cultivate tourist loyalty and increase return rates by fostering emotional connections (Campón-Cerro et al., 2016). Such relationships are built not just on visuals or physical appeal but on a deeper sense of engagement with the community's life and values. Digital narratives play a strategic role in shaping perceptions of a destination's authenticity. When developed collaboratively, inclusively, and with respect for local cultural contexts, authenticity becomes more than a marketable product. It becomes a medium for fostering awareness, relationships, and sustainability. Therefore, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development must continually consider the power and challenges of digital narratives as part of destination communication and marketing strategies.

Grassroots and Community-Driven Marketing

In recent years, the concepts of community-driven marketing and grassroots marketing have gained increasing attention in destination marketing studies. Both approaches emphasize the importance of active community participation in promoting their localities, not merely as tourism objects but as narrative subjects who shape how destinations are perceived and understood by the outside world (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Sujatmiko, et al 2025).

Grassroots marketing refers to promotional strategies initiated at the local level by individuals or community groups without reliance on large institutions or commercial enterprises (Hughes, 2005). These strategies are often organic, informal, and leverage local social networks and authentic community values to disseminate messages. In tourism, grassroots marketing prioritizes local narratives, social relationships among residents, and promotional activities emerging from community initiatives.

Conversely, community-driven marketing refers to consciously designed and community-controlled marketing strategies, including content planning, information distribution, and communication management (Carl, 2006; Jiang et al., 2024). Unlike grassroots efforts, which may arise spontaneously, community-driven approaches tend to be more structured, often involving cross- sector collaboration and emphasizing community empowerment in decision-making.

Both concepts intersect closely with Community-Based Tourism (CBT), where local communities are not just beneficiaries but key actors across the entire tourism value chain. In this framework, marketing is inseparable from community identity, local cultural values, and underlying sustainability principles (Okazaki, 2008; Iqbal et al., 2022). Grassroots and community-driven marketing are vital strategies for CBT development. They empower communities to shape, manage, and disseminate narratives about their identities. In the digital age, these approaches enable low-cost, high-reach messaging. However, their success depends on community capacity, inclusivity, institutional support, and sensitivity to local values. Directed, collabo rative, and sustainable interventions are thus essential to strengthen community-based marketing ecosystems and advance equitable, inclusive, and sustainable tourism.

The Significance of Grassroots Marketing in CBT

Grassroots marketing plays a crucial role in CBT development, particularly in rural areas lacking access to large-scale promotional resources. In many alternative tourism destinations, such as the rural villages of Banyuwangi, grassroots initiatives take various forms: village Instagram accounts managed by local youth, self-organized cultural events, and community-produced promotional videos without professional assistance (Jauhariyah et al., 2023; Mukaffi et al., 2022). This approach allows communities to craft narratives that reflect local realities, free from global market demands or external commercial interests. Maintaining authenticity is critical in attracting tourists seeking meaningful and sustainable experiences (Aboalganam et al, 2025). A study by Suharso et al. (2022) highlights how Banyuwangi's success in digital tourism branding stems from collaboration between local government and community initiatives. For instance, communities produce low-cost, high-impact local narratives that enhance global visibility through social media and digital platforms.

Community-Driven Marketing and Digital Transformation

Digital transformation has opened new opportunities for communities to control their own narratives. Community - driven marketing in the digital era involves not only technology adoption but also participatory organizing and decision-making. Research by Lalisan et al. (2024) demonstrates how ASEAN communities enhance agricultural and tourism competitiveness through digital initiatives, using tools like NVIVO to strengthen collective capacity. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and village websites serve not only as information channels but also as spaces for cultural representation and local aspirations. When communities independently manage these platforms, they preserve message integrity and local values in promotional effort s (Ranjan & Chaturvedi, 2023; Maquera et al., 2022). Fernandez-Lores et al. (2021) found that public participation in managing digital media for cultural institutions (e.g., museums) correlates with increased visitation. This suggests that community-led digital promotion can yield greater impact than formal campaigns run by external entities.

Inclusivity and Challenges in Community Participation

Despite their promise for sustainable and inclusive tourism, grassroots and community-driven marketing face implementation challenges. Key barriers include digital literacy gaps, unequal technology access, and the dominance of certai n groups in community narratives (Sujatmiko, et al, 2025; Lalisan et al., 2024). When more vocal or skilled groups dominate digital narratives, there is a risk of marginalizing diverse perspectives. Thus, inclusive participation is essentia l to ensure marketing truly represents the community's social, cultural, and aspirational diversity. Another critique is the potential for unplanned over-tourism due to viral narratives that outpace destination readiness in infrastructure and social capacity. As Carl (2006) notes, community-based promotion must be accompanied by regulatory frameworks and risk management to avoid negative socio-cultural impacts.

Multistakeholder Collaboration for Strengthening Community Marketing

Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among communities, governments, academia, and industry. The Penta-Helix and Quintuple-Helix models (Hartanto et al., 2021; Sumarto et al., 2020) provide frameworks for supporting community-led destination promotion. Governments can offer digital training and infrastructure, while academia contributes research and data-driven mentorship. In this model, communities are not just implementers but equal strategic partners. Such collaboration ensures market-responsive promotion without compromising local values. Communities can also leverage tourist behavior data for targeted communication strategies, such as interest-based digital segmentation (Eusébio et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2018).

The Role of Emotion, Trust, and Collective Identity

A key strength of community-driven and grassroots marketing is their ability to foster emotional connections between tourists and communities. Narratives rooted in real experiences, conveyed through authentic local voices, build deeper trust and engagement. This is critical for tourist loyalty, as shown in Campón-Cerro et al.'s (2016) study on rural Spanish destinations. Moreover, community control over narratives strengthens collective identity and cultural pride. This identity serves not only as a marketing asset but also as a foundation for tourism's social sustainability (Gao & Wu, 2017).

Research Gap

Research on community-based tourism and digital marketing strategies has grown significantly in recent decades. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of local community participation, cultural preservation, and the role of information technology in promoting tourist destinations, particularly in rural areas. However, several research gaps remain inadequately addressed, especially concerning the relationship between community-driven digital narratives, the effectiveness of grassroots marketing, and tourist perceptions and behaviors in sustainable tourism contexts.

Giampiccoli & Saayman (2018), provides an in-depth discussion of CBT principles, emphasizing equity, participation, and sustainability. Their research is conceptual and normative, focusing on institutional structures that support CBT. While the study offers a strong theoretical foundation, it does not specifically examine how digital technology and community narratives can enhance the competitiveness of CBT destinations in the social media era.

Aboalganam et al (2025), investigate the role of authentic narratives in shaping tourist perceptions, particularly in destinations promoting local cultural aspects. The study primarily explores how digital narratives enhance perceived authenticity. However, it remains descriptive and does not analyze the extent to which these narratives are co-created with communities or their long-term impact on tourist behavior.

Jiang et al. (2024), offer a significant update by examining tourist self-presentation on social media post-travel. It underscores the importance of perception, motivation, and digital representation shaped by tourists. However, the research fo cuses more on user behavior rather than community-driven marketing processes.

Mukaffi et al. (2022), this study focuses on the relationship between tourism growth and regional economics in Banyuwangi. While highly relevant in linking local contexts to macroeconomic indicators, it lacks discussion on how community-led digital promotion influences tourist perceptions and destination choices in CBT.

Deb et al. (2022) examine post-pandemic digital marketing strategies in sustainability contexts. It provides robust insights into the opportunities and challenges of digital marketing in tourism, but does not emphasize community involvement or local participation in these strategies. The concept of grassroots marketing, rooted in organic narrative dissemination through social networks, also remains underexplored.

Distinct from prior studies that often address these topics in isolation, this article integrates CBT, digital narratives, and grassroots marketing into a unified analytical framework. It demonstrates how viral community-driven digital narratives can reinforce perceptions of authenticity, encourage sustainable tourist behavior, and support local socioeconomic development goals. The research examines how collaborative content creation between local communities and tourists impacts authentic value, cultural identity, and community participation in destination promotion, an area still underexplored in digital tourism and marketing literature. Unlike many earlier studies that focus primarily on the supply side, this research also investigates how tourists interpret the digital narratives they consume and how these shape their decisions to engage in CBT activities. This enriches the demand-side perspective, which remains underrepresented in existing literature.

By identifying critical gaps in current scholarship and offering a more integrative and contextual approach, this study contributes to advancing theory and practice in community-based tourism, digital marketing, and narrative studies. Its findings can inform future policies and promotional strategies for destinations seeking more participatory, authentic, and sustainable development models.

Method
Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory case study design to investigate how grassroots marketing and community-generated digital narratives influence tourists' perceptions, behaviors, and support for community-based tourism (CBT) in rural Banyuwangi, Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate for uncovering the depth and complexity of personal experiences, motivations, and community dynamics that are often not observable through quantitative methods (López-Estrada et al., 2021; Okazaki, 2008). To strengthen the reliability and credibility of qualitative insights, the study integrates multiple sources of data: interviews, digital content analysis, and reflexive observation, allowing for methodological triangulation. The research was conducted in several community-based tourism villages in Banyuwangi Regency, East Java, Indonesia, such as Osing Kemiren, Tamansari, and Kalibendo. These sites were selected based on their active use of grassroots digital marketing and recognition as CBT destinations supported by local government initiatives and community engagement (Jauhariyah et al., 2023; Suharso et al., 2022). The diversity among sites provided comparative depth and minimized the risk of contextual bias.

Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights. The sample consisted of 25 participants, including 15 tourists and 10 community-based tourism stakeholders. While the number of informants is modest, the selection aimed to capture depth rather than breadth of experience, consistent with qualitative case study principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The 15 tourist samples included individuals aged 20–55 years with varied educational and digital backgrounds, who had interacted with digital content about Banyuwangi's rural destinations on platforms like Instagram and had chosen to engage in CBT experiences such as homestays and cultural tours. 10 community-based tourism stakeholders, including village tourism managers, local influencers, and youth group leaders, who actively participated in creating and disseminating digital narratives. Participants were selected based on demonstrated engagement with community-driven digital marketing and direct experience with CBT activities between 2020 and 2024. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and digital content analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via online meetings, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interview questions explored perceptions of authenticity, engagement with grassroots marketing, digital behavior, and sustainable tourism values. Follow-up interviews were conducted with selected participants for member checking, ensuring the accuracy and credibility of interpretations. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

The digital content analysis included 100 social media posts to enhance analytical robustness. Posts were collected from official CBT-related Instagram accounts (e.g., @visitbanyuwangi, @osingkemiren), YouTube videos, community-run websites, and blogs. This expansion beyond the initial 50 posts improved representativeness and allowed for trend identification across different content genres. Posts were analyzed for narrative structure, visual representation, engagement patterns, and thematic emphasis (e.g., culture, sustainability, community identity). Coding reliability was enhanced through inter-coder agreement between two researchers.

Field observations were conducted in three community tourism sites, focusing on community meetings, tourism activities, and digital content creation sessions. Observational data provided contextual grounding for the interview findings and helped validate digital narrative analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring perceptions, motivations, and grassroots marketing effects on tourist behavior. Social media content was categorized by themes: community involvement, sustainability messages, and authenticity. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and synthesis. Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software. Engagement data were used to triangulate findings and assess the effectiveness of digital narratives in shaping audience perception (Pesonen, 2011; Jiang et al., 2024). Triangulation across interviews, field observations, and digital content enhanced trustworthiness and analytical depth. In addition, peer debriefing sessions with tourism scholars were conducted to refine theme interpretation and strengthen analytical rigor.

Limitations and Delimitations

While qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, several limitations are acknowledged. The number of participants (25) limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The reliance on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube may still introduce bias toward digitally active users, although the inclusion of offline participants mitigates this effect. Additionally, the sample size of 100 posts, while expanded, remains modest for capturing the full diversity of digital narratives; future studies should employ larger-scale or longitudinal data to assess trends more comprehensively.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical guidelines for human subjects. Participation was voluntary, and all data were anonymized. Digital content was analyzed only from publicly accessible or consented materials.

Methodological Contribution

This study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how a multi-source qualitative design, combining interviews, content analysis, and reflexive observation, can effectively explore digital narrative phenomena in CBT contexts. It advances methodological rigor in tourism research by emphasizing transparency, reflexivity, and representational inclusivity, offering a replicable model for future studies in grassroots and digital tourism marketing.

Results & Discussion
Fingings
Tourist Perceptions of Grassroots Marketing

The analysis of interviews and digital content revealed that tourists perceived grassroots marketing as significantly more trustworthy and emotionally resonant than institutional or commercial promotions. Respondents frequently mentioned that Instagram posts and YouTube content shared by local youth groups, homestay hosts, or community cultural activists provided them with a sense of "real-life atmosphere" that commercial platforms could not replicate. One tourist participant expressed:

"I found the village through a post shared by a local guide. It wasn't fancy, but it felt personal. I believed it more than what I saw on travel apps."

This perceived authenticity was attributed to the source credibility and emotional sincerity of community-generated content. Tourists associated such narratives with deeper local knowledge, genuine cultural representation, and a more meaningful promise of immersive experience. These findings confirm earlier claims by Sujatmiko, et al (2025) that trust in grassroots narratives enhances a destination's perceived authenticity.

Moreover, the emotional tone of grassroots digital content was found to strongly influence tourists' expectations and desire for connection. Instead of passive sightseeing, tourists sought active involvement in rural life, such as learning traditional crafts, participating in rituals, or joining cooking sessions with host families. This demonstrates how grassroots marketing not only shapes perceptions but also stimulates deeper cognitive and emotional investment in CBT experiences.

Tourist Behavioral Changes

Exposure to grassroots marketing messages translated into observable behavioral changes among tourists. Many interviewees reported modifying their itineraries to prioritize local homestays over hotels, opting for cultural workshops over generic tours, and avoiding over-commercialized attractions. The narratives they consumed prior to visiting played a central role in shaping these choices. Respondents consistently mentioned that content portraying real people, daily routines, and personal stories made them more inclined to seek experiences that benefited local residents directly. As one participant stated:

"When I saw the post from a village youth group showing how they guide tourists through rice fields and temples, I knew I wanted to go there and support them directly."

These behaviors align with Eusébio et al. (2017), who argue that CBT tourists often have higher motivations to support local development, and are more open to experiential forms of engagement. The findings from this study further confirm that digital grassroots narratives nudge tourists toward socially and environmentally responsible actions.

Additionally, tourists reported a heightened awareness of sustainability issues through community-generated content that included messages about waste management, heritage protection, and respectful conduct. Such behavioral cues embedded in digital storytelling influenced visitors to act more consciously during their trips, supporting the dual goals of conservation and community empowerment.

Community Engagement in Digital Narratives

The study found that community participation in creating digital narratives was both active and evolving. Community members, particularly youth groups and homestay owners, were involved in producing content ranging from photo stories to short-form video documentaries, which they published on Instagram, YouTube, and local tourism websites. This process of co-creation, as supported by Fernandez-Lores et al. (2021), empowered communities to take ownership of their representation in the digital tourism sphere.

Several village tourism managers explained that they regularly organize content creation workshops and collaborate with local influencers who are culturally sensitive. Some communities have also developed internal teams to manage digital platforms, with responsibilities rotating among members to encourage broader participation and skill sharing. Such grassroots efforts not only enhanced promotional reach but also reinforced community identity and pride. By participating in storytelling, local residents felt more connected to the tourism process and more motivated to preserve their traditions and landscapes. As noted by one community stakeholder:

"When our youth make videos about our festival and it goes viral, the whole village feels proud, we're not just being seen, we're being heard."

However, digital inequality remains a persistent challenge. While some groups demonstrated high levels of engagement, others, especially elderly residents and women in more conservative areas, had limited access or felt excluded from the process due to low digital literacy, as highlighted by Lalisan et al. (2024). This uneven participation raises concerns about representational equity in community-driven narratives.

Identified Challenges

Despite its promise, grassroots marketing in rural tourism faces several structural and operational challenges. The most prominent issue identified in the fieldwork was the digital literacy gap among community members. Many villagers still rely on a few tech-savvy individuals, typically younger men, to manage all digital content. This creates dependency and excludes less-represented voices, such as elderly women or traditional leaders, from the promotional ecosystem. Another critical issue was conflict over content priorities between community actors and external influencers. While the community often emphasizes cultural integrity and sustainability, influencers, especially those driven by platform algorithms, tend to focus on visually appealing content that may oversimplify or commodify cultural practices. As one tourism manager remarked:

"Some influencers come and only care about taking pretty pictures... They don't ask about the meaning of our rituals or history behind the place."

This tension reveals a key vulnerability in grassroots marketing: the risk of misrepresentation or cultural dilution when external narratives dominate. Carl (2006) and Mohr (2017) warned of such dynamics in early analyses of viral and grassroots campaigns.

A third challenge was infrastructural limitations, such as unreliable internet access in remote areas, lack of professional-grade equipment, and absence of formal training in digital storytelling. These technical barriers restrict the frequency and quality of content produced, limiting global visibility. Although local governments and NGOs have begun offering workshops and grants, the coverage remains insufficient. Finally, content curation emerged as a significant concern. Several participants noted the lack of editorial oversight over user-generated content, which could sometimes conflict with community ethics or present inaccurate information about the destination.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the transformative power of grassroots and community-driven marketing in shaping sustainable tourism practices, particularly within the framework of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in rural Indonesia. The insights reveal that grassroots digital narratives are not merely promotional tools but are deeply embedded in processes of cultural expression, local empowerment, and authentic storytelling. These narratives serve as mechanisms through which communities assert control over how their identities, values, and environments are perceived and engaged with by the outside world. In alignment with Aboalganam et al (2025) and Sujatmiko, et al (2025) this study reaffirms that tourists are increasingly drawn to digital content that appears genuine, intimate, and emotionally resonant characteristics typically associated with grassroots narratives. Unlike top-down marketing campaigns, which often lack emotional depth and local nuance, community-created content was found to build trust and emotional connectivity, influencing not only tourist perceptions but also their behavioral intentions. This suggests a paradigm shift where authenticity, as perceived by the tourist, is no longer tied solely to physical attributes or heritage artifacts but is instead constructed through affective and participatory digital interactions.

Furthermore, this study builds on Jiang et al. (2024) by emphasizing that tourists today are active agents in both consuming and reproducing narratives. Through reposting, commenting, and engaging with community-generated content, tourists become co-creators of destination imagery. The feedback loop created between community storytellers and audiences enhances both emotional reciprocity and narrative circulation. Yet, what sets this study apart is the evidence that tourist behavior post-engagement is notably altered. The data show a deliberate shift from passive tourism consumption to active participation in CBT activities such as homestays, cultural performances, and volunteerism. This change illustrates the functional role of grassroots marketing in achiev ing sustainability goals, where visitor engagement becomes aligned with local development priorities. Echoing Eusébio et al. (2017), such behavior embodies the values of responsible tourism, including mutual respect, cultural immersion, and conscious consumption.

This participatory dynamic is further strengthened by the active involvement of local communities in the digital storytelling process. The findings demonstrate that grassroots marketing fosters a sense of ownership and pride among community members. When residents, especially youth and cultural actors, participate in creating and curating digital content, they are not merely producing information but also reinforcing their own cultural identity and internal solidarity. This process of digital empowerment, as illustrated by Fernandez-Lores et al. (2021), is particularly significant in rural areas where traditional knowledge systems and social bonds are under constant threat from external modernization forces. Digital storytelling in this sense acts as a cultural preservation strategy, allowing communities to archive and disseminate their heritage in ways that are accessible, engaging, and self-directed. Additionally, such involvement contributes to a redistribution of promotional power, decentralizing tourism branding from government or corporate entities to the very people who live and shape the destination.

However, despite these promising outcomes, several structural challenges persist that limit the full realization of community-driven marketing potential. One critical concern is the persistent digital divide within communities. As Lalisan et al. (2024) and Mukaffi et al. (2022) noted, digital literacy and technological access are

unevenly distributed, often along lines of age, gender, and education. This creates a representational imbalance, where narratives are shaped predominantly by younger, digitally literate men, marginalizing voices such as elderly women or traditional leaders who are equally integral to community heritage. This gap presents a risk of cultural misrepresentation and hinders inclusive storytelling, which is essential for community cohesion and external authenticity. Therefore, any grassroots digital initiative must incorporate inclusive capacity-building measures to ensure that all segments of the community can contribute to and benefit from tourism promotion.

Another pressing issue is the conflict between community values and influencer-driven aesthetics. The findings reveal that while influencers can amplify destination visibility, their content priorities often clash with community ethics and sustainability goals. Influencer narratives tend to prioritize visually captivating content that conforms to platform algorithms, potentially oversimplifying or commodifying cultural practices. As Carl (2006) warned, such distortion can lead to cultural dilution and alienation, where communities feel misrepresented or even exploited. This tension underscores the importance of community-led curation and gatekeeping mechanisms that protect cultural integrity while still leveraging digital reach. It also calls for new ethical frameworks and partnerships between influencers and community stakeholders, grounded in respect, transparency, and co-creation.

From a policy perspective, the findings point toward the necessity of supportive governance structures that can institutionalize and scale grassroots marketing efforts. While community autonomy is vital, external support remains crucial in providing infrastructure, training, and financial resources. The role of local governments and NGOs should be reframed from top-down implementers to facilitators of participatory tourism development. As shown in the Banyuwangi case, strategic alliances across sectors, what Hartanto et al. (2021) describe as a quintuple-helix model, can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of grassroots digital promotion. Public-private-community partnerships can help communities navigate technical challenges, negotiate external pressures, and maintain narrative sovereignty. In doing so, tourism becomes a tool not only for economic growth but for community empowerment and cultural resilience.

Finally, this study makes a methodological contribution by integrating qualitative interviews with digital content analysis to capture both the intent and reception of grassroots narratives. This approach reveals the affective dimensions of digital storytelling and the relational dynamics between communities and tourists. It also allows for the identification of alignment (or misalignment) between projected narratives and visitor experiences. This methodological pluralism can be adopted in future studies to further explore how digital narratives function across different tourism typologies, cultural contexts, and technological ecosystems.

In conclusion, grassroots and community-driven marketing represents a powerful, culturally embedded strategy for advancing sustainable tourism. It reshapes destination branding into a participatory, emotionally resonant, and locally controlled process. However, to fully harness its transformative potential, stakeholders must address issues of digital equity, cultural representation, and strategic collaboration. Only then can digital narratives function not merely as promotional artifacts, but as living instruments of identity, development, and dialogue in the evolving landscape of rural tourism.

Conclusion

This study explored how grassroots and community-driven digital narratives influence tourist perceptions, behaviors, and engagement with community-based tourism (CBT) in Banyuwangi, Indonesia. The findings clearly address the research questions by demonstrating that (1) community-generated narratives significantly enhance tourists' sense of authenticity and emotional connection with destinations, (2) these narratives shape tourists' behavioral intentions toward more responsible and participatory forms of travel, and (3) the process of digital co-creation empowers local communities to assert agency and ownership over their tourism identity. In doing so, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling and grassroots marketing collectively reinforce the socio-cultural and economic sustainability of CBT.

Beyond reaffirming the role of authenticity as a central construct in tourism marketing, the study contributes new insights into how authenticity is co-created rather than merely projected. The dialogic exchange between tourists and communities in digital spaces leads to mutual meaning-making, trust formation, and behavioral alignment with sustainability principles. This research, therefore, extends the theoretical discourse on sustainable tourism by integrating digital narratives as an essential dimension of community empowerment and destination development.

Implications

This study offers several implications for tourism practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Specifically as follows:

For local communities and tourism operators, the findings reinforce the importance of community ownership over storytelling processes. Training programs in digital literacy and storytelling should be designed to include all community segments, particularly underrepresented groups such as women and elders, to ensure more

inclusive and representative narratives. Equipping communities with basic tools, creative frameworks, and editorial guidance can enhance the consistency and integrity of the narratives they present.

For policymakers, there is a clear need to institutionalize support for grassroots tourism marketing within broader rural development agendas. This includes investing in digital infrastructure in remote areas, creating incentive structures for local content creators, and providing technical assistance to ensure community narratives are not overshadowed by commercial influencers. Encouraging participatory governance models in tourism through Penta-Helix or Quadruple-Helix collaboration frameworks will foster synergy between government, academia, industry, media, and communities.

For tourism researchers, this study contributes to the growing literature on the convergence of digital storytelling, authenticity, and community empowerment. It highlights the need for further empirical studies on how digital narratives evolve over time and how they influence long-term visitor loyalty, post-visit behavior, and destination resilience. Future research could also investigate how tourists themselves shape local narratives upon returning home or sharing their own digital experiences.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the focus was limited to a specific regional context, community-based tourism villages in Banyuwangi. While the findings offer rich contextual insights, their generalizability to other regions or tourism systems should be approached with caution. Similar studies in other cultural or geographic settings would provide valuable comparative perspectives. Second, the analysis centered predominantly on Instagram and YouTube content. Although these platforms are widely used, excluding other platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, or localized tourism apps may have limited the scope of digital engagement observed. Future studies should adopt a more platform-diverse approach to capture broader patterns of digital storytelling and influence. Third, this study examined perceptions and behaviors primarily from a single temporal standpoint. It did not measure the longitudinal effects of digital narratives on tourist loyalty or repeat visitation behavior. A follow-up or panel study would allow for a deeper understanding of how digital storytelling shapes long-term tourist engagement with community-based destinations. Lastly, while efforts were made to include diverse community voices, challenges in access, time constraints, and digital literacy disparities may have led to the underrepresentation of certain groups. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive, and future research should strive for even more inclusive participation to capture a fuller range of community perspectives.

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