Communication Strategy of Kudus Culture and Tourism in Introducing Religious Tourism to Foreign Tourists

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the communication strategies employed by the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar) to promote religious tourism to international visitors. The research aims to analyze the effectiveness of these strategies in increasing Kudus' visibility as a religious tourism destination. A qualitative approach with a descriptive method was utilized, incorporating in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis to gather insights from stakeholders, including Disbudpar officials, tour guides, and foreign tourists. The findings indicate that Disbudpar Kudus employs various promotional techniques, including social media campaigns, official websites, and participation in international tourism exhibitions. Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook serve as primary channels, leveraging visual and interactive content to engage potential tourists. However, challenges remain, such as inconsistent responsiveness to inquiries and a lack of multilingual content. The study highlights the need for more immersive digital strategies to enhance engagement, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). In conclusion, while the current strategies have contributed to increased international interest in Kudus, further improvements in digital engagement, global partnerships, and technological innovation are necessary to sustain long-term growth. This research provides practical recommendations for optimizing communication strategies to attract more international religious tourists and strengthen Kudus' position in the global tourism market.

Keywords: Kudus, Religious Tourism, Foreign Visitor.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an economic sector that contributes significantly to economic growth and social development in various countries (Suwantoro, 2006). Religious tourism is an essential segment of the Indonesian tourism industry. This activity involves visits to places that have special meaning for religious people, such as places of worship, graves of clerics, or historical sites related to the development of a particular religion. Indonesia, as a country with a Muslim-majority population,

has great potential for the development of religious tourism. Various historical sites and places of worship throughout the archipelago support this.

In the national context, the Indonesian government has identified religious tourism as one of the main pillars in the strategy for developing sustainable tourism. This aligns with efforts to diversify tourist destinations and improve the quality of services to attract more domestic and foreign tourists. The development of religious tourism also aligns with the principles of Sharia economics, which emphasize sustainability, justice, and community welfare. Thus, religious tourism strategically supports national economic growth and strengthens Indonesia's image as a tourist destination rich in spiritual and cultural values. The development of religious tourism contributes to increasing the number of tourist visits and positively impacts the local economy. Religious tourism activities can encourage the growth of supporting sectors such as accommodation, transportation, culinary, and other micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). In addition, religious tourism also plays a role in preserving local culture and traditions and strengthening the local community's religious identity.

Kudus Regency in Central Java Province is one of Indonesia's leading religious tourism destinations. Kudus has various historical sites related to the spread of Islam in Java, especially those related to one of the Walisongo, namely Sunan Kudus. One of the leading icons is the Menara Kudus Mosque, built in 1549 by Sunan Kudus. This mosque has a unique architecture combines elements of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic culture, as seen from the mosque tower, which resembles a temple. The uniqueness of this architecture is a unique attraction for domestic and foreign tourists. In addition to the Menara Kudus Mosque, the Sunan Kudus Tomb is pilgrims' leading destination. Every year, thousands of pilgrims come to make pilgrimages and participate in various local traditions that are still preserved, such as the Bukak Luwur and Dandangan traditions (Munzaroah, Nuzula, & Hana, 2023). These traditions have spiritual value and are interesting cultural attractions for tourists.

Religious tourism in Kudus has a positive impact on the local economy. The arrival of tourists increases community income through the hospitality, culinary, and souvenir sales sectors. In addition, religious tourism encourages the preservation of local culture and traditions, such as religious ceremonies and handicrafts, which are additional tourist attractions (Adiyati, Sardjono, & Murtini, 2019). Thus, religious tourism acts as a catalyst in preserving cultural heritage while improving the economic welfare of the local community.

The potential for religious tourism in Kudus is increasing along with the number of tourist visits. Data from the Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office shows that in 2024, the number of tourist visits reached 4.3 million people, an increase of 37% compared to the previous year (Marsono, Prihantara, Irawan, & Sari, 2016). Although most tourists are domestic tourists, there are also visits from foreign tourists. Foreign tourists visiting Kudus generally come from countries with significant Muslim communities, such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam (Choe, 2024)Their primary motivation is to make pilgrimages and learn about the history of the spread of Islam in Java. Some tourists are also interested in studying local architecture and culture. Their travel patterns usually include visiting historical sites, participating in religious events, and exploring Kudus' culinary specialties.

An effective communication and promotion strategy is needed to attract foreign tourists further. The Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office has a central role in increasing the appeal of religious tourism for international visitors. As a local government institution, this office is responsible for planning, managing, and promoting tourist destinations, including historical religious sites such as the Menara Kudus Mosque and the Tomb of Sunan Kudus. Efforts include infrastructure development, human resource training, and effective marketing strategies to attract foreign tourists.

The Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office utilizes various media and communication channels to implement its communication strategy. Social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are the primary means of sharing the latest information about religious events, cultural festivals, and other tourist attractions (Rosalia & Santoso, 2018). In addition, the office's official website provides complete information about religious tourism destinations, history, event schedules, and supporting facilities in various languages, making it easier for foreign tourists to access the information they need. Printed and electronic publications such as brochures, pamphlets, and e-booklets are distributed through embassies, international travel agents, and tourism exhibitions abroad.

Digital technology is key to the Kudus Regency religious tourism promotion strategy. Search engine optimization (SEO) is carried out to ensure that potential tourists easily find the content of the official website through search engines such as Google(Štefko, Kiráľová, & Mudrík, 2015). Social media campaigns are launched using unique hashtags, photo contests, and stories of tourist experiences to increase audience interaction and engagement. In addition, collaboration with online travel platforms helps increase the visibility of Kudus religious tourism destinations among international tourists. The development of a mobile application containing complete information about tourist destinations, interactive maps, and tourist guide features is also provided to make it easier for tourists in Kudus.

Cooperation with various parties is essential in promoting Kudus religious tourism to the international market. The Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office has partnered with international travel agents to include Kudus religious tourism destinations in their tour packages. It also offers incentives for agents who successfully bring in foreign tourists. Media relations are strengthened by inviting international journalists and bloggers to visit and cover Kudus religious tourism destinations, thereby gaining publicity in international mass media and digital platforms. Participation in international tourism exhibitions is also carried out to directly promote Kudus religious tourism destinations to potential tourists and global tourism industry players. In addition, collaboration with Indonesian diaspora communities abroad promotes Kudus religious tourism through their networks and holds cultural events that introduce Kudus to the international community.

Through these various efforts, the Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office is committed to increasing the attractiveness of religious tourism for international visitors. Hopefully, these steps can contribute positively to the local economy and preserve regional culture, making Kudus a tourist destination.

Previous studies have highlighted various strategies to promote tourism in Kudus and other areas with potential for religious tourism. One relevant study is the Marketing Communication Strategy of the Kudus Regency Culture and Tourism Office in Increasing the Number of Visitors to the Kretek Museum, which examines the use of integrated marketing communication (IMC) in increasing the attractiveness of the museum. The study results indicate that various communication media, such as print, electronic, and digital, have been utilized. However, their effectiveness is still limited due to the lack of innovation in delivering messages and limited promotional budgets (Rosalia & Santoso, 2018).

Another relevant study is the Strategy for Developing Kudus Tower Tourism Based on Local Wisdom as an Effort to Restore the Community's Economy, which uses a SWOT analysis to identify factors that influence the development of religious tourism in Kudus. The study results indicate that strengthening local cultural elements, improving facilities, and promoting social media can increase tourist visits. This study also emphasizes the importance of strategies based on local communities to create a broader economic impact for the surrounding community (Praatmana & Muhammad Arsyad, 2022).

In addition, research on the Promotion Strategy of Religious Tourism Destinations by the Tourism and Culture Office of Kampar Regency provides insight into the promotional methods used by government agencies in developing religious tourism. This study found that promotion was carried out through various channels, such as direct activities at tourist attractions, print and electronic media, and social media. However, budget constraints and a lack of professional digital marketing staff are significant obstacles to implementing this strategy (Al Farabi, 2022)

Although the above studies contribute to understanding religious tourism's marketing and promotion strategies, several research gaps have not been filled. One of the main gaps is the lack of research that discusses explicitly the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office's communication strategy for attracting foreign tourists. Most previous studies have focused on increasing the number of tourists in general without distinguishing between domestic and foreign tourists. The foreign tourist market has different characteristics and preferences, which require a more targeted communication approach.

In addition, previous studies have not deeply analyzed the use of digital technology in promoting religious tourism. Although several studies touch on the role of social media, little research explores how technologies such as virtual tours, location-based applications, and innovative digital marketing strategies can attract foreign tourists (Murat YEŞİL, 2013). Given the increasing reliance of tourists on technology in planning their trips, research on this aspect is becoming increasingly important. Finally, previous studies are generally descriptive and have not evaluated the effectiveness of strategies implemented by local governments in promoting religious tourism. Existing studies mostly describe the strategies used without measuring the concrete impact of these strategies on the number of foreign tourist visits. Therefore, this study will fill this gap by analyzing the effectiveness of communication strategies used by the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office in attracting foreign tourists and providing data-based recommendations to improve the attractiveness of religious tourism in Kudus sustainably.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to explore the communication strategies implemented by the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar) in promoting religious tourism to foreign tourists. The qualitative approach allows an in-depth understanding of how the target audience implements and receives these communication strategies. At the same time, the descriptive method provides a comprehensive picture of the communication practices carried out by Disbudpar.

Primary Data Sources were obtained through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including Disbudpar employees involved in the planning and implementation of promotions, tour guides, and foreign tourists who were the promotion targets. In addition, direct observation of various promotional activities was also part of the primary data. Secondary Data Sources include related documents, such as promotional materials, activity reports, and strategic planning documents used by Disbudpar to increase the attractiveness of religious tourism in Kudus.

Data for this study were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including Disbudpar employees, tour guides, and foreign tourists, to gather insights into the strategies, objectives, and challenges. Direct observations were carried out by attending promotional activities such as launch events, seminars, and workshops, allowing a real-time understanding of strategy execution and audience engagement. Document analysis involved reviewing promotional materials, activity reports, and strategic planning documents to better understand the communication approaches employed in religious tourism promotion.

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic approach consisting of the following steps:

1. Interview recordings were transcribed, and field notes from observations were compiled. All relevant documents were categorized for systematic examination.
2. The data were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes related to communication strategies. These themes were grouped into message delivery, media selection, and audience engagement categories.
3. Identified themes were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of the communication strategies. Comparisons were made across different data sources to ensure consistency in findings.

Several validation techniques were applied to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. To verify consistency and credibility, source triangulation was conducted by comparing interviews, observations, and document analysis data. Member checking involved presenting the findings to key informants, allowing them to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations to ensure their perspectives were correctly represented. Additionally, an expert review process was carried out by consulting communication and tourism experts, who provided feedback on the interpretations and conclusions, thus strengthening the study's validity.

By implementing this structured approach to data collection and analysis, the study ensures the validity and reliability of its findings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Disbudpar's communication strategies for attracting foreign tourists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Utilization of Digital Media

The reliance of Disbudpar Kudus on digital media as a core promotional strategy reflects a broader shift in tourism marketing, where accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and targeted engagement drive destination branding. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve as primary channels to reach international audiences, leveraging visual and interactive content to enhance Kudus' appeal as a religious tourism destination. While these platforms offer the advantage of real-time communication and broad outreach, their effectiveness is contingent on sustained audience engagement and responsive interaction management. Though successfully capturing interest through destination imagery, travel vlogs, and infographics, the current approach is hindered by inadequate responsiveness to user inquiries, which risks diminishing audience trust and reducing engagement over time.

Beyond social media, Disbudpar has attempted to establish a more structured digital presence through its official website and a dedicated digital application. These platforms provide essential travel information, such as destination guides and interactive maps. Yet, their functionality remains limited due to the lack of multilingual support and integration with international travel booking systems. This gap presents a significant obstacle to Kudus' competitiveness in the global religious tourism market, as seamless access to information and booking options are critical for attracting and retaining foreign visitors. Without a more robust and internationally oriented digital infrastructure, Disbudpar's promotional efforts risk being confined to raising awareness rather than facilitating actual tourist inflow.

Furthermore, collaborating with influencers and tourism content creators represents a strategic move to align Kudus' promotional content with contemporary digital consumption trends. Influencer-driven marketing has proven effective in enhancing visibility, yet its impact is diminished when not supported by an interactive communication framework. The failure to manage user interactions on social media suggests a reactive rather than proactive digital engagement model, which limits the potential of social media as a practical conversion tool.

Looking ahead, Disbudpar must transition from a primarily content-driven digital strategy to a more data-driven and immersive approach. Incorporating advanced technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) could provide potential visitors with an interactive preview of Kudus' religious sites, fostering deeper engagement before making travel decisions. Additionally, leveraging big data analytics to assess tourist preferences would enable the customization of promotional campaigns, ensuring content is tailored to specific demographic and regional interests. The current digital strategy, while a strong foundation, requires a shift towards more dynamic and interactive elements to ensure Kudus' long-term competitiveness in the global religious tourism sector.

Platforms Used

Disbudpar Kudus' strategic use of various social media platforms reflects an adaptive approach to modern tourism promotion, leveraging the unique strengths of each channel to maximize engagement.

Integrated information from Disbudpar Kudus's official website is an information center that details tourist destinations, accommodations, activities, and local culture. The website may have interactive features like maps, event calendars, and online booking or reservation forms. Disbudpar Kudus may optimize the website content with SEO (Search Engine Optimization) techniques to ensure the website is easy to find.

Disbudpar Kudus may publish blogs or articles about tourist attractions, travel guides, and Kudus's cultural stories to attract attention and provide added value to visitors. Using promotional videos that show Kudus's beauty and uniqueness can help attract a wider audience. Disbudpar Kudus can use paid advertising on social media platforms or Google Ads to target specific audiences and increase the visibility of their promotions. By utilizing these digital media, Disbudpar Kudus can reach a wider audience, increase awareness of their tourist destination, and attract more domestic and international visitors.

In addition, Facebook, with its broad demographic reach and structured communication tools such as event pages and community groups, is an effective medium for disseminating formal information, including tourism agendas and cultural event schedules. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon audience participation, and the static nature of its content may limit engagement compared to more dynamic platforms. In contrast, Instagram capitalizes on the visual appeal of Kudus' religious tourism, utilizing high-quality images and short cultural narratives to attract international audiences. Integrating Instagram Stories and Reels enhances real-time interaction, making tourism promotions more immersive and engaging. Yet, Instagram's algorithm favors high-engagement content, requiring Disbudpar to consistently produce compelling visuals to maintain visibility.

Twitter is a rapid information-sharing tool, enabling Disbudpar to distribute concise updates and leverage hashtags to expand its reach. While it allows for quick dissemination of information, the platform's fleeting content cycle necessitates frequent updates to sustain audience attention. Conversely, TikTok presents a disruptive opportunity to engage younger demographics through creative and trend-driven content such as cultural tutorials and tourism challenges. The platform's algorithm prioritizes virality, offering cost-effective visibility; however, its effectiveness depends on Disbudpar's ability to continuously adapt to shifting content trends.

While the multi-platform strategy enhances Kudus' tourism appeal, its success hinges on consistent and innovative content management. Merely establishing a presence on these platforms is insufficient—Disbudpar must actively foster two-way interactions, monitor engagement analytics, and refine content strategies in response to audience behavior. A lack of responsiveness to user engagement, particularly on interactive platforms like Instagram and TikTok, could diminish the credibility and effectiveness of the promotion. Therefore, Disbudpar Kudus must not only leverage digital tools but also implement a dynamic, data-driven approach to ensure sustained impact and global competitiveness in religious tourism promotion.

Shared Content

The effectiveness of the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office's (Disbudpar) content strategy lies in its ability to create an immersive and engaging promotional experience that aligns with evolving digital consumption trends. High-quality images of tourist destinations, such as the Menara Kudus Mosque and the Tomb of Sunan Kudus, leverage the power of visual storytelling to captivate potential visitors. The strategic use of aesthetic composition and well-framed shots enhances the emotional appeal, making these destinations more desirable (Kudus Culture and Tourism Office, 2023). However, while static images serve as a strong visual hook, they lack the dynamic engagement that video content can provide. Short videos documenting local festivals like the Dandangan tradition before Ramadan or the Cultural Parade bridge this gap by offering a more interactive and emotionally resonant experience. The rise of short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels further amplifies the reach of such content, particularly among younger audiences who prefer fast-paced and visually stimulating narratives (Akasse & Ramansyah, 2023).

Beyond mere attraction, including educational narratives in promotional content adds depth to the tourist experience, transforming Kudus from a passive sightseeing destination into a cultural and historical discovery place. Detailed information about religious sites, local cuisines, and traditional customs allows potential visitors to form a deeper connection with the destination before their arrival. Informative narratives, such as the history of the Menara Kudus Mosque or the uniqueness of Soto Kudus, provide an added cultural dimension that appeals to tourists seeking an educational component in their travels . The integration of hyperlinks to official websites and digital maps further enhances this by providing functional value, enabling tourists to plan their trips efficiently. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the consistency and adaptability of content across various digital platforms. A lack of content diversification could result in missed opportunities to engage different audience segments, especially those seeking interactive or real-time experiences. To maximize impact, Disbudpar must tailor content formats based on platform-specific user behaviors—such as leveraging infographics for Facebook's information-driven audience while utilizing YouTube live streams to foster real-time engagement. By adopting an engaging storytelling approach and ensuring visual appeal, Disbudpar can create a virtual experience that attracts potential tourists and strengthens Kudus' position as a competitive religious tourism destination.

Interaction with Social Media Users

Using social media as an interactive communication tool has transformed how the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar) engages with potential tourists. Unlike traditional promotional methods, social media interaction enables two-way communication, fostering real-time engagement that significantly influences tourist perceptions and decision-making processes. The ability to respond to inquiries, address concerns, and manage feedback enhances the user experience and builds credibility and trust in Kudus as a tourist destination. According to Santoso (2023), interactive communication fosters stronger relationships between service providers and consumers, making social media a critical tool in modern tourism marketing. This is particularly

relevant in an era where digital engagement influences travel behavior, with tourists increasingly relying on direct communication with tourism offices before making travel decisions.

Moreover, the immediacy of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allows Disbudpar to act as a real-time information hub. By promptly addressing common concerns such as operating hours, ticketing details, or accessibility, Disbudpar facilitates more leisurely trip planning for tourists and reinforces its image as a responsive and professional tourism management entity. This aligns with findings from previous studies that emphasize the role of digital interaction in shaping tourist satisfaction and loyalty. However, while the potential benefits are substantial, the effectiveness of social media engagement is contingent upon consistent and timely responses. Delayed replies or ignored inquiries can diminish audience engagement and erode the credibility of the tourism office, ultimately weakening Kudus' competitive edge in religious tourism promotion.

Disbudpar must institutionalize a structured social media management system to mitigate these challenges. Implementing AI-powered chatbots for initial responses, utilizing sentiment analysis tools for feedback evaluation, and assigning dedicated teams to monitor interactions can significantly enhance efficiency. Structured social media management increases tourist trust and higher conversion rates from online engagement to actual visits. Without a well-defined strategy, social media risks becoming a passive promotional tool rather than an active engagement platform. Therefore, the success of Kudus' digital tourism strategy will ultimately depend on how well Disbudpar integrates interactive communication within a broader, technology-driven tourism marketing framework.

International Tourism Exhibition

The Kudus Department of Culture and Tourism (Disbudpar) 's participation in international tourism exhibitions is a strategy to promote the region's beauty and establish a global network to increase the number of international tourists. In destination marketing, presence at large-scale exhibitions allows Kudus to compete with other destinations and identify the trends and preferences of global travelers.

Before participating in an exhibition, Disbudpar Kudus conducts research to ensure that the selected event aligns with their target audience and promotional goals. This step reflects a data-driven approach to tourism marketing, where the effectiveness of promotional strategies depends on a deep understanding of the target market. The visually appealing and informative booth design also demonstrates efforts to optimize marketing appeal. Brochures, posters, and promotional videos serve as communication tools and shape a positive perception of Kudus as a unique destination.

The presence of tourism experts and cultural practitioners at the exhibition further enhances Kudus' appeal. Through direct interaction with visitors, they provide information and build an emotional connection with potential tourists(Sampe & Kristiyani, 2023). This approach aligns with experiential marketing theory, where direct engagement with the audience can increase interest and build destination loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2012). This strategy is reinforced by social media and

digital platforms, enabling Disbudpar Kudus to expand their promotional reach in real-time. Live updates and online interactions create a viral effect that can enhance the destination's attractiveness on a broader scale.

Post-exhibition evaluation is critical in assessing the effectiveness of Kudus' participation in international exhibitions. Collecting contact data and visitor feedback and analyzing tourist interest trends allow Disbudpar Kudus to measure the success of their strategy and develop more targeted follow-up actions. Collaborations with travel agencies, tour operators, and media partners established during the event can open up market expansion opportunities and increase tourist visits to Kudus (Rosalia & Santoso, 2018).

With a systematically designed strategy and careful execution, Kudus' participation in international tourism exhibitions not only introduces the region's charm to the world but also strengthens its positioning in the global tourism market. This approach demonstrates that tourism is not merely about destination promotion but also about how a region can adapt to the dynamics of the global tourism industry to attract tourists sustainably.

CONCLUSION

The communication strategy implemented by the Kudus Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar) in promoting religious tourism to international visitors has had a notable impact on increasing the visibility and appeal of Kudus' religious tourism sector. Through digital media, social media campaigns, official websites, and collaborations with travel agencies, Disbudpar has successfully introduced key religious sites such as the Tomb of Sunan Kudus and the Tomb of Sunan Muria to a global audience.

Additionally, participation in international tourism exhibitions has expanded Kudus' reach and strengthened its presence in the global tourism market. The impact of these strategies is evident in the growing digital engagement from foreign tourists, an increase in international visits, and stronger networks with global tourism stakeholders.

However, some challenges remain, such as inconsistent responsiveness to social media inquiries, insufficient multilingual content, and the limited use of immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), which could enhance the promotional experience. To address these issues, Disbudpar needs to improve its digital media management by ensuring timely interactions with potential tourists and utilizing big data analytics to personalize promotional efforts.

Developing multilingual promotional materials would also allow Kudus to attract a more diverse international audience. Incorporating AR and VR technology to create interactive virtual experiences of Kudus' religious sites would further enhance engagement and interest.

Furthermore, strengthening global partnerships with travel influencers, international media, and religious tourism operators could amplify Kudus' exposure internationally. By continuously refining its communication strategy with innovative approaches, Kudus can establish itself as a

premier religious tourism destination, ensuring long-term growth, competitiveness, and a more immersive experience for foreign visitors.

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