



Evaluating the Impact of Short-Form Video Content on Sustainable Tourism Narratives in Rwanda and Lombok, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed destination marketing, making digital media central to contemporary tourism promotion. While these platforms enhance destination visibility, they also raise concerns about cultural misrepresentation, staged authenticity, and the ethical implications of user-generated content (UGC).

Objective: This study examines how short-form digital tourism content contributes to sustainable tourism by evaluating its effectiveness in destination promotion, ethical representation, and support for sustainability objectives.

Method: A qualitative research design was adopted using non-participatory content analysis of 20 short tourism videos purposively selected from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The sample comprised influencer-generated content, local business promotions, and user-generated travel vlogs showcasing emerging destinations across Africa and Asia. Data were analysed through thematic coding based on three key dimensions: destination visibility, ethical representation, and alignment with sustainable tourism principles.

Results: The findings indicate that digital platforms significantly enhance destination visibility and promotional reach. However, they often fall short in ensuring ethical representation and authentic portrayals of local cultures. Three major challenges emerged: selective storytelling, exclusion of local communities from destination narratives, and superficial representations of tourism destinations.

Conclusion: Digital tourism marketing offers substantial promotional advantages but poses significant sustainability challenges when ethical considerations and local community perspectives are overlooked. Achieving sustainable tourism requires digital marketing practices that balance promotional objectives with authentic and responsible destination representation.

Unique Contribution: This study advances understanding of the relationship between digital tourism marketing and sustainable tourism by demonstrating how user-generated content shapes destination narratives and influences the ethical dimensions of destination branding.

Key Recommendation: Tourism organisations should adopt ethical digital marketing strategies that prioritise community participation, promote authentic destination narratives, and actively involve local stakeholders in content creation to support sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Digital marketing, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, user-generated content.



INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing global industries, contributing significantly to gross domestic product (GDP), employment, and cultural exchange worldwide. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023), global tourism generated more than USD 1.3 trillion in revenue following the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the industry's resilience and successful adaptation to digital transformation. This growth has been accompanied by a shift from traditional marketing approaches—such as brochures, billboards, and travel exhibitions—to digital platforms that increasingly shape destination perception, promotion, and visitor experiences (Azemali et al., 2024).

This transformation has also facilitated the growth of alternative forms of tourism. Ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism increasingly appeal to socially and environmentally conscious travellers seeking meaningful and responsible experiences. These forms of tourism extend beyond leisure by promoting environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and historical reflection (Richards, 2023). They support the notion that tourism can contribute to sustainable development, particularly in emerging destinations where it serves as an important driver of economic and social progress. However, the rapid expansion of digital marketing has also introduced significant challenges. While social media and influencer marketing have enabled destinations in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia to gain global visibility, they have also raised concerns about cultural commodification, greenwashing, and the spread of misinformation (Font & McCabe, 2018). Similarly, user-generated content (UGC) can empower local communities by amplifying their voices, but when created without cultural sensitivity or ethical consideration, it may perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresent local realities.

Against this background, this study examines how digital marketing—particularly short-form video content—promotes sustainable tourism in emerging destinations through digital storytelling and user engagement. Specifically, it investigates the dual role of digital marketing as both a catalyst for sustainable tourism development and a potential source of ethical and cultural challenges. Drawing on relevant literature, content analysis, and contemporary digital marketing trends, the study proposes a framework for tourism marketing that balances global visibility with local authenticity and sustainability.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how digital marketing influences the promotion of sustainable tourism.
2. To explore the ethical and cultural implications of tourism marketing in Lombok and Rwanda.
3. To assess how digital marketing practices support or undermine sustainability goals in tourism.



LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between digital marketing and sustainable tourism in emerging destinations, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is limited to selected digital content and case studies from Lombok and Rwanda, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other tourism destinations. In addition, the study relies primarily on qualitative content analysis and therefore does not directly measure tourists' behavioural responses or the long-term impacts of digital marketing campaigns. Future studies may adopt mixed-methods approaches to validate and extend the findings across diverse tourism contexts.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework illustrates the dynamic relationship among digital marketing, representation practices, tourist behaviour, and sustainable tourism outcomes in emerging destinations. It is based on the premise that digital technologies, when applied ethically and inclusively, can serve as powerful tools for sustainable development. Conversely, when used irresponsibly or without adequate cultural sensitivity, they may contribute to cultural misrepresentation, exploitation, and the erosion of sustainability objectives.

Digital Marketing as a Driver of Visibility and Perception

Digital marketing forms the foundation of the framework and encompasses social media platforms, influencer marketing, user-generated content, and digital storytelling. These tools have shifted promotional power from traditional destination marketing organisations to individual content creators and online communities. Consequently, digital content increasingly shapes how destinations are perceived by global audiences, particularly within ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism.

For example, a short-form video featuring a rainforest eco-lodge or a traditional cultural festival can significantly increase a destination's international visibility within a short period. However, the way such stories are framed—including whose voices are represented and which aspects of the destination are highlighted—strongly influences audience perceptions and expectations.

Representation and Storytelling as a Mediating Layer

Representation and storytelling serve as the mediating link between digital marketing and sustainable tourism outcomes. Representation refers to how cultures, places, and communities are portrayed through visual and textual media. This concept is informed by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which argues that media do not merely reflect reality but actively construct it.

Within tourism, digital content that emphasises exoticism, stereotypes, or sensationalism rather than authentic cultural experiences may encourage performative authenticity, whereby communities modify cultural practices to satisfy tourists' expectations (Choe & Kim, 2023). Conversely, ethical storytelling that incorporates local voices, acknowledges historical and



cultural contexts, and is developed with informed community consent can promote mutual respect, cultural preservation, and authentic destination experiences.

Representation is therefore not neutral. It shapes both tourists' perceptions of destinations and the ways local communities perceive and present themselves.

Influence on Tourist Attitudes and Behaviour

Digital marketing also influences tourists' attitudes and behavioural intentions, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Repeated exposure to social media content promoting environmentally responsible activities, authentic cultural experiences, or respectful engagement with dark tourism sites can foster positive attitudes toward sustainable travel and encourage responsible behaviour.

However, when digital content prioritises visual appeal over ethical considerations—for example, promoting selfies at sacred sites or marketing luxury resorts through misleading environmental claims—it may encourage behaviours that undermine sustainable tourism principles. This component of the framework demonstrates how ethically produced digital content can shape responsible travel decisions and reinforce sustainable tourism practices.

Sustainability Outcomes at the Community Level

Ultimately, digital tourism marketing produces tangible outcomes for destination communities. When implemented responsibly, it can:

- stimulate local economies by increasing visitation and supporting small businesses;
- promote environmental conservation and awareness;
- preserve cultural heritage through authentic representation; and
- empower local communities by amplifying their voices and participation in destination storytelling.

Conversely, poorly managed digital marketing may:

- contribute to overtourism and environmental degradation;
- marginalise local communities and exclude their perspectives;
- encourage cultural appropriation or the commodification of trauma and heritage; and
- undermine long-term sustainability objectives.

These contrasting outcomes underscore the central argument of this study: digital marketing is not merely a promotional tool but also a social, ethical, and developmental force. Its contribution to sustainable tourism depends largely on how digital narratives are designed, communicated, and managed.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on Sustainable Development Theory, Representation Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how digital tourism marketing shapes destination perceptions, influences tourist behaviour, and affects sustainable development outcomes in emerging destinations.

1. Sustainable Development Theory

Sustainable Development Theory, as articulated in the Brundtland Report (1987) and further advanced by the UNWTO (2022), advocates meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Within tourism, the theory emphasises balancing environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic development. Consequently, sustainable tourism marketing should not only attract visitors but also promote the long-term social, cultural, and ecological well-being of host communities. As Font and McCabe (2018) argue, digital marketing should align with sustainability principles by encouraging low-impact travel, fostering partnerships with local communities, and avoiding exploitative representations of people and places.

2. Representation Theory

Representation Theory, developed by Hall (1997) and extended to digital tourism contexts by Munar (2020), examines how media, language, and images construct meaning rather than simply reflect reality. In tourism, the ways destinations, cultures, and communities are portrayed directly influence how they are perceived, consumed, and valued by visitors. Digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often simplify complex cultural identities through highly curated visual storytelling. Choe and Kim (2023) describe this phenomenon as performative authenticity, whereby local communities modify cultural practices to conform to tourist expectations shaped by digital imagery.

Applied to this study the theory provides a framework for analysing how digital tourism content may reinforce stereotypes, commodify cultural heritage, or marginalise local voices. It supports the need for inclusive and ethical marketing practices that prioritise authentic self-representation over spectacle and commercialisation.

3. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), extended in tourism research by Lee et al. (2021), posits that behavioural intention is the strongest predictor of actual behaviour. Behavioural intentions are influenced by three factors: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Within tourism marketing, digital platforms shape these determinants by presenting particular travel behaviours as desirable or socially acceptable.



When influencers promote environmentally responsible travel or community-based tourism experiences, they can encourage viewers to adopt similar behaviours, even in the absence of direct persuasion.

The TPB in the context of this study explains how user-generated content and influencer marketing shape tourists' decision-making processes. It conceptualises digital content not merely as a communication tool but as a behavioural stimulus capable of encouraging sustainable travel practices. This perspective reinforces the importance of ethical content creation in promoting responsible tourism.

Together, these three theoretical perspectives enable a comprehensive analysis of digital tourism marketing by examining what is marketed, how destinations are represented, why tourists respond to digital content, and the resulting impacts on local communities and ecosystems. Collectively, they support the study's objective of evaluating tourism marketing from ethical, developmental, and behavioural perspectives.

Summary of Literature Gaps and Relevance

Although previous studies acknowledge the growing influence of digital marketing and user-generated content (UGC) in tourism promotion, relatively few have examined their role in advancing sustainable tourism in emerging destinations. Existing research has largely focused on destination promotion and consumer engagement, with limited attention to how digital marketing influences cultural representation, ethical practice, and community participation. Furthermore, insufficient research has explored how digital marketing strategies can simultaneously promote sustainability while protecting cultural identity and empowering local communities. This study addresses these gaps by examining digital marketing not merely as a promotional instrument but also as a cultural, ethical, and environmental force that shapes destination narratives and sustainable tourism outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Geographical Representation

This study focuses on emerging tourism destinations in Africa and Asia through the analysis of short-form digital videos featuring Rwanda and Lombok, Indonesia. These destinations were selected because they represent growing ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism markets that have increasingly adopted digital marketing strategies. However, the findings may not be generalisable to all emerging destinations, as regions such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands were excluded. Consequently, unique cultural, political, and tourism contexts from these regions are not represented in this study.



Sample Scope and Size

The study analysed a purposive sample of 20 short-form tourism videos obtained from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Although these platforms are among the most influential digital marketing channels, the relatively small sample size may not fully capture the diversity of tourism marketing practices across Rwanda and Lombok. A larger sample, incorporating additional platforms and a longer period of observation, could reveal broader patterns and greater variation in ethical representation and sustainability practices.

Subjectivity in Content Interpretation

The thematic analysis relied on the researcher's interpretation of patterns relating to ethical representation, sustainability, and destination portrayal within the selected videos. Although systematic coding procedures were employed to enhance consistency and minimise bias, qualitative interpretation inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity. Researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds or cultural perspectives might interpret some themes differently.

Platform Algorithm Influence

The selection of videos was influenced partly by the recommendation algorithms and hashtag search functions of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These algorithms prioritise content based on engagement indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares rather than educational value or ethical quality. Consequently, the study may have disproportionately analysed highly popular content while overlooking community-generated or educational videos that receive less algorithmic visibility.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using thematic content analysis. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth examination of how digital marketing and user-generated content (UGC) promote sustainable tourism. Particular attention was given to ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism within emerging destinations, where formal destination marketing infrastructure is often limited but digital platforms increasingly shape tourism promotion and visitor perceptions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through non-participatory content analysis of publicly available videos posted on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select content that addressed the following criteria:

- tourism experiences in emerging destinations;
- ethical and cultural representations of local communities;



- sustainability-focused storytelling; and
- marketing narratives related to ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism.

A total of 20 videos were analysed, representing a balanced mix of influencer-generated content, local business promotional videos, and user-generated travel vlogs. The videos were selected based on their relevance to the study objectives, engagement levels, use of relevant hashtags (e.g., #SustainableTourism, #Ecotourism, and #LocalCulture), and geographical representation across Africa and Asia.

DATA PRESENTATION

Tourism Category	Content Focus	Data Representation
Eco-Tourism	Environmental conservation and green travel behaviors	7 videos
Cultural Tourism	Traditional festivals, crafts, and heritage sites	7 videos
Dark Tourism	Historical reflection and memorial sites, including locations such as the Kigali Memorial	6 videos

DATA ANALYSIS

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of 20 short-form videos, comprising YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels, focusing on sustainable tourism in emerging destinations. The selected video was analyzed through thematic coding, which was based on the recurring patterns that were aligned with the research objectives of the study. Special attention was paid to the three major topics: (1) the impact of digital marketing on visibility, (2) Ethical and cultural representation, and (3) alignment of tourism promotion with stability targets.

The video was classified into categories depicting eco-tourism, cultural tourism and dark tourism. The material was transferred from each video, where necessary, and the critical language, caption, hashtags, and visual elements were examined how they shape this perception and message.

Theme 1: Digital Marketing and Visibility

Many videos (e.g., *Top 8 Sustainable Travel Destinations to Visit in 2024*, *Lombok Case Study*, and *Curtain Call Cultural Reels*) showcased how emerging destinations leverage short-form content to boost online presence. Hashtags such as #SustainableTravel, #EcoTourism, and #HiddenGems were used to increase search. Destination branding was largely visible, cinematic drone shots, immersive nature clips, or quick cultural snapshots, emphasized the appeal in detail.



□ *Observation:* Digital platforms gave visibility to low-oriented places. However, the representation was often superficial - some destinations were reduced to the "Instagramable" background rather than shown in context.

Theme 2: Ethics and Cultural Representation

Videos like *WildTesa's Ethical Storytelling Reel* and *#DarkTourism Content* raised critical issues. In some clips, the locals were painted without reference or proper attention, while others promoted the basis of burial or sacred forests without morally any morally sensitive sites. Serena's reel (Does sustainable travel exist? ") Severely questioned how tourists participate in local narratives and whether their content contributes to sustainability or spectacle.

□ *Observation:* Ethical gaps appeared where the creators prioritized aesthetics on the context. Local voices rarely included directly; Most reels were narrated or implicated by tourists or affected, not residents.

Rwanda's Genocide Memorial and the Ethics of Dark Tourism Promotion

Rwanda stands out in global tourism for its approach to balancing remembrance and visibility in the digital era. The Kigali Genocide Memorial, the country's top dark tourism site, honors the victims of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, where over 800,000 lives were lost. Recently, this memorial has gained exposure on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, featuring emotional travel vlogs, reflective reels, and short documentaries.

1. Visibility and Destination Branding

The Rwanda government strategically uses tourism to rebuild its economy and reopen global perceptions. Rwanda initiative supported by Rwanda Development Board promotes moral connection with the massacre memorial. The official branding focuses on peace, reflection and flexibility rather than sensational or horror. However, the user-related material varies widely. While some visitors share practical reflections, others have been criticized for improper selfies or highly emotional reactions. This dichotomy highlights the challenge of balanced visibility with respect in moral tourism marketing.

Choe and Kim (2023) emphasizes that dark tourism sites are susceptible to protesting authenticity. Material can create emotions but lack the importance of the site or lack of reference required.



2. Ethical Considerations in User-Generated Content (UGC)

The Kigali Memorial has clear on-site policies that discourage photography in certain areas and require visitors to behave respectfully. Despite these guidelines, some videos depict tourists violating the rules, either intentionally or unintentionally, owing to a lack of cultural understanding or the pressure to "capture the moment." This observation is consistent with Munar (2020), who argues that the democratisation of media through social platforms does not automatically guarantee ethical practices. Without appropriate guidance, user-generated content (UGC) may prioritise digital performance over educational value, thereby undermining the intended purpose of the memorial site.

Furthermore, this example illustrates how digital marketing can inadvertently transform sites of trauma into spectacles for online consumption, raising significant ethical concerns in dark tourism. The commodification of grief and suffering, when not balanced with education, historical accuracy, and respect for victims, can cause further harm to affected communities and distort public understanding of historical events.

3. Responsible Campaigns and Educational Impact

To counterbalance this, Rwanda has launched several education-driven digital campaigns in collaboration with NGOs and international partners. These include virtual tour heard by the survivors, social media campaigns and QR codes with verified information that connect physical places to the digital archives. These efforts reflect a more structured and community-sensitive approach to digital storytelling.

It is in correspondence with Fonts and McCabe (2018), which advocates marketing strategies that educate rather than exploited. The online appearance of the Kigali Memorial emphasizes the rapidly survivor-led stories and local partnership, establishing a model how emerging destinations can integrate morality to visible efforts

4. Tourist Behaviour and Impact

Research suggests that many tourists who go on a memorial leave with a changed perspective - not only about Rwanda's past but also about the importance of memory, harmony and human rights (Richards, 2023). Well-designed digital materials have the ability to expand this effect by reaching those who can never go physically. However, if the content lacks reference, it takes the risk of reducing the purpose of the site. This refers to a wide theoretical link to the principle of planned behaviour: morally produced tourists, educational digital materials are more likely to be attached to respectable, informed travel behavior. In contrast, insensitive tasks can be normalized by irregular digital narratives, especially if they are highly visible and rewarded with choice or ideas.



The Kigali Genocide Memorial case displays both the power and risk of digital tourism marketing. It highlights the importance of aligning digital visibility with moral story stories, cultural sensitivity and community control. As more destinations enter the tourism spotlight with complex history, Rwanda's approach provides a valuable blueprint to balance development with dignity and education.

Theme 3: Sustainability Alignment

Several reels promoted **plastic-free travel** (*Joy Malonza's Reel*), eco-lodges, or zero-waste destinations. These were informative, highlighting simple responsible behaviors (e.g., reusable bottles, choosing local guides). However, other people presented a paradox: advertising "sustainable gateway" that required long flights, which reveals tension between green marketing and real practice.

□ *Observation:* While the intention to support stability was existing, execution was diverse. Videos leading community initiatives in the form of Indonesia or Kenya include more grounded and authentic messages.

Emerging Patterns across the Dataset

- **Most-used hashtags:** #SustainableTourism, #EcoTravel, #LocalCulture, #HiddenGems, and #TravelResponsibly.
- **Frequently featured visuals:** forests, oceans, traditional clothing, local markets, children, and "breathtaking views."
- **Notable gaps:** little evidence of tourist education, informed consent, or follow-up on the long-term impacts of visits.

Case Study: Lombok, Indonesia – Community-Based Eco-Tourism and Digital Storytelling

Lombok, a lesser-known Indonesian island compared to Bali, has emerged as a model for community-based digital tourism branding rooted in sustainability and local empowerment. Facing rising global interest in eco-tourism, Lombok's tourism stakeholders, particularly women-led cooperatives and youth content creators, have taken to social media to showcase authentic experiences, such as traditional weaving, organic farming, forest conservation, and local festivals.

1. Digital Visibility through Local Voices

Unlike many tourism destinations where foreign influencers dominate destination narratives, Lombok's digital tourism campaigns are largely driven by local storytellers. Through TikTok videos, Instagram Reels, and Facebook posts, villagers share personal stories, environmental education, and everyday cultural practices. Rather than merely promoting the destination, this content educates audiences about community values, local traditions, and sustainable ways of life.



These digital campaigns frequently employ hashtags such as #VisitLombokResponsibly, #SasakCulture, and #EcoFriendlyStay, ensuring that destination visibility is aligned with sustainability values. According to Tarmidzi et al. (2024), community-led digital storytelling has significantly enhanced both destination branding and responsible tourist behaviour. This finding is consistent with the UNWTO (2022), which identifies community-led media as an important pathway to sustainable tourism development.

2. Authenticity and Environmental Awareness

Digital content from Lombok deliberately avoids the highly curated, "Instagram-perfect" aesthetic in favour of authentic representations of local life. Videos commonly feature artisans at work, bamboo eco-lodges, community tree-planting initiatives, traditional farming practices, and everyday village life. Rather than promoting an idealised image of the destination, many posts openly acknowledge local environmental challenges, including waste management, coastal erosion, and overtourism, thereby encouraging responsible travel.

This approach contrasts with more commercial tourism campaigns that market environmentally friendly experiences while overlooking broader sustainability challenges. By drawing on lived experiences, Lombok's local storytellers present the island not merely as a tourist destination but as a living community with its own needs, boundaries, and cultural heritage.

3. Tourist Impact and Local Benefits

Local tourism cooperatives in Lombok report increased direct bookings, greater demand for community homestays, and higher levels of support for ecotourism initiatives through their social media activities. These platforms enable visitors to engage directly with local businesses, reducing dependence on third-party travel agents and foreign-owned tourism operators. Consequently, a larger share of tourism revenue remains within local communities, contributing to income generation, cultural pride, and improvements in local infrastructure.

These findings support Schegg and Stangl (2021), who argue that sustainable tourism marketing should strengthen the capacity of local stakeholders. Lombok demonstrates this principle by integrating digital literacy, community storytelling, and indigenous knowledge into its destination branding strategy.

Overall, the Lombok case illustrates how community-based digital marketing can simultaneously promote cultural preservation, economic inclusion, and sustainable tourism. It demonstrates that when local communities are empowered with digital skills and access to online platforms, they are able to control their own narratives while attracting environmentally and socially conscious travellers. Lombok therefore provides a compelling alternative to influencer-dominated destination marketing, showing that sustainable tourism promotion can successfully emerge from the grassroots.



Connection to Research Questions

Research Question	Insight from Video Analysis
How does digital marketing affect visibility and perception?	It increases reach but may oversimplify or commodify culture.
What ethical concerns arise?	Informed consent, cultural appropriation, and over-tourism risks.
How can strategies align better with sustainability?	By involving locals, emphasizing education, and avoiding green washing.

Although the study was based on the thematic analysis of 20 short-form tourism videos, two destinations in the two destination-ravanda and Lombok-DetaSet stood out for their relevance to the subjects of criminal and moral representation and stability alignment. Instead of collecting new data, these destinations were chosen as embedded case studies directly drawn from the original sample. This allowed for a deep discovery of how to play extensive patterns in real -life digital tourism contexts. Case studies provide support for examples, for example, enrich analysis with concrete examples without distracting from the qualitative scope of the study.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of digital marketing and user-generated content (UGC) in promoting sustainable tourism, with particular emphasis on ecotourism, cultural tourism, and dark tourism. Through the thematic analysis of short-form video content from platforms such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, the study identified both the opportunities and ethical challenges associated with contemporary digital tourism marketing.

The findings demonstrate that digital marketing—particularly visual social media platforms—has significantly enhanced the visibility of emerging tourism destinations. User-generated content enables ordinary travellers to shape destination narratives, showcase authentic local experiences, and stimulate interest without the substantial costs associated with traditional marketing campaigns. This democratisation of content creation presents important opportunities for tourism development, especially in emerging economies.

However, the study also identified several ethical concerns. Digital tourism content frequently portrays communities and cultural sites through lenses of exoticism and consumerism, often overlooking issues of informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and meaningful local participation. Without ethical accountability, accurate representation, and community involvement, digital tourism marketing risks undermining the sustainability principles it seeks to promote.

Furthermore, although sustainability themes are increasingly incorporated into digital tourism content, their depth and authenticity vary considerably. Many videos emphasise scenic landscapes, traditional crafts, and environmentally friendly slogans while providing limited



evidence of genuine engagement with local communities or long-term sustainability initiatives. Consequently, the disconnect between sustainability messaging and actual tourism practices remains an important challenge.

Overall, the study concludes that digital marketing can support sustainable tourism only when it is grounded in ethical storytelling, authentic representation, and meaningful community participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the contribution of digital marketing and user-generated content to sustainable tourism in emerging destinations:

1. **Promote ethical storytelling practices.** Tourism marketers, content creators, and influencers should receive training on ethical digital storytelling, including obtaining informed consent, respecting cultural heritage, avoiding cultural appropriation, and accurately representing local histories and traditions.
2. **Empower local communities through digital capacity building.** Governments, tourism organisations, and development partners should invest in digital skills training for local tourism stakeholders, including guides, artisans, entrepreneurs, and community organisations, enabling them to produce and share their own authentic content.
3. **Develop community-led marketing campaigns.** Destination marketing organisations and non-governmental organisations should collaborate directly with local communities to design and implement tourism campaigns that reflect authentic cultural perspectives while ensuring that tourism benefits are equitably shared.
4. **Encourage responsible platform governance.** Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube should strengthen support for responsible tourism content by promoting ethical creators, improving content moderation, and discouraging content that exploits communities, misrepresents cultures, or encourages environmentally harmful behaviour.
5. **Integrate sustainability indicators into digital campaigns.** Tourism marketing initiatives should move beyond visual appeal by incorporating measurable sustainability indicators, such as environmental conservation efforts, local income generation, community partnerships, and cultural preservation outcomes.
6. **Establish regulatory frameworks for digital tourism marketing.** Governments and tourism authorities should develop ethical guidelines and codes of conduct for digital tourism promotion, particularly for culturally sensitive and environmentally vulnerable destinations. These frameworks should include standards for disclosure, community consent, and responsible representation.
7. **Strengthen multi-stakeholder collaboration.** Sustainable digital tourism marketing requires collaboration among content creators, tourism authorities, local communities, private-sector organisations, and non-governmental organisations to ensure that



promotional activities align with long-term environmental, cultural, and community development objectives.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Olumuyiwa A. Akande and Joanna I. Ogunsile conceived the study, including the design, Ogunsile J. I. collated the data, and Ogunsile J. I. handled the analysis and interpretation, while so and so the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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