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Destination Framing in Southwest Papua's Marine Ecotourism: A User-Generated Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The marine ecotourism destinations of Raja Ampat in Southwest Papua Province, located within the Coral Triangle, possess globally significant biodiversity and strong potential for sustainable diving tourism development. While destination promotion has traditionally relied on top-down branding strategies led by government institutions, the digital platforms has shifted the dynamics of tourism communication toward more participatory and user-driven processes. This study aims to analyze destination framing constructed through tourist perceptions and to identify key dimensions shaping the tourists' interpretations. Using a qualitative approach, this research examines 100 units of user-generated content (UGC) collected from multiple digital platforms, including social media and online review sites. Data were analyzed using thematic and framing analysis based on Entman's frameworks concept. The findings reveal that destination framing is constructed through six primary dimensions: biodiversity, experience, adventure, infrastructure, safety, and conservation. While biodiversity, experience, and adventure are predominantly framed positively, other dimensions such as infrastructure, safety, and conservation reflect critical and ambivalent perspectives. By incorporating tourist-generated narratives, these findings highlight the importance of integrating bottom-up destination framing into tourism governance and policy-making processes whereas the stakeholders can develop more adaptive, responsive, and sustainable tourism strategies. This research contributes to the advancement of communication-based approaches in tourism studies by positioning destination framing as a key analytical lens in the digital era.

Keywords: *Destination Framing; Digital Tourism Communication; Sustainable Tourism; Tourist Perception, User-Generated Content.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The marine waters of the Bird's Head Seascape, located in the provinces of West Papua and Southwest Papua, are part of the Coral Triangle—globally recognized as the epicenter of marine biodiversity. Approximately 2,460 species or 60 percent of the entire reef fish fauna of the Indo-West Pacific inhabits this region, making it one of the richest marine ecosystems on the planet [1]. The high level of endemism underscores the importance of this region not only ecologically, but also as a natural laboratory for global marine conservation studies [2]

Raja Ampat Regency represents a prominent case of marine ecotourism, which characterized by exceptional marine biodiversity and relatively intact reef ecosystems, the region has gained global recognition as one of the world's leading underwater tourism destinations and holds strategic importance for aesthetic and recreational value [3]. This positioning underscores the region's dual role as both a site of ecological significance and a model for integrating conservation objectives with tourism development [4]

The contribution of marine-based tourism to the regional economy in Raja Ampat is reflected in the revenue generated by the local public service agency (BLUD), which is collected through mandatory environmental service fees paid by visitors, reaching approximately IDR 22.5 billion in 2024 [5]. This performance which taken by the Local Government highlights the effectiveness of environmental service financing mechanisms and reflects a significant increase in funding derived directly from tourism activities.

In practice, tourism promotion strategies have largely been driven by top-down destination branding approaches. However, in the digital era, post-visit tourist testimonials have become part of the *framing*

environment, influencing subsequent travel decisions. Experience-based content is proven to have higher credibility compared to formal promotional messages, and significantly contributes to the formation of destination image [6].

Digital platforms have also shifted the authority of tourism communication from institutional actors to more participatory user networks [7]. In this context, tourists are no longer merely consumers of information, but also producers of meaning through user-generated content (UGC) [8]. Fragidis [9] and Byun [10] studies show that experience-based narratives shared through UGC on social media not only influence destination image, but also shape tourist expectations prior to visiting. These narratives not only reinforce positive images but also reveal dimensions that are often absent in official narratives.

1.2 Research Gap

Framing within digital platforms—mediated by algorithms and user interactions—plays a crucial role in how information is produced and interpreted. Drawing on framing theory by Entman (2007) [11] in the digital era tourists actively frame their experiences through user-generated content, which becomes central in shaping perception [12].

In this context, studies from Fang et al. [13] tourist perception is not solely determined by objective conditions, but also by how experiences are understood, communicated, and framed within the digital media ecosystem. However, most tourism studies still focus on destination branding and destination image, while research on user-driven destination framing and its linkage to policy framing remains limited [14]. Therefore, it is important to examine how tourist-generated framing can serve as a foundation for developing policies and governance for sustainable tourism.

1.3 Research Problem

Based on the background above, this study seeks to understand how destination framing in the digital era—constructed by tourists—is not merely a collection of individual experience representations, but also reflects processes of selection and salience that shape collective perception [15]. Furthermore, this study examines how such digitally mediated framings interact with broader communication dynamics to influence destination narratives, thereby informing both public perception and the strategic direction of tourism governance.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to identify and analyze the framing of marine ecotourism destinations as constructed from tourist perceptions, through categorizing the key dimensions that shape their experiences and evaluations of the destination.

In addition, this study aims to analyze the implications of such framing in order to provide recommendations for policy directions and tourism governance, particularly through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Framing

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way tourism destinations are perceived and communicated [16]. Femenia-Serra et al. [7] argues that social media has evolved from merely a promotional tool into a core infrastructure for shaping destination image, gradually replacing the role of traditional media in tourism communication.

In conventional tourism promotion, prospective tourists are typically exposed to dominant and homogeneous narratives, which shape their expectations and satisfaction toward destinations. [17]. In contrast, in the digital era, perception is not entirely neutral but is mediated by platform systems [18].

Within the platform-based digital environment, the use of tourist perceptions as a strategic source of information has become increasingly important [18]. As tourists are no longer only consumers of information but also producers of meaning through various forms of user-generated content (UGC). In this context, Man & Yu [19] argues that social media not only shapes perception but also creates *digital framing*, where tourist experiences are mediated through algorithms and echo chambers.

From a communication perspective, this phenomenon is reinforced by the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) [20]. Aboalganam et al. [21] demonstrate that digital content such as reviews, vlogs, and comments—often framed as *digital storytelling*—has a significant influence on trust formation, destination image, and travel decision-making.

In this context, Leong et al. [14] highlight that digital spaces also enable *co-creation*, where the meaning of a destination is collectively constructed among industry actors and tourists. Soltani-Nejad et al. [22] finds that vlogs and experience-based tourism content play an important role in shaping tourist perceptions. Furthermore, experience-based narratives shared through social media can foster emotional attachment between tourists and destinations [23].

2.2 Destination Framing

From a communication perspective, destination framing has evolved into a form of *multimodal framing*. Zein et al. [24] emphasizes the integration of text, visuals, and video in digital media, which shapes interpretations of cultural values and the attractiveness of tourism destinations in increasingly complex ways [17].

Aboalganam et al. [21] argue that user-generated content (UGC) in social media platforms plays a crucial role in shaping tourist perceptions, expectations, and decision-making, as it is perceived as more relevant and trustworthy. Tourist experiences shared through UGC become part of *virtual branding* practices, collectively constructing destination image through public participation [10]

Furthermore, digitalization has encouraged the emergence of data-driven approaches in understanding

tourist behavior. Fuad Nasvian et al [23] demonstrates that computational analysis of UGC can be used to systematically identify patterns of *expectation framing*, where tourist expectations are formed long before actual visits occur.

Within the digital tourism ecosystem, this transformation positions tourists as key agents in shaping perception. Egger et al. [25] show that social media has become a primary source of travel information, while user-generated content plays a significant role in constructing destination image and narratives. Testimonies generated through tourist visits and disseminated via electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) are no longer confined to limited social circles but can reach wider audiences once published across various online platforms [26] [27].

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Paradigm and Method

This study adopts a constructivist–interpretive paradigm**,** which views social reality as something that is constructed through processes of interaction, experience, and communication practices. In the context of tourism, destination perception is therefore not understood as a single objective reality, but rather as a construction of meaning that is produced and reproduced by various actors through digital media.

This research employs a digital narrative qualitative research design**,** focusing on communication practices within digital spaces through the analysis of user-generated content (UGC) collected from multiple online platforms. The data collection process involves identifying and compiling keywords that represent tourist experiences and perceptions during their activities.

To enhance methodological transparency and analytical rigor, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy in selecting user-generated content (UGC) that explicitly reflects first-hand tourist experiences in marine ecotourism activities.

3.2 Types and Sources of Data

The data sources for this study were collected from a variety of platforms, including Google Reviews, YouTube, discussion forums (such as Reddit), TripAdvisor, and travel blogs that contain individual experiences in the form of opinions, perceptions, and evaluations of destinations. The data collected in this study are considered to have reached data saturation**,** defined as the point at which no new categories or significant variations in meaning emerge during the analysis process.

The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) content containing experiential narratives (e.g., reviews, captions, or vlogs), (2) relevance to marine-based tourism activities such as diving, snorkeling, and island travel, and (3) publication within the last five years to ensure contextual relevance.

The sampling process also followed a maximum variation logic, capturing diverse perspectives across multiple platforms—including Google Reviews, TripAdvisor, YouTube, Reddit, and travel blogs—and across different content formats (textual and audiovisual).

Based on a synthesis of tourism and digital communication literature, the combination of dimensions used to assess tourist perceptions and experiences in this study focuses on the following attributes: Biodiversity Frame, Experience Frame, Adventure Frame, Infrastructure Frame, Safety Frame, and Conservation Frame**,** as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Operational Dimensions of the Study

Dimension	Brief Description
Biodiversity	Description of tourist perceptions of marine biodiversity**,** including species diversity, coral reef conditions, and the uniqueness of endemic marine life.
Experience	Description of tourists' subjective experiences**,** including satisfaction, emotional impressions, and the quality of interactions during their visit.
Infrastructure	Description of perceptions related to accessibility and infrastructure**,** including supporting facilities (such as internet connectivity), transportation, and overall service quality of the destination.
Safety	Description of risk and safety perceptions**,** including tourism safety standards, emergency preparedness, and the professionalism of operators.
Conservation	Description of tourists' evaluation of sustainability practices**,** environmental protection, and marine conservation efforts at the destination.
Adventure	Description of challenges and uniqueness of experiences**,** including diving adventures, accommodation in remote locations, and environmental conditions.

Source: Author's analysis, compiled from [28] [29] [7] [30] [31]

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

The data analyzed in this study consist of various forms of user-generated content, including textual reviews on online platforms, social media captions, user comments, tourist experience narratives,

and interpretations of visual descriptions accompanying such content.

This study employs a qualitative framing analysis technique**,** referring to the four core elements of Robert Entman's model: define problems (how issues are defined), diagnose causes (what causes are emphasized), moral judgment (the values or evaluations expressed), and suggest remedies (the solutions or implications proposed). The diversity of data forms enables the researcher to capture the construction of destination meaning more comprehensively within the digital communication ecosystem.

Analytically, the study applied a multi-stage qualitative procedure, beginning with open coding to identify recurring narrative elements, followed by axial coding to cluster these into broader thematic categories aligned with the study's operational dimensions.

3.4 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, this study employs source triangulation across multiple digital platforms, consistency in framing categories, and interpretative rigor**.** Additionally, the study conducts corpus-based analysis to examine textual units derived from recurring narratives across platforms, serving as a form of data validation. This combination of systematic analysis and triangulation ensures that the findings are robust and credible.

Conversely, for this study content generated by official tourism bodies, promotional materials, duplicated entries, and posts lacking substantive narrative elements were excluded to maintain analytical validity.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Based on the analysis of user-generated content collected from various digital platforms, a total of 100 content items were examined, consisting of 40 social media posts (YouTube) and 60 tourist reviews from TripAdvisor, Reddit, and Google Reviews. Data collection was guided by the principle of theoretical saturation, where additional data no longer contributed to new thematic insights.

This study prioritizes analytical generalization. The diversity of platforms and consistency of emerging themes suggest that the dataset has reached sufficient saturation to support the framing analysis. Through thematic analysis identifying framing patterns derived from the operational dimensions, the findings reveal a distribution across the six main dimensions analyzed in this study.

The analysis reveals how user-generated content constructs and frames marine tourism in Raja Ampat by highlighting specific issues, attributing particular causes, expressing evaluative judgments, and proposing implicit or explicit solutions. Across platforms such as online reviews, social media, and travel vlogs, tourists actively construct alternative narratives based on their direct experiences. The illustrative quotes are synthesized representations of recurring narratives identified across user-generated content platforms, rather than direct verbatim excerpts.

Across the dataset, these elements emerge in varying configurations, demonstrating how different platforms and content types shape distinct narrative patterns and interpretative frames. The findings indicate that destination framing is not only dominated by positive narratives related to biodiversity, experience, and adventure**,** but also reveals critical perspectives concerning infrastructure (negative-critical), conservation (positive-critical), and safety (ambivalent)**.**

Based on the data presented in Table 2, the biodiversity and conservation dimensions indicate that tourist experiences shape perceptions of environmental quality and sustainability as key factors in the attractiveness of marine tourism in West Papua and Southwest Papua. Meanwhile, the experience and adventure dimensions align with the concepts of the experience economy and experiential tourism, where unique experiences and emotional engagement constitute the core value of tourism.

The infrastructure dimension reflects aspects of destination competitiveness and service quality that influence tourist satisfaction. The uniqueness of the experiences offered by these destinations is often perceived as incomparable to other global destinations. Nevertheless, infrastructure remains a critical dimension that requires attention from tourism stakeholders.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of User-Generated Content Data from Multiplatform

Dimension	Dominant Tourist Narrative	Examples of Tourist Narrative (UGC)	Framing Character
Biodiversity	The destination is described as an "underwater paradise" with extraordinary species richness and marine ecological diversity.	"Raja Ampat is literally the most biodiverse place I've ever dived—every dive feels unreal." "The coral reefs are pristine, and the variety of marine life is just mind-blowing." "It's like swimming inside a National Geographic documentary."	Positive

Experience	Diving experiences are perceived as unique, exclusive, and "once in a lifetime," not found in other tourism experiences.	"This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, nothing else compares." "Every dive felt special—completely different from anywhere I've been." "It's not just a trip, it's an unforgettable life experience."	Positive
Infrastructure	Complaints are identified regarding access, transportation, and supporting facilities, including limited internet connectivity in certain locations.	"Getting there is complicated and expensive, but worth it in the end." "Infrastructure is still limited, especially transport and internet access." "Don't expect luxury facilities—this place is still quite remote."	Critical–Negative
Safety	Perceptions are mixed (ambivalent): some tourists feel safe, while others highlight safety standards, including procedures in cases of accidents, illness, or emergencies.	"I felt safe diving here, but the remoteness makes you think about emergencies." "The guides were professional, but I wasn't sure about medical facilities nearby." "Amazing experience, but safety standards can vary depending on the operator."	Ambivalent
Conservation	Tourists demonstrate concern for environmental issues and the sustainability of future destination management.	"I hope tourism here stays sustainable—this place is too precious to lose." "It's beautiful, but increasing tourism could damage the reefs if not managed well." "You can see conservation efforts, but more awareness is still needed."	Critical–Positive
Adventure	Diving activities are perceived as challenging and prestigious adventures, including opportunities to dive in one of the richest biodiversity hotspots on Earth.	"Diving here feels like a real adventure—remote, wild, and untouched." "Strong currents and deep dives make it exciting and challenging." "It's a dream destination for serious divers looking for adventure."	Positive

Source: Author's analysis

The safety dimension is associated with risk perception, which has been widely recognized in previous studies as influencing travel decisions and tourist comfort. Prior to visiting, tourists tend to search online for information regarding potential conditions they may encounter in Papua and Southwest Papua. They generally demonstrate awareness of possible risks, including preparing travel insurance, anticipating weather-related challenges, and bringing necessary personal medication.

4.2 Findings Analysis

This study demonstrates how communication plays a central role in shaping the reality of tourism destinations. Tourist perceptions are not solely determined by objective conditions, but also by how experiences are understood, communicated, and framed through digital media [32].

In the tourism context, framing not only shapes tourist perception but can also influence destination management priorities. Through platforms such as online reviews, social media, and travel vlogs, tourists actively construct alternative narratives based on their empirical experiences, which are often perceived as more authentic, credible, and experience-based [6] [33].

These perceptions not only reinforce the positive image of destinations but also reveal dimensions often absent in official narratives, such as accessibility, infrastructure quality, diving safety standards, as well as conservation and sustainability issues [13]. Experience-based narratives shared through social media not only influence destination image but also shape tourist expectations prior to their visit, including perceptions of service quality, risk, and sustainability [17]

In the context of marine tourism destinations in West Papua and Southwest Papua, the concept of destination framing becomes essential in explaining how destinations are interpreted through the construction of tourist experiences. Destination framing is inherently bottom-up**,** dynamic, and reflective of complex realities—encompassing positive, negative, ambiguous, and critical perspectives emerging from tourist experiences.

In this regard, user-generated content (UGC) functions not only as a medium for sharing experiences

but also as a mechanism of collective evaluation of destination conditions, which can serve as valuable input for tourism stakeholders. The process of meaning-making within the digital communication ecosystem further positions it as a participatory space. Destination perceptions are continuously constructed within this space, opening opportunities for developing studies that bridge digital communication and tourism governance.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of integrating tourist-based destination framing with policy framing and traditionally top-down destination branding approaches. The findings demonstrate that tourist narratives within the digital ecosystem are not merely reflective but also performative**,** shaping how destinations are understood, evaluated, and widely recommended.

Based on these findings, user-generated content can serve as a strategic source of information for governments in formulating more adaptive marine tourism policies in West Papua and Southwest Papua Provinces.

Future studies should specifically examine the framing gap and framing alignment between user-generated narratives and policy narratives, as well as the forms of negotiated perception within the digital ecosystem. The integration of framing perspectives with collaborative governance should also be further developed to produce more comprehensive communication–policy models in tourism studies.

For tourism stakeholders, this study shows that user-generated content represents a strategic source of feedback that can be utilized by governments to reshape destination branding. Promotional strategies can be aligned with actual framing, enabling destination communication to become more adaptive, credible, and oriented toward tourist experiences.

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