Optimizing Digital Marketing Strategies to Increase Coffee Tourism Competitiveness in a Sustainable Economy

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze digital marketing strategies to enhance the competitiveness of coffee tourism as part of sustainable economic development. Tourism based on local commodities, particularly coffee, has great potential to boost community welfare because it integrates aspects of agriculture, culture, and the creative economy. Coffee is not merely a consumer product but also a cultural identity that can be packaged as a tourist attraction through educational activities, agrotourism, and experience-based tourism. However, limited technology utilization and suboptimal digital marketing strategies remain major obstacles to coffee tourism development. Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews with managers, field observations, documentation of promotional activities, and literature studies supporting the analysis of digital marketing theory. The results show that optimizing digital marketing strategies can be done through consistent use of social media, strengthening branding based on positioning and uniqueness, and involving local communities in developing promotional content. Social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, have proven effective in building visual narratives about the uniqueness of coffee tourism, while branding that emphasizes the quality of Gayo coffee and the authenticity of the experience is able to attract tourists within a more specific market segment. Furthermore, the involvement of local communities in digital marketing strategies serves not only as promoters but also as cultural agents that maintain the authenticity of the tourism experience. This involvement strengthens the image of coffee tourism as an inclusive, participatory, and sustainable destination. The positive impact of implementing this strategy is not only seen in the increase in tourist visits but also in the opening of new business opportunities for the local community, ranging from homestay management and local transportation to creative coffee-based products. This aligns with the concept of a sustainable economy, where economic benefits are felt not only by business owners but also by the local community as a whole. Therefore, the results of this study confirm that digital marketing strategies play a crucial role in strengthening the competitiveness of coffee tourism, both locally, nationally, and internationally. Successfully utilizing digital technology for promotion not only provides short-term benefits in the form of increased tourism but also encourages the creation of a more sustainable tourism ecosystem. Coffee tourism can develop as a commodity-based tourism model that maintains a balance between economic, social, and environmental aspects, while strengthening regional identity amidst increasingly fierce global competition.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism based on regional commodities, such as coffee, holds significant potential for supporting sustainable economic development because it integrates the agricultural, tourism, and creative economy sectors. Coffee is viewed not only as a consumer product but also as a cultural

icon that can be packaged into a tourist attraction through coffee plantation tours, processing education, and *coffee tasting experiences* . However, the competitiveness of coffee tourism in Indonesia remains relatively low compared to commodity-based destinations in other countries. This is influenced by the limitations of suboptimal digital marketing strategies, limited market reach, and the lack of utilization of modern technology to expand promotional access. In fact, in the era of digital transformation, marketing strategies no longer rely solely on product quality, but also on the ability to build image, increase visibility, and create engaging interactions with potential tourists through digital platforms. Optimizing digital marketing strategies is an urgent need to face global competition. Social media, *marketplaces* , and online travel platforms such as TripAdvisor, Traveloka, or Google Travel can be utilized to introduce coffee tourism to a wider audience. Furthermore, a data-driven approach through analysis of market trends, consumer preferences, and tourist behavior enables coffee tourism managers to design more targeted digital content. Digital marketing also opens up opportunities for collaboration with *influencers* , coffee enthusiast communities, and tourism stakeholders, thereby strengthening *the branding of* coffee tourism as part of a modern, sustainability-oriented lifestyle. Therefore, this study aims to formulate a more effective digital marketing strategy to increase the competitiveness of coffee tourism, while strengthening coffee's position as a leading regional commodity. The implementation of this strategy is expected to not only increase tourist visits but also provide added value to the global marketing of local coffee products. Furthermore, successful digital marketing optimization will support the creation of a sustainable economy, where local communities benefit economically, the environment is protected, and the cultural value of coffee as a regional identity can be continuously preserved.

In 2020, the International Coffee Organization (ICO) ranked Indonesia as the fourth-largest coffee producer in the world after Vietnam, Colombia, and Brazil. This ranking demonstrates that coffee is one of Indonesia's leading commodities with a significant contribution to the national economy. In terms of domestic consumption, ICO data recorded that Indonesia consumed 4.6 million 60 kg/lb packages of coffee in the 2016–2017 period, and that number increased to 5 million in 2020. This trend shows that coffee consumption in Indonesia is not only related to lifestyle aspects but also reflects the increasing public appreciation for local coffee products, including coffee with geographical indications such as Gayo, Toraja, and Kintamani Coffee. This phenomenon opens up significant opportunities for the development of coffee tourism, as public interest in coffee can be integrated with experience-based tourism. According to Oktaviani & Rustandi (2018), digital marketing is a type of marketing that involves promoting a company's products or services to potential customers through online media. The advantages of digital marketing lie in its ability to reach a wider audience, be interactive, quickly adapt to current trends (up-to-dateness), and facilitate transaction processes. In the context of entrepreneurship, especially for the younger generation, digital marketing is a strategic choice because it is relatively affordable yet has a significant impact on increasing product competitiveness. This is relevant to a study by Hendrawan (2019), which confirmed that digital marketing has a significant and positive impact on improving sales performance, particularly for the micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) sector. The application of digital marketing in the context of the coffee industry has proven to expand market reach and strengthen brand image. For example, coffee tourism destinations like Seladang Kopi utilize social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to introduce their products and package coffee tourism experiences to the public. This strategy allows them to

convey promotional messages quickly, effectively, and more cheaply than using traditional media such as print or television advertising. This aligns with the findings of Soedarsono, Mohamad, Adamu, & Pradita (2020), who emphasized that social media is not only cost-effective but also provides an interactive space for businesses and consumers to build more personal relationships. Thus, digital marketing is not only a promotional tool, but also a two-way communication medium that strengthens consumer loyalty while supporting the development of coffee-based tourism.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study approach, aiming to deeply understand the obstacles and opportunities in implementing digital marketing strategies in coffee tourism destinations. Primary data collection techniques were conducted through field observations, documentation, and in-depth interviews with coffee tourism industry players, tourists, and digital marketing experts. Meanwhile, secondary data was collected through literature review sourced from scientific journals and industry reports relevant to digital marketing and coffee tourism. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, namely by selecting individuals with experience or expertise related to digital marketing in the context of coffee tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview Results

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with coffee tourism entrepreneurs in Takengon, including the managers of Seladang Kopi and Galeri Kopi Indonesia, as well as several tourists who had visited. The following are relevant excerpts from the interviews:

1. Interview with the owner of Seldang Kopi coffee tourism

    "We use social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to promote coffee tourism. Through short photos and videos, we can reach a wider audience without spending a lot of money. Social media promotion is more effective than brochures or print ads."

2. Interview with the owner of the Indonesian Coffee Gallery coffee tour

    "Our main challenge is limited resources for creating consistent digital content. We sometimes struggle to manage our social media accounts regularly due to the limited number of people who understand digital marketing."

3. Interview with the owner of Ali Kopi coffee tour

    We offer coffee educational tourism, offering a unique, hands-on experience from farm to cup. Digital promotions are effective in attracting tourists, even though our business is still in its infancy. We hope this initiative will have a positive impact on the local economy.

4. Interview with Tourists

    "I learned about this coffee tour from a friend's Instagram post. The content was engaging, including stories about Gayo coffee, brewing methods, and hands-on experiences on the coffee plantations. That's what drew me to the trip."

5. Interviews with Digital Marketing Experts

    "Digital marketing strategies for coffee tourism still need to be strengthened with clear branding. Social media promotion alone isn't enough; we also need to emphasize the uniqueness of Gayo coffee as a local identity, distinguishing it from other coffee tourism destinations."

Discussion

Based on the interview results above, there are several key findings that show the important role of digital marketing in increasing the competitiveness of coffee tourism in Takengon.

First, the owner of the Seladang Kopi coffee tour emphasized that social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, are the primary platforms for promoting coffee tourism. This strategy is considered effective because it can reach a wider audience in a more interactive and cost-effective manner than conventional methods. This statement aligns with the opinion of Oktaviani & Rustandi (2018), who explained that digital marketing is an efficient means of introducing products and services, especially for small and medium-sized businesses with limited capital. Social media enables two-way interaction between tour operators and potential tourists, for example through comments, direct messages, and re-sharing of content by other users. This marks a shift in promotional patterns, from traditional methods such as brochures, billboards, and print advertisements that are one-way, to more participatory digital media. Furthermore, the use of Instagram and TikTok platforms is also considered relevant to changes in tourist consumer behavior, particularly the younger generation who are highly active in accessing visual content based on photos and short videos. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media has the power to create online communities that can expand the reach of messages organically through user-generated content. In the context of coffee tourism, content documenting visiting experiences, the brewing process, and narratives about Gayo coffee can spread widely because tourists tend to share their experiences on personal social media. Therefore, digital marketing strategies rely not only on promotions created by managers but also involve tourists as indirect promotional agents. Furthermore, the success of digital marketing strategies through Instagram and TikTok is closely related to the visual power offered by both platforms. Aesthetically pleasing photos, short videos depicting coffee plantations, or snippets of local cultural interactions are effective tools for building a positive destination image. Research by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) shows that visual content on social media can shape the emotional perceptions of potential consumers, thereby increasing their intention to visit. This is evident in testimonials from tourists who stated that their interest was sparked after seeing posts about coffee tourism on Instagram. These findings also indicate that digital marketing functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a means of education and cultural preservation. Through narratives about the history and quality of Gayo coffee posted on social media, managers can educate tourists about the value of local wisdom while raising awareness of regional specialty coffee products. Thus, digital marketing strategies contribute double-whammy: increasing the competitiveness of tourist destinations while strengthening the cultural identity of Gayo coffee within a sustainable economic framework.

Second, the owner of the Indonesian Coffee Gallery coffee tourism site revealed a major obstacle in the form of limited human resources in managing digital content. This situation indicates that although social media and digital platforms offer significant opportunities for expanding promotional reach, limitations in internal aspects such as technological literacy and content creation skills remain a significant obstacle. This finding aligns with research by Hendrawan (2019), which emphasized that digital marketing has been proven to significantly improve the performance of MSMEs, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on the readiness and competence of business actors. The obstacle of limited human resources often results in suboptimal digital marketing strategies, for example, less engaging content, inconsistent posting frequency, or less than optimal use of social media features. Furthermore, this limited human resources also illustrates the digital literacy gap among community-based tourism managers.

According to Haryanti & Setiawan (2020), digital literacy encompasses not only the ability to use technological devices but also aspects of communication strategy, audience analysis, and creativity in content presentation. In the context of the Indonesian Coffee Gallery, the lack of trained personnel makes it difficult for managers to compete with other tourism destinations that are more actively using digital marketing professionally. As a result, despite the significant potential of Gayo coffee and its tourist attractions, information dissemination is limited, thus failing to fully capture the attention of a larger tourist market. To overcome this obstacle, collaborative support from external parties, including government, academics, and practitioners, is needed. Local governments, for example, can play a role by providing digital marketing training programs specifically for coffee tourism operators. Academics can contribute by providing research-based mentoring, such as developing destination branding strategies or training in creative content creation. Meanwhile, digital marketing practitioners from the private sector can provide applicable best practices to help managers become more skilled at utilizing social media. This collaborative effort is crucial so that coffee tourism managers do not rely solely on limited experience but instead have a broader set of competencies to compete in the digital economy. Therefore, the limited human resources in digital content management are not only an internal challenge for the Indonesian Coffee Gallery but also reflect the need for more systematic and sustainable capacity building. If external support can be optimized, digital marketing strategies in the coffee tourism sector will become more than just a promotional tool, but also a strategic instrument to strengthen competitiveness, increase tourist visits, and ultimately have a significant economic impact on local communities.

Third, the owner of the Ali Kopi coffee tourism business promotes the concept of *"farm-to-cup" coffee educational tourism* with effective digital promotions to attract tourists. The main obstacles faced are limited human resources in content creation, inconsistent posting, and limitations due to the business being in its pioneering stage. Nevertheless, this business is expected to have a positive impact on the local economy by absorbing labor and strengthening local MSMEs, and hopes for greater support to develop as a center for Gayo coffee education. These findings align with research by **Hidayat & Rachmawati (2022)** on *the Coffee Tourism Village Development Strategy in Bondowoso,* which highlights limited human resources and infrastructure, and research **by Prasetyo (2021)** on *the Implementation of Digital Marketing Communication Strategies for Cultural Tourism in Yogyakarta* , which emphasizes the importance of consistency and quality content in tourism promotion. Furthermore, research by **Nugroho (2020)** on *Factors of Digital Marketing Adoption in the Mandalika Special Economic Zone* also underscores the importance of technological and infrastructure support for the success of digital strategies.

Fourth, from a tourist perspective, the primary factor driving them to visit coffee destinations is the allure of engaging, authentic digital content that conveys real-life experiences. Interviews revealed that the majority of tourists reported obtaining information about coffee tourism not from formal advertising or conventional promotions, but rather through posts on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. This demonstrates a shift in consumer travel behavior, where visiting decisions are increasingly influenced by visual narratives and personal experiences shared through digital media. Social media storytelling strategies, highlighting Gayo coffee culture, the coffee bean processing process, and the unique atmosphere of the destination, are key factors in building tourist interest. This finding aligns with Soedarsono et al.'s (2020) assertion that social media not only serves as a promotional tool but is also effective in creating two-way interactions with consumers and building long-term loyalty. Tourists who feel connected

to the stories and cultural values presented tend to be more interested in returning and even re-share their experiences on social media, creating a digital word-of-mouth effect that broadens the promotional reach. In the context of coffee tourism, digital storytelling not only increases tourist visits but also strengthens the image of Gayo coffee as a regional specialty with high cultural value. Furthermore, the appeal of authentic content derived from tourists' firsthand experiences also acts as user-generated content (UGC), which, according to research by Munar & Jacobsen (2014), has a significant influence on tourists' decisions in choosing a destination. Content uploaded by visitors is considered more honest and convincing than formal promotions from managers. Therefore, a digital marketing strategy based on storytelling and the use of UGC can be a competitive advantage for coffee tourism, as it combines promotion, interaction, and credible social proof. Overall, these findings from a tourist perspective confirm that the main strength of digital marketing lies in the ability to create content that is not only informative, but also emotional and inspiring. If coffee tourism managers consistently develop content strategies based on cultural narratives and authentic experiences, the opportunity to expand the market and increase tourist loyalty will be greater, while simultaneously supporting the goal of sustainable economic development through coffee tourism.

Fifth, from the perspective of digital marketing experts, the success of coffee tourism promotion is determined not only by the intensity of promotional activities but also by the strength of *the branding* developed. Experts emphasize the importance of a *uniqueness-* based *branding strategy* and clear *positioning* . Gayo coffee tourism, for example, cannot simply be marketed as a commodity-based special interest tourism destination; it must also be able to highlight the distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other coffee-producing regions, both domestically and internationally. This uniqueness can be conveyed through a narrative about the long history of Gayo coffee, the cultural values inherent in local traditions, and the coffee's recognized quality in the international market. This uniqueness-based *branding strategy* aligns with marketing theory, which states that differentiation is a key factor in winning global competition. By emphasizing strong *positioning , Gayo coffee tourism can be perceived not only* as a tourist destination but also as a representation of cultural identity and a superior regional product with an international reputation. In this context, digital promotion must be directed at building a consistent image, both through visuals, narratives, and the tourism experience offered. For example, emphasizing that Gayo coffee is a "heritage coffee" with a story and authentic value, tourists and consumers feel they have a unique experience when visiting this destination. Furthermore, a strong *branding strategy also has a long-term impact on consumer loyalty and the sustainability of the destination. Branding that emphasizes uniqueness* encourages the creation of positive associations in the minds of tourists, which in turn strengthens *brand equity* . This not only increases the competitiveness of Gayo coffee tourism locally but also expands its reach to international markets through cross-border digital promotion. Thus, *uniqueness* -based *branding* and *positioning* are not only communication strategies but also important instruments in supporting coffee tourism as a pillar of a sustainable economy. Furthermore, branding aspects based on local identity have emerged as a significant differentiation factor. The uniqueness of Gayo coffee, with its historical, cultural, and international quality values, is a crucial asset in building a strong positioning. This identity not only makes coffee tourism a recreational destination but also a symbol of regional pride and a representation of cultural heritage with global value. With consistent, uniqueness-oriented branding, Gayo coffee tourism has the opportunity to compete with similar destinations internationally. However, challenges such as limited human resources and digital literacy among coffee tourism managers remain obstacles that need to be

addressed immediately. Interviews demonstrate the need for training, mentoring, and collaboration between the government, academics, and practitioners to improve the capacity of local human resources. This external support will help create a more professional and sustainable digital marketing ecosystem. The positive impact of an integrated digital marketing strategy is reflected not only in increased tourist visits but also in the opening of new economic opportunities for the surrounding community. Local communities benefit from the development of supporting businesses such as homestays, culinary delights, handicrafts, and transportation services. Thus, coffee-based tourism serves not only as a leading tourism sector but also as an instrument for community empowerment and a driver for the creation of a sustainable economy.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that digital marketing strategies play a crucial role in enhancing the competitiveness of coffee tourism as an instrument of sustainable economic development. Field findings show that the use of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, is an effective tool in building the image of coffee tourism destinations while expanding market reach. Social media serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a space for interaction between managers and tourists through creative content, storytelling, and authentic digital experiences. This further strengthens the relevance of digital marketing in the context of modern tourism, where tourists' visit decisions are heavily influenced by the visuals and narratives they encounter online. In addition to digital promotion, strengthening branding based on local identity is also a key factor in maintaining the uniqueness and differentiation of coffee tourism compared to other destinations. Gayo coffee, for example, is not only known as a premium-quality consumer product but also holds high cultural, historical, and local wisdom values. By emphasizing these aspects in its marketing strategy, coffee tourism destinations are able to build a strong positioning both nationally and globally. This uniqueness-oriented branding has been proven to increase the added value of destinations and strengthen the loyalty of tourists seeking authentic experiences. However, the study also found that limited human resources (HR) and digital literacy remain major obstacles to optimizing digital marketing strategies. Many coffee tourism managers do not fully understand digital content management techniques, audience analysis, or the use of modern marketing tools that can improve promotional effectiveness. These limitations result in inconsistent content publication and low-quality promotional content. Therefore, support from external parties, such as the government through training programs, academics through research and mentoring, and digital marketing practitioners through strategic collaborations, is essential to improve the capacity of coffee tourism managers. Moving forward, this study recommends the importance of developing collaborative models between stakeholders in building a sustainable digital marketing ecosystem. This collaboration can be realized through strengthening the role of local communities, intensive digital literacy training, and the use of cutting-edge technologies such as big data analytics to understand market trends and virtual tourism, which allows tourists to experience the experience digitally before making a direct visit. With a strategy that is more adaptive to technological developments, coffee tourism can expand its market to the international level while maintaining the sustainability of local culture. Therefore, strengthening digital marketing strategies is not merely a promotional tool but also an integral part of efforts to preserve coffee culture, empower local communities, and develop sustainable tourism in Indonesia. Coffee tourism managed with an optimal digital approach will be able to create a balance between

economic, social, and environmental aspects, thereby truly supporting the realization of the principles of sustainable development in the tourism sector.

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