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Visual Dominance in Digital Tourism Narratives: The Construction of Destination Image in Gua Kristal, Kupang

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of visual content on social media has transformed how tourism destinations are produced and understood in digital environments. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok no longer function solely as information channels but actively shape narratives through a visual logic that prioritizes appeal, immediacy, and ease of consumption. Crystal Cave in Kupang illustrates how local destinations gain visibility through repetitive visual patterns that gradually standardize representation. These patterns expand reach while privileging viral aesthetics and sidelining social and contextual complexity. This study analyzes how visual dominance shapes digital tourism narratives and influences destination image construction. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines 80 public posts on Instagram and TikTok published between January and December 2025. Data were selected through purposive sampling based on engagement, relevance, and visual clarity. Analysis focuses on visual framing, captions, hashtags, and audience interaction, employing thematic and narrative coding informed by narrative paradigm theory, destination image theory, and simulation within hyperreality studies. Findings indicate that immersive visual representations produce simplified and standardized portrayals of destinations. Repetitive patterns drive homogenized imagery, while local context and social dimensions become increasingly marginal. Algorithmic reinforcement amplifies these dominant patterns, shaping expectations that often diverge from lived experience. As a result, digital representations function not merely as reflections but as active forces that construct how destinations are perceived.

Keywords: *Visual Dominance, Digital Narrative, Destination Imagery, Hyperreality, Crystal Cave*

1. INTRODUCTION

Development of social media over the past decade has not only expanded reach of tourism communication but also marked a digital transformation in how destinations are produced and understood. Recent data shows that more than 4.7 billion people actively use social media, spending over two hours per day on average [1]. In this context, platforms like Instagram and TikTok no longer function simply as promotional media, but as spaces shaping production and distribution of meaning. Tourists now learn about destinations through circulating visuals before experiencing them directly. Numerous studies show that visual content significantly influences perception and visit intention [2], [3]. Shift confirms that tourism experience is increasingly mediated by digital systems.

Dominance of visuals on social media has changed how destinations are presented. Content emphasizes aesthetically appealing aspects, while social and cultural dimensions are often overlooked. High-quality visuals increase engagement while encouraging idealized and selective images [4]. Elements such as color, lighting, and composition become key determinants of audience attention. Visuals in this context not only convey information but act as a mechanism for selecting reality. Algorithmic systems reinforce this tendency by regulating content distribution based on interaction levels. Algorithms not only determine visibility but also influence how creators produce content [5]. Creators tend to follow visual patterns proven effective in maintaining reach. As a result, destination appearances increasingly follow recurring standards. Process demonstrates that digital content is not neutral, but shaped by platform logic prioritizing engagement.

Digital transformation also changes how travelers search for and consume travel information. Over 60% of travelers use social media as a primary source when choosing destinations [6]. Repeated visual exposure shapes expectations before direct experience occurs [7]. In this situation, travel decisions are no longer based solely on factual information but also on previously consumed visual experiences. Social media thus becomes space for initial perception formation. Platform characteristics further influence narrative

construction. Instagram presents more curated and stable imagery, while TikTok delivers dynamic experiences through short-form video. Both platforms rely on visual power to strengthen emotional engagement [8]. Audiences do not only see, but also imagine experience. Difference shows that travel experience is not merely presented, but shaped according to platform logic.

Dominance of user-generated content strengthens this process. User content is perceived as more authentic because it originates from direct experience [9]. However, such authenticity still emerges through selection processes that highlight best aspects while omitting less appealing ones. Resulting representation becomes partial. In this context, travel experience turns into a curated, collective construct. Situation shows that digital narratives not only convey information but also define boundaries of destination understanding. Most studies still emphasize role of social media in increasing visibility, while discussion of its limitations remains limited. Visual repetition can lead to standardized experience that reduces diversity of meaning. Destinations are ultimately understood through narrow patterns rather than through complexity of reality.

Based on these conditions, study starts from assumption that visual dominance on social media shapes selective and standardized tourism narratives. Research focuses on Instagram and TikTok as primary platforms for visual content distribution, with Crystal Cave in East Nusa Tenggara as case study. Analysis examines how tourism experience is shaped through visuals, text, and audience interaction, while identifying highlighted and marginalized aspects. Study contributes to understanding how digital transformation shapes destination images in contemporary tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Narrative Paradigm in Digital Tourism Communication

Narrative paradigm proposed by Walter R. Fisher positions humans as beings who understand the world through stories. Communication is not understood as simply conveying information, but as a process of constructing narratives that shape how individuals interpret reality [10]. Narratives enable individuals to connect events, values, and experiences into a meaningful whole. In this perspective, power of a message is determined not by formal logic, but by its ability to make sense to the audience. An effective message is one that can be believed as a story. Thus, reality is understood through narrative structures that are received and interpreted by individuals.

Fisher developed two key concepts for assessing narrative quality: coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to internal consistency of a story, particularly interconnectedness of elements that make up the plot. Fidelity relates to relevance of a story to audience experience and values [10]. A strong narrative is not only logically structured but also experientially relevant. In this context, truth is not always objective, but depends on audience acceptance. Accepted story is often one that feels most plausible, not necessarily most factually complete. This perspective suggests that meaning is formed through a subjective process of interpretation.

Development of digital platforms has expanded role of narrative in tourism communication. Social media enables rapid, widespread, and iterative production and distribution of stories. Content such as photos, videos, and captions functions as part of a narrative flow shaping perception of destinations. Audiences not only receive information but also engage with experiences structured as visual stories. Narrative-based content has greater capacity to build emotional engagement than descriptive information [4]. In this context, narrative becomes a key mechanism in shaping digitally mediated tourism experience.

Platform characteristics also reshape how narratives are produced and evaluated. Content appears in short, visual, and fragmented formats aligned with rapid consumption patterns. Stories are no longer delivered as complete sequences, but as attention-driven fragments. Coherence shifts from structural completeness to visual appeal. Fidelity also shifts, as alignment with audience expectations becomes more important than alignment with reality. In this context, successful narratives are those that are easily accepted and widely shared. This shift indicates that standards of narrative quality are increasingly shaped by platform logic.

Tourism narratives on social media tend to present experiences that are simplified and adjusted to visual preferences of audiences. Users share most compelling moments, producing repetitive and uniform narrative patterns. Complex journeys are reduced into easily consumable fragments. Audiences then understand destinations through these narrative constructions. This process shows that narratives not only construct meaning but also limit how destinations are understood. Within digital transformation, narrative paradigm becomes a crucial analytical lens for examining how circulating stories both shape and simplify tourism reality.

2.2 Destination Image in Digital Context

Concept of destination image explains how a place is perceived through a combination of knowledge and experience possessed by tourists. Echtner and Ritchie define image as a combination of cognitive and affective dimensions shaping overall perception of a destination [11]. Cognitive dimension relates to factual information such as facilities, accessibility, and attractions, while affective dimension refers to feelings toward a place. These two dimensions work simultaneously to form a complete impression. Image is determined not only by what is known, but also by how experience is felt. Therefore, destination image is

understood as a complex and multidimensional construct.

This approach goes beyond individual attributes and encompasses holistic impressions that are difficult to measure directly. Tourist perceptions are often influenced by atmospheres or nuances that cannot always be described in detail. Images are dynamic because they continuously change with experience and incoming information. Research shows that destination image has a direct influence on travel intention, satisfaction, and loyalty [12]. Small changes in perception can significantly affect travel decisions. In this context, image becomes a strategic element that not only describes a destination but also shapes tourist behavior.

Rise of social media has significantly changed how destination images are produced and disseminated. In digital environments, images are no longer shaped by a single official source, but through contributions of interconnected users. Every post, whether photo, video, or caption, contributes to collective perception of a place. User-generated content is often perceived as more compelling because it reflects lived experience. Destination images are formed through ongoing interaction across platforms. This condition makes images more open, yet more difficult to control due to platform distribution logic.

In practice, visual selection becomes a key factor in shaping resulting images. Content tends to highlight aesthetically appealing aspects such as natural beauty or enjoyable experiences. Other elements that do not support this image are rarely displayed. As a result, affective dimension becomes more dominant than cognitive dimension. Tourists are influenced more by visual impressions than by comprehensive factual information. Consequently, destination images become more emotional, yet less representative of actual conditions. This process indicates that social media images are formed through selective representation.

Differences in platform characteristics reinforce variation in destination image formation. Instagram presents curated and stable visuals, while TikTok offers more dynamic experiences through short-form video. Although both platforms shape perception through different approaches, they operate within a similar visual logic. Destination images no longer derive from a single representation, but from accumulation of circulating content. Audiences receive multiple versions of an image that are not always consistent, yet repeated visuals form recognizable patterns. In this context, destination image becomes a continuously reproduced digital construction rather than a fixed representation.

2.3 Simulation and Hyperreality in Digital Tourism

The idea of simulation and hyperreality suggests that reality is no longer understood as something directly experienced, but as a result of representational construction. Jean Baudrillard explains that signs and symbols no longer simply refer to reality but form a system of meaning in their own right [13]. In this context, representations evolve into *simulacra*, forms without clear original reference. Boundaries between reality and representation become blurred, so that experience no longer relies on physical presence. Individuals interact more with images than with reality itself. This shift transforms how reality is understood in contemporary life.

Digital environment accelerates this process through continuous circulation of visual content. Image and video production becomes not only massive but also structured through algorithm-based distribution systems. Frequently appearing content forms visual patterns that later become references for understanding objects. Audiences do not simply observe, but internalize these patterns as credible forms of reality. Repeated exposure makes representations feel familiar and convincing. In this environment, direct experience is no longer primary requirement for understanding a place. Reality begins to take shape through repeated visual consumption.

Simulations operate by arranging visual and narrative elements to create experience without direct presence. Baudrillard emphasizes that simulation does not merely imitate reality but produces a version of reality perceived as real [13]. Visuals, text, and narrative structures are organized to create coherent and convincing impressions. Audiences can imagine and experience places through consumed content. However, such experience results from selection and simplification. Only certain elements are presented, while others are excluded. Simulation therefore produces structured experience rather than complete representation.

This phenomenon is evident in representation of tourist destinations on social media. Circulating content tends to highlight beauty, clarity, and ideal atmosphere, while aspects that do not align with such image are rarely presented. This pattern shapes expectations of tourists toward experiences they anticipate. When lived experience does not match consumed representations, a gap emerges between perception and reality. In this situation, representation no longer functions as depiction, but as primary reference for understanding destinations. Media-generated images can become more dominant than actual conditions.

Characteristics of digital platforms reinforce this process in different yet complementary ways. Instagram presents curated and stable images, while TikTok delivers dynamic experiences through short-form video. Both platforms do not merely present information but construct experiences that feel real to audiences. Boundary between seeing and experiencing becomes increasingly blurred. Audiences can sense presence without physical involvement. In this context,

digital tourism not only represents reality but actively shapes how reality is perceived.

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a digital content analysis design to examine how tourism narratives are shaped on social media platforms. This approach is selected because it enables in-depth reading of visual and textual representations within digital communication contexts [14]. Data consist of 80 public posts from Instagram and TikTok, with 40 posts from each platform, selected through purposive sampling based on engagement level, relevance to Crystal Cave, and clarity of visual representation. Data collection was conducted from January to December 2025 to ensure consistency and recency of content patterns. Social media is understood as a space for meaning production shaped by user interaction and platform logic.

Units of analysis include visual framing, captions, hashtags, and audience interaction as key elements in formation of digital narratives. Visual framing is examined to identify representational patterns through composition, camera angle, and visual aesthetics. Captions and hashtags are analyzed to interpret narrative structure and distribution context. Audience interaction, including number of likes and comments, is used to examine response patterns and reinforcement of certain representations. Analysis is conducted using thematic analysis and narrative coding to identify recurring themes and patterns in data [2]. Interpretation is then connected to Narrative Paradigm [10], Destination Image [11], and simulation and hyperreality [13], enabling integrated understanding of relationships between visuals, narratives, and construction of meaning in digital tourism.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of 80 social media posts related to Crystal Cave shows that digital tourism narratives are shaped through interaction between visuals, text, and audience responses within a space structured by platform logic. Resulting representations are not neutral, but reflect a selection process influenced by content distribution mechanisms and user visual preferences. Instagram tends to present curated and aesthetically composed images with strong emphasis on visual composition, while TikTok offers more dynamic experiences through video flow and personal narratives.

Despite differences in presentation, both platforms share a tendency to simplify destination reality through visual dominance. Aspects lacking strong visual appeal, such as social context and local practices, tend to be marginalized. Findings indicate that digital narratives are shaped not only by what is presented, but also by what is excluded. As a result, representations become visually compelling yet limited in depth, producing images that are powerful but partial.

4.1 TikTok: Experiential and Simulated Narrative

Findings from 40 TikTok posts show a consistent representational pattern in constructing Crystal Cave tourism experience. Content does not merely present location, but actively produces a sense of experience through visually dominant elements. Interconnection between images, text, hashtags, and audience responses forms a reinforcing narrative structure that operates repeatedly across posts. This repetition stabilizes representation, turning individual uploads into a recognizable pattern. Meaning of destination is therefore not derived from direct reality, but from processes of selection, arrangement, and circulation of content. In this context, TikTok functions not only as a medium of display, but as a system that actively constructs how destinations are experienced and understood.

Data are analyzed through thematic analysis and narrative coding to identify recurring patterns and relationships between elements [2]. Findings indicate that representation is not shaped by isolated examples, but by accumulation and repetition across the dataset. Visuals, narrative elements, distribution mechanisms, and audience interaction operate as an integrated structure that continuously reproduces similar forms of experience. This process suggests that digital tourism narratives on TikTok are not only experiential, but also simulated constructed to appear real through repetition and visual coherence. Such an approach allows a more focused and systematic reading of data, reducing fragmentation while highlighting underlying patterns. Following table summarizes key trends identified in TikTok content.

Table 4.1 Thematic Results Coding Crystal Cave TikTok Content

Component Analysis	Key Findings	Data Indicators	Meaning
Visual Framing	Experience immersive	Swimming , camera close , clear water	Audience as if " present "
Narration (Text)	Emotional narrative	“rich because I've seen this…”	Experienc e as personal values
Production Narrative	Visual construction	“Price 100 thousand for results Good "	Experienc e produced
Hashtag	Distribution algorithmic	#goakristalk upang #ntt #travel	Optimizati on visibility
Interaction Audience	High engagement	Likes & comments active	Validation social
Visual Patterns	Visual repetition	Blue water , swimming	Homogeni zation

Narrative Characters	Simulation experience	Visual + text + audience	Reality become blurry

Visual dominance is evident in how experiences are constructed through camera techniques such as close-up shots and dynamic framing. Swimming activities emerge as a central element in creating a sense of direct presence for the audience. Water clarity and blue color consistently appear across different posts, forming a recognizable visual pattern. Such repetition establishes easily identifiable visual standards. Audience members do not only observe, but also feel as if they are part of the experience. Visuals function as the primary medium in presenting tourism experiences in digital environments.

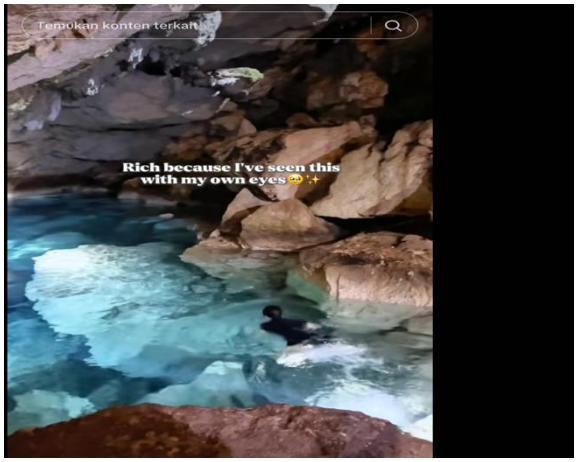


Figure 1a. Activity swim in the Crystal Cave as representation experience immersive visual- based (Source : Research Data, 2026)

Strengthening of meaning appears through use of text embedded directly in video content. Sentences such as "rich because I've seen this with my own eyes" do not merely describe experience, but add emotional value to displayed visuals. Language guides audiences to interpret experience as something personally meaningful. Text and visuals operate simultaneously to produce a stronger impression, where narrative becomes an integral part of experience construction rather than a simple addition. This relationship intensifies emotional engagement with content.

Production aspect indicates that presented experiences are not entirely spontaneous. Information related to production effort, including attention to visual quality, points to a planned process. Representations emerge from deliberate visual decisions shaped by consideration of audience appeal. Tourism experiences are not only lived but also structured for presentation. This process shows that digital tourism content involves intentional production practices, where experience becomes part of a constructed visual form with specific aesthetic value.

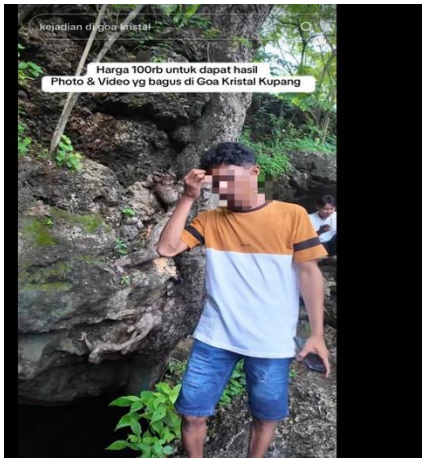


Figure 1b. Content production cost information as an indication of the construction of visual experiences in digital representation (Source: Research Data, 2026)

Information such as *"100 thousand rupiah to get good photo and video results"* indicates that seemingly natural experiences have undergone a deliberate production process. Resulting representations are not simply spontaneous outcomes of tourist visits, but part of content production practices that consider aesthetics and audience appeal. Experiences are not merely recorded, but constructed as visuals designed for display and sharing. This shift marks a movement from direct experience toward experience shaped for digital representation.

Distribution through hashtags shows that destination narratives are shaped not only by content, but also by platform mechanisms. Hashtags such as #goakristalkupang, #kupang, and #ntt function as visibility strategies that connect content to broader distribution networks. Rather than serving as simple labels, hashtags operate as algorithmic gateways that influence reach and visibility. In this way, distribution contributes to formation of recurring representational patterns, not just expansion of audience.

Audience interaction further reinforces these patterns. Content featuring strong visuals and emotional narratives tends to generate high engagement, reflected in likes and comments. Responses indicating that an experience is "worth it" suggest acceptance of presented representations. At the same time, such responses encourage repetition, as highly engaging content is more likely to be reproduced and imitated. In this context, audiences do not only respond, but also participate in reinforcing representational standards on the platform.

Overall, representation of Crystal Cave on TikTok shows that tourism experience is constructed through interaction between visuals, narrative, distribution, and audience response. Repetitive patterns produce uniform and recognizable representations while simplifying complexity of the destination. Boundary between lived experience and representation becomes increasingly blurred,

positioning the platform not only as a medium of display, but as an active force shaping perception.

4.2 Instagram: Aesthetic and Curated Representation

Representations of Crystal Cave on Instagram tend to present calm, curated, and visually composed imagery. Across observed content, users place greater emphasis on how the destination appears rather than how it is experienced. Choices of camera angle, body positioning, and color balance indicate strong control over visual composition. Landscape functions as the primary element, while human figures act as complements that enhance spatial depth. This pattern produces visual uniformity across posts, making Crystal Cave appear consistent and easily recognizable within digital content streams.

In contrast, TikTok emphasizes movement and experiential flow, highlighting how each platform constructs representation through distinct visual logic. This difference is further reflected in overall content structure, where visuals, captions, hashtags, and audience responses operate in an interconnected manner. These elements do not stand alone, but collectively shape destination image. Repetition across posts reduces individual variation and strengthens a shared, collective representation. Following table summarizes these relationships as a foundation for further analysis.

Table 4.2 Thematic Coding Results of Crystal Cave Instagram Content

Component Analysis	Key Findings	Data Indicators	Meaning
Visual Framing	Aesthetics curated	Static pose, composition neat	Dominant visual image
Caption	Simple narrative	Description short	Visual enhancer
Hashtag	Category destination	#goakristalkupang #ntt #travel	Distribution content
Interaction Audience	High engagement	Dozens of likes thousands of comments active	Validation social
Visual Patterns	Repetition aesthetics	Blue water , symmetrical framing	Homogenization
Narrative Characters	Ideal image	Focus on beauty	Reality filtered

Visual patterns in Instagram posts show a clear trend in how Crystal Cave is constructed as a destination image. Most users favor clean, visually accessible compositions that immediately highlight water clarity and striking blue tones. Human presence does not function to depict activity, but to complement the scene and emphasize spatial scale. Similar shooting angles across posts create a uniform visual style, producing a controlled and consistent appearance. These recurring choices indicate that destination image is not incidental, but systematically formed through repeated visual patterns that reinforce a particular way of seeing the place.

This visual approach is reinforced by captions that provide direct and practical information. Many posts do not only highlight aesthetic appeal, but also explain location, access, and preparation needed before visiting. Information such as travel distance, origin of the name Crystal Cave, and practical details like bringing towels or renting lights contributes to a more structured narrative. Presentation remains simple and personal, making content easily understood by audiences. This combination of visual clarity and informational support strengthens audience trust while allowing them to imagine the experience in a more concrete way. High levels of engagement suggest that clarity and usefulness of information play a significant role in shaping audience response, not only through attraction but also through perceived reliability.



Figure 2a. Sitting pose on the edge of a rock with curated visual compositions and information experience detailed tourism (Source : Research Data, 2026)

Contrary to the assumption that captions function merely as supplementary elements, these posts demonstrate a strong informative and practical role of text. Captions do not only describe visual beauty, but also provide detailed information regarding location, travel distance, origin of the name Crystal Cave, and necessary preparations such as bringing towels, soap, or renting lighting equipment. This direct and personal style of delivery makes information easily accessible and understandable for audiences. In this context, captions function as experiential guides that complement and structure the meaning of visuals. High levels of audience response indicate that the combination of strong visuals and clear information is effective in increasing both interest and trust. This pattern suggests that Instagram not only constructs destination image, but also provides practical references that shape how potential visitors anticipate and plan their experience.

At the same time, other posts demonstrate a different use of text, where captions no longer function

as sources of information, but as tools to reinforce visual impressions. Sentences tend to be short and evocative, designed to build associations rather than deliver new information. Expressions such as “clear as crystal, blue as the sky” emphasize visual qualities while maintaining focus on imagery. Language operates in a suggestive mode, encouraging audiences to imagine and emotionally engage with the scene. In this case, captions act as interpretive cues that direct how visuals should be understood, rather than explaining them explicitly. Relationship between visuals and text produces a stronger and more immersive impression, even though meaning remains grounded in curated imagery.



Figure 2b. Visual of clear water with the caption “ clear as crystal , blue as the sky ” as an aesthetic framing reinforcement (Source: Research Data, 2026)

Differences between these two captioning approaches highlight the flexible yet strategic role of text in shaping digital narratives. On one side, captions function as informational tools that structure audience understanding in a practical and accessible way. On the other, captions operate as affective triggers, reinforcing visual impressions through concise and evocative language. Despite these differences, both approaches remain anchored in visual dominance, where imagery continues to serve as the primary entry point for audience attention. Audience responses to both patterns indicate that engagement is not driven by a single factor, but emerges from the interplay between informational clarity and aesthetic appeal. In this sense, Instagram does not merely display content, but actively organizes how destinations are interpreted through combined visual and textual cues.

Selective emphasis on visually compelling moments further shapes this process. Not all aspects of experience are represented; instead, only those aligned with aesthetic expectations are repeatedly highlighted. This selective visibility produces a clean and controlled representation, where complexity is filtered out in favor of visual coherence. Over time, repeated use of similar visual styles establishes a recognizable pattern that is easily adopted by other users. What begins as individual expression gradually becomes a shared visual convention. As this pattern circulates and stabilizes, diversity of experience becomes less visible, replaced by a standardized form of representation that prioritizes consistency over variation.

Overall, imagery circulating on Instagram suggests that destination image is constructed through structured repetition rather than comprehensive representation. Audiences come to recognize Crystal Cave through recurring visual elements color, composition, and camera angle that function as markers of familiarity. Perception is shaped primarily by what is consistently shown, while less visible aspects fade from collective understanding. Resulting image appears strong and coherent, yet remains partial, as it emerges from continuous processes of selection and arrangement. In this context, Instagram operates not only as a platform for sharing, but as a system that stabilizes certain ways of seeing while simultaneously narrowing alternative interpretations of the destination.

4.3 Visual Dominance and the Construction of Digital Tourism Meaning

Findings from TikTok and Instagram indicate that representations of Crystal Cave are not randomly produced, but follow structured patterns shaped by platform logic. TikTok constructs movement-based and immersive experiences through dynamic visuals and personal narratives, while Instagram produces stable, curated, and aesthetically controlled imagery. These differences do not reflect contradiction, but demonstrate how each platform organizes experience according to its own mode of distribution and visibility. In this context, tourism experience no longer appears as a complete reality, but as a form adapted to audience attention and engagement. Platforms therefore operate not merely as communication channels, but as systems that regulate how reality is produced, circulated, and recognized.

Visual dominance becomes the central mechanism linking both platforms in constructing digital tourism narratives. Visuals function as primary entry points that capture attention and establish initial meaning, while text operates to reinforce, guide, or stabilize interpretation. Meaning is not produced through informational completeness, but through strength of representations that are immediately recognizable and easily consumed. Communication shifts from conveying experience toward producing images capable of sustaining visibility within fast-moving digital flows. In this condition, visuals do not only represent destinations, but define what is accepted as a legitimate experience.

Repetition of visual patterns across platforms further reveals a process of representational homogenization. Elements such as water clarity, intense blue tones, and clean compositions appear consistently and are reproduced across posts. Content that generates high engagement becomes a reference model, establishing implicit standards for how

destinations should be presented. Experiences that fall outside these visual expectations tend to remain invisible. As a result, representation is shaped less by diversity of reality and more by continuous selection and reproduction of similar visual forms. Destination image is therefore stabilized through repetition rather than grounded in experiential complexity.

Audience interaction strengthens this process through continuous feedback loops. Likes, comments, and views do not merely indicate response, but function as signals that guide future content production. Creators adapt to patterns that attract attention, reinforcing cycles of repetition. Meaning is thus produced relationally emerging from interaction between creators, audiences, and platform algorithms. Over time, this process structures representation into predictable forms while limiting space for alternative or less visually dominant experiences.

This condition reflects a shift toward simulation, where representation no longer mirrors reality but begins to substitute it. Experiences encountered through social media generate expectations that can exceed or even precede direct experience. Repeated visuals establish standards against which reality is evaluated, positioning representation as a reference point rather than a reflection. Boundary between lived experience and mediated image becomes increasingly unstable, as destinations are understood through images that circulate more frequently than the places themselves.

Implications of this process extend beyond perception toward broader understanding of tourism. Visual-dominated representations prioritize aesthetic appeal, particularly natural beauty, while marginalizing dimensions such as community life, environmental conditions, and social relations. This produces a narrowed interpretation of destinations, where value is measured through visual attractiveness. When expectations are formed through selective representations, direct experience risks misalignment with perceived reality. Digital tourism communication therefore operates ambivalently: expanding visibility while simultaneously constraining how destinations are understood.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that digital tourism narratives no longer represent destinations as complete realities, but are shaped by platform logic that prioritizes visibility and visual appeal. TikTok and Instagram display different representational forms, yet converge in simplifying tourism experience into easily consumable visual fragments. Dominance of visuals produces emotionally compelling images, but limits depth of context and information. As a result, representation becomes selective, where only certain aspects are repeatedly displayed while others remain absent. Destination image therefore emerges not as a reflection of reality, but as a digital construction shaped by patterns of distribution and consumption.

Findings indicate that digital tourism communication not only expands promotional reach, but also defines boundaries of how destinations are understood. Repetition establishes visual standards that influence expectations and evaluation of experience. Lived experience is increasingly interpreted through alignment with pre-existing images rather than direct encounter. Consequently, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions that lack visual appeal tend to be marginalized. This condition highlights the need for a more balanced communication approach one that moves beyond visual attractiveness and presents a more comprehensive and accountable representation of destination complexity.

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