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Strengthening the “California” Agrotourism brand through visitor-based eco-digital tourism: a participatory promotion approach in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Agrotourism has emerged as a strategic sector in rural economic development, yet many destinations in Indonesia remain constrained by limited digital promotion capabilities. California agrotourism, located in Cialam Jaya Village, Konda District, South Konawe Regency, possesses considerable potential as an eco-digital tourism destination; however, most visitors have not yet understood how to effectively utilize digital platforms to promote the destination, resulting in the underutilization of digital word-of-mouth promotion and limited brand recognition beyond the local area. This study aims to: (1) increase visitors' awareness of the importance of eco-tourism-based digital promotion; (2) equip visitors with effective creative content production skills; and (3) strengthen the image and reach of the local brand “California” as a leading agrotourism destination in Southeast Sulawesi. The program employed a participatory approach integrating three primary methods: lectures and presentations, demonstrations, and guided independent practice conducted directly at the tourism site. Materials were organized into three sessions covering the urgency of eco-digital tourism, viral branding strategies, and digital content creation techniques. Evaluation was conducted through process observation and in-depth interviews with participants. The results indicate that all three program objectives were successfully achieved. Participants demonstrated a significant improvement in their understanding of eco-digital tourism concepts and actively produced creative digital content across four platforms, namely TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and websites. The content generated by participants contributed to strengthening the brand image and expanding the promotional reach of California Agrotourism. In conclusion, empowering visitors as organic digital promotion agents through structured technical guidance represents a cost-effective and sustainable strategy for strengthening local agrotourism brand visibility and supporting rural community economic welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Agrotourism constitutes a strategic sector that plays a significant role in stimulating rural economies while simultaneously preserving local wisdom and cultural values. In Indonesia, the development of agrotourism has gained increasing attention due to its capacity to integrate agricultural potential with sustainable tourism activities (Zulgani et al., 2023). Visitors are not only attracted by natural landscapes but also seek educational experiences in agricultural practices, such as

planting and harvesting. Agrotourism, therefore, serves as an effective instrument for enhancing the income of local farmers while supporting environmental conservation through eco-friendly agricultural practices (Purnomo et al., 2025). The growth of agrotourism in rural Indonesia has also demonstrated its capacity to create new employment opportunities, reduce rural-urban migration, and empower local communities through tourism-based economic diversification (Kader & Abd. Radjak, 2020). In this context, agrotourism is increasingly

recognized not merely as a tourism activity but as a comprehensive rural development strategy that simultaneously addresses economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability (Mulyadi, 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2026).

The integration of digital technology into agrotourism has further expanded its promotional potential and market reach. In the current era of digital transformation, the ability to leverage online platforms for destination promotion has become a critical determinant of a tourism destination's competitiveness (Retnasary et al., 2019). Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have emerged as powerful tools for destination marketing, enabling destinations to reach wider audiences at minimal cost while fostering authentic engagement with potential visitors (Leung et al., 2013). Destinations that effectively harness digital technology are better positioned to attract visitors, build brand recognition, and sustain long-term growth (Deb & Mallik, 2023). However, the benefits of digital promotion can only be fully realized when the actors involved, including destination managers, local communities, and visitors, possess adequate digital literacy and promotional skills (Gretzel et al., 2015).

One of the emerging agrotourism destinations in Southeast Sulawesi is "California" agrotourism, located in Cialam Jaya Village, Konda District, South Konawe Regency. This destination offers scenic green hills, organic farming areas, educational agricultural attractions, and various recreational activities, including fruit picking, fishing, and outbound programs. California agrotourism also possesses strong appeal as an Instagrammable and educational destination, making it highly potential to be developed within an eco-digital tourism framework, an approach that combines environmental sustainability principles with the utilization of digital technology (Gretzel et al., 2015). The destination's unique combination of natural beauty, agricultural education, and recreational diversity positions it as a compelling agrotourism product capable of attracting diverse visitor segments, from school groups and families to corporate communities seeking team-building experiences in a natural setting. Nevertheless, realizing this potential requires a deliberate and structured effort to strengthen the destination's

digital presence and brand visibility (El Archi et al., 2023).

Despite its considerable potential, Agrotourism "California" still faces several challenges in terms of digital promotion. Based on preliminary observations conducted by the service team, most visitors have not yet understood how to effectively utilize digital platforms to promote the destination. Many visitors attend the site but do not share their experiences on social media, resulting in the underutilization of digital word-of-mouth promotion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Furthermore, the local brand "California" remains relatively unknown beyond the South Konawe area, indicating the need for a structured digital branding strategy. This gap between the destination's actual potential and its digital visibility reflects a broader challenge faced by many rural agrotourism destinations in Indonesia, where limited digital literacy among visitors and local stakeholders continues to hinder optimal promotional outcomes (Retnasary et al., 2019). Without a deliberate effort to bridge this gap, the destination risks being overshadowed by competing tourism products that are more actively promoted through digital channels (Gumilang et al., 2024).

Visitors who are equipped with digital promotion strategies have the potential to act as effective tourism ambassadors. Destination brands that achieve virality on social media have been proven to attract a greater number of potential visitors, particularly among millennials and Generation Z, who are highly active on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Luna-Cortés, 2018; Javed et al., 2020). Therefore, strengthening visitors' capacity in digital branding represents a strategic and urgent step to increase tourist arrivals and improve the economic welfare of communities surrounding the destination (Berger, 2016). The role of visitors as organic promoters is particularly significant in the context of user-generated content, where authentic experiences shared by real visitors are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than conventional advertising (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). When visitors are equipped with the knowledge and skills to produce compelling digital content, they effectively become volunteer brand ambassadors whose contributions have a multiplier effect on

destination awareness and appeal (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Deb & Mallik, 2023).

Based on these issues, the service team designed a Technical Guidance Program titled Strengthening the Local Brand “California” through Eco-Digital Tourism. This program aims to enhance visitors' understanding and skills in utilizing digital platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and websites, as viral promotional media for the destination. The program is grounded in the conviction that empowering visitors with digital promotion capabilities represents one of the most cost-effective and sustainable approaches to destination branding, particularly for rural agrotourism destinations with limited marketing budgets (Leung et al., 2013). Specifically, the program is expected to: (1) increase visitors' awareness of the importance of eco-tourism-based digital promotion; (2) equip visitors with effective creative content production skills; and (3) strengthen the image and reach of the local brand “California” as a leading agrotourism destination in Southeast Sulawesi.

METHODS

The technical guidance program on Strengthening the Local Brand 'California' through an Eco-Digital Tourism approach was implemented through a series of structured stages (Kader & Abd. Radjak, 2020). The implementation method of this community service activity consisted of four main phases: preparation, activity implementation, activity methods, and evaluation. Each phase was systematically designed to ensure the optimal achievement of the program's objectives, namely, enhancing the understanding and skills of visitors to California agrotourism in utilizing digital platforms as viral promotional media for the destination.

Preparation

The preparation stage was conducted before the implementation of the technical guidance in California agrotourism. This phase included: (1) initial coordination with the management of California agrotourism and relevant stakeholders to determine the objectives, schedule, and implementation mechanisms; (2) identification of participants' needs through field observations and discussions with destination managers regarding the current state of digital promotion; (3) development of technical guidance modules and materials in the

form of presentation slides and practical guides for digital content creation; and (4) logistical preparation and technical coordination of the activity site at California agrotourism, Cialam Jaya Village, Konda District, South Konawe Regency.

Participants

The participants of the technical guidance program were visitors to Agrotourism “California” who attended the program in October 2024. The target participants included general visitors, students, and community groups visiting the destination. Visitors were selected as the primary target group based on the consideration that they represent highly potential organic promoters capable of disseminating destination-related information voluntarily and authentically through digital platforms.

Activity Implementation

The technical guidance was conducted over a period of one month in October 2024 at California agrotourism, located in Cialam Jaya Village, Konda District, South Konawe Regency. The activities were carried out directly within the tourism site, enabling participants to simultaneously practice digital content creation at designated photo and video spots that had been previously identified by the service team.

Activity Methods

The technical guidance employed a participatory approach integrating three primary methods: (1) lectures and presentations, involving direct delivery of materials by the service team using presentation slides; (2) demonstrations, where the team provided hands-on examples of content creation on digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and websites; and (3) guided independent practice, in which participants independently produced and uploaded content from the Agrotourism “California” site under the supervision of the service team.

The materials delivered during the technical guidance program were organized into three sessions. Session 1: The urgency of eco-digital tourism and the importance of strengthening local brands through digital approaches. Session 2: Viral branding strategies through digital platforms (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and websites). Session 3: Techniques for creating creative and effective digital content.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the program was conducted using two approaches. First, a process evaluation was carried out through observation of participants' active engagement during practical sessions and content creation assistance. Second, outcome evaluation was conducted through in-depth interviews with participants to assess improvements in their understanding of viral branding, eco-digital tourism, and digital content creation techniques after participating in the technical guidance. The indicators of success for this program included increased participant understanding, the production of digital content by participants, and the dissemination of California agrotourism promotions through at least one digital platform.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The technical guidance program on strengthening the local Brand "California" through an Eco-Digital Tourism approach was conducted in October 2024 at California agrotourism, located in Cialam Jaya Village, Konda District, South Konawe Regency. The program was attended by visitors from California agrotourism, including general tourists, students, and community groups. Before the implementation of the program, the state of digital promotion for California agrotourism remained highly limited; the local brand was not widely recognized beyond the South Konawe region, and digital content circulating on social media was still minimal. This condition is consistent with the preliminary findings of the service team, which indicated that most visitors lacked sufficient understanding of eco-tourism-based digital promotion strategies.

California agrotourism offers a captivating natural panorama characterized by neatly arranged green hill landscapes. From an elevated vantage point, visitors can observe clusters of small wooden cottages scattered along the hillsides, creating a serene rural atmosphere. Pathways adorned with white fences and colorful flowering plants further enhance the aesthetic appeal of the area, providing an unforgettable tourism experience for visitors seeking a refreshing natural environment. As the sun begins to set, the sky over Agrotourism "California" transforms into a stunning gradient of blue, orange, and golden hues. This scenery becomes even more enchanting with the gradual

illumination of lights across various parts of the area, creating a romantic and exotic ambiance. The presence of ponds and buildings with vibrant-colored roofs further enhances the visual appeal of the site, making it highly *Instagrammable* and suitable for photography (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Natural Landscape and Visual Ambiance of California agrotourism, South Konawe Regency

In addition to its natural beauty, California Agrotourism offers a wide range of tourism activities that cater to diverse visitor groups, including general tourists, students, and community organizations seeking unique outdoor experiences. Visits to this destination are not limited to enjoying scenic landscapes and fresh air; they also involve various interactive activities such as exploring plantation areas, experiencing traditional rural cuisine, and taking photographs at designated *Instagrammable* spots. Furthermore, California agrotourism features educational tourism programs that are particularly suitable for school children and students interested in gaining deeper insights into agriculture and the environment. Through these educational visits, participants gain hands-on experience in farming practices, become familiar with various types of crops, and develop an understanding of the importance of sustainable agriculture.

Beyond educational tourism, California agrotourism also provides a variety of outbound activities suitable for groups, communities, and corporate organizations aiming to conduct team-building programs in an open natural setting. Another key attraction is the fruit and vegetable picking experience, which enables visitors to harvest produce directly from the fields while simultaneously gaining insights into cultivation processes and the importance of organic farming. For those who prefer more leisurely activities,

fishing tourism offers a relaxing option within a serene and natural environment. A distinctive experience is provided through the *pincara* ride, a traditional boat that allows visitors to explore the surrounding water areas while enjoying refreshing green landscapes. Visitors can also spend leisure time at the California agrotourism café, which serves a variety of local dishes in a tranquil rural atmosphere. By integrating nature-based tourism, education, and recreation, California agrotourism represents an ideal destination for family vacations, school excursions, and corporate events.

Enhancing Visitors' Awareness of Eco-Digital Tourism-Based Digital Promotion

The material delivery session constituted the initial stage of the technical guidance implementation. Participants were introduced to the urgency of eco-digital tourism as a tourism approach that integrates environmental sustainability principles with the utilization of digital technology for destination promotion. This session was received with considerable enthusiasm by the participants, which reflects the high level of interest among visitors in eco-tourism-based digital promotion.

Based on the results of interviews conducted after the technical guidance activities, all participants reported a significant increase in their level of understanding compared to their knowledge before attending the program. Participants who were previously unfamiliar with the concept of eco-digital tourism and its relevance to destination promotion now recognize that each tourism visit holds substantial potential to serve as an opportunity for responsible and sustainable digital promotion. This finding is consistent with Gretzel et al. (2015), who argue that tourists with higher levels of digital literacy are more likely to actively participate in promoting eco-tourism destinations through digital platforms. Therefore, the first objective of this program, namely, to enhance visitors' awareness of the importance of eco-digital tourism-based digital promotion, can be considered successfully achieved.

Enhancement of Visitors' Digital Content Creation Skills

Following the material delivery session, the program proceeded with demonstrations and guided independent practice conducted at various attractive spots within California agrotourism. At this stage,

participants directly produced digital content in the form of photographs, short videos, and narrative texts, which were subsequently uploaded to their respective digital platforms. The service team provided intensive assistance throughout the process, including guidance on selecting appropriate shooting angles, crafting engaging captions, using relevant hashtags, and applying fundamental techniques of effective visual storytelling.

The results of the practical sessions indicate that participants were able to independently produce creative content across the four digital platforms introduced during the training. Through TikTok, participants created short-form videos by utilizing storytelling features, specific hashtags, and relevant audio elements (Figure 2). On Instagram, participants uploaded photos and videos accompanied by engaging narratives, while also making use of features such as Instagram Stories, Reels, and Live Streaming (Figure 3). Through Facebook, participants shared photos, videos, and travel reviews using the hashtag #EcoDigitalCalifornia as part of a collective digital campaign (Figure 4). Meanwhile, via websites, participants published travel stories, photographs, and testimonials that function as more permanent and widely accessible sources of destination information (Figure 5).

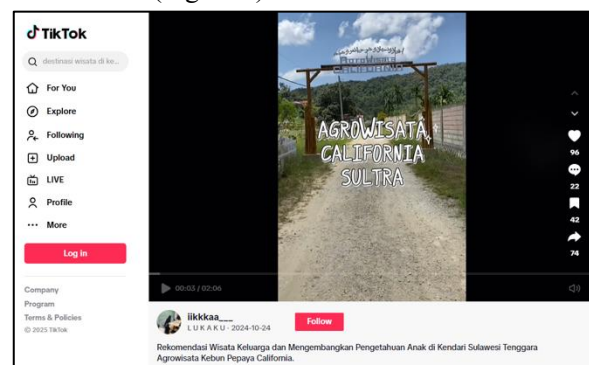


Figure 2. Participants' Digital Content Promotion Through TikTok as a Result of the Technical Guidance Program



Figure 3. Participants' Digital Content Promotion Through Instagram as a Result of the Bimtek Program

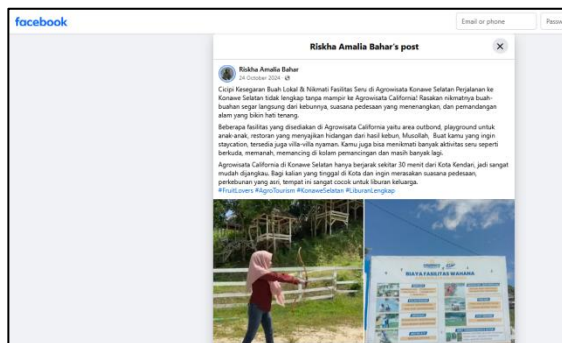


Figure 4. Participants' Digital Content Promotion Through Facebook as a Result of the Technical Guidance Program

Participants' ability to independently produce digital content confirms the effectiveness of a practice-based training approach conducted directly at the tourism site. Berger (2016) argues that authentic, experience-based content possesses significantly greater diffusion potential compared to conventional promotional content. Therefore, the second objective of this program, namely, equipping visitors with effective creative content production skills, can be considered successfully



achieved.

Figure 5. Participants' Digital Content Promotion Through Website as a Result of the Bimtek Program

Strengthening the Image and Reach of the Local Brand 'California'

The content produced and disseminated by participants across the four digital platforms has generated a tangible impact on strengthening the image and expanding the reach of the local brand "California". The diversity of platforms utilized reinforces a multi-channel promotion strategy capable of simultaneously reaching different segments of tourists. This finding aligns with Luna-Cortés (2018), who emphasizes that multi-platform engagement enhances the effectiveness of destination marketing. TikTok proves effective in reaching younger audiences through entertaining and informative short-form video content, while Instagram strengthens the visual image of the destination through aesthetically appealing photos and videos that reflect the natural beauty of California agrotourism. Facebook extends outreach to more diverse age segments through digital community interactions, whereas websites contribute to building the destination's credibility as an official and reliable source of information.

Beyond merely generating content, the technical guidance program has transformed visitors from passive consumers of tourism experiences into active and organic digital promotion agents. The voluntary participation of visitors in sharing their experiences through social media represents one of the most effective forms of promotion, as it is perceived as authentic and trustworthy by potential tourists. This perspective is supported by Kaplan & Haenlein (2011), who highlight the importance of user-generated content in digital word-of-mouth communication. Furthermore, the sustainability of this program has the potential to foster an active digital community that supports the long-term development of Agrotourism "California," while also encouraging synergy among tourism managers, local communities, and regional governments in building a more competitive digital-based tourism ecosystem. Accordingly, the third objective of this program, namely, strengthening the image and expanding the reach of the local brand "California" as a leading agrotourism destination in Southeast Sulawesi, can be considered successfully achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the technical guidance program on Strengthening the Local Brand 'California' through an Eco-Digital Tourism approach has been successfully implemented and has produced measurable outcomes across all three program objectives. First, the program effectively enhanced visitors' awareness of the importance of eco-tourism-based digital promotion, as evidenced by participants' significantly improved understanding of eco-digital tourism concepts and their relevance to destination promotion following the technical guidance. Second, participants demonstrated the ability to independently produce and publish creative digital content across multiple platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and websites, confirming the effectiveness of the participatory, practice-based training approach employed in this program. Third, the content produced and disseminated by participants has contributed to strengthening the image and expanding the reach of the local brand 'California', transforming visitors from passive tourism consumers into active and organic digital promotion agents.

The findings of this program underscore the strategic importance of empowering visitors as voluntary brand ambassadors in the context of rural agrotourism destination marketing. When equipped with adequate digital promotion knowledge and skills, visitors generate authentic user-generated content that is perceived as more credible and persuasive than conventional advertising, thereby producing a multiplier effect on destination awareness and appeal. This approach is particularly relevant for rural agrotourism destinations with limited marketing budgets, for whom visitor-driven digital promotion represents a cost-effective and sustainable alternative to formal marketing campaigns.

For future programs, it is recommended that similar technical guidance initiatives be conducted on a more regular and structured basis, with the involvement of destination managers, local community members, and relevant government stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of digital promotion efforts. The development of a dedicated digital community centered on California agrotourism is also encouraged as a long-term strategy for maintaining consistent content

production and strengthening the destination's digital ecosystem. Furthermore, future studies may consider incorporating quantitative pre-test and post-test instruments to provide more robust empirical evidence of participants' knowledge and skill improvements, thereby contributing to the broader body of literature on community-based digital tourism promotion in Indonesia.

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