Exploring digital promotion as a tool for community empowerment: A participatory analysis of website utilization in Sumber Urip tourism village

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ABSTRACT

This study explores digital promotion as a tool for community empowerment through the use of the website desasumberurip.com in Sumber Urip Tourism Villages. As digital transformation has become increasingly crucial for rural tourism development, village management has adopted a website to enhance promotion and support local economic activities. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the study involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and content analysis of the website. Participants included key village stakeholders such as management, tourism unit leaders, and digital administrators. The findings reveal that the website serves as an initial step in digitalizing tourism promotion, offering accessible information about tourism attractions, cultural events, and local products. However, its current structure remains static, which limits its interactivity and timely updates. The identified challenges include limited digital literacy among the broader community, inadequate technological infrastructure, and the absence of integrated e-commerce features for local MSMEs. Despite these limitations, the website has begun to engage young community members in content management, indicating emerging opportunities for digital community empowerment. The study concludes that while the website represents significant progress in promoting Sumber Urip Tourism Villages, further development is required. Future efforts should focus on transitioning to a dynamic web platform, enhancing storytelling-based content, and increasing community participation to maximize the impact of digital promotions. Ultimately, optimizing the website holds potential not only for boosting tourism visibility, but also for empowering local communities and strengthening the village's digital identity.

Keywords: digital promotion, community empowerment, tourism village, website utilization, participatory analysis

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital promotion has emerged as a transformative tool for community empowerment in rural tourism contexts, fundamentally altering how local communities engage with tourism development processes and benefit-distribution mechanisms (Gretzel et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020). Unlike traditional top-down approaches to tourism promotion, digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for community participation in destination representation, content creation, and tourism management decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the recognition of digital promotion as a potential pathway for community-driven tourism development that prioritizes local agencies and empowerment (Sigala, 2020). This paradigm shift requires analytical frameworks that examine digital promotion effectiveness through community empowerment lenses, rather than conventional marketing metrics alone.

The participatory potential of digital promotion tools, particularly websites, lies in their capacity to enable community members to actively shape their destinations' online representation and tourism narrative. Research has demonstrated that effective website utilization in tourism contexts extends beyond technical functionality to encompass community involvement in content development, design decisions, and ongoing management processes (Angelina et al., 2022; Sari & Batubara, 2021). When communities meaningfully participate in website development and management, digital promotion becomes a tool for empowerment rather than external control, enabling local residents to determine how their culture, traditions, and tourism assets are presented to potential visitors. This participatory approach to digital promotion aligns with the contemporary understanding of sustainable tourism development, which prioritizes community agency and self-determination.

However, the empowerment potential of website utilization in rural tourism contexts remains underexplored, particularly in Indonesian village tourism settings, where community participation patterns vary significantly across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Current research on digital marketing communication strategies demonstrates the technical effectiveness of websites and social media platforms for tourism promotion (Dwityas et al., 2020; Vila et al., 2021); however, limited attention has been paid to how communities participate in website development processes and whether such participation translates into genuine empowerment outcomes. The gap between technical website functionality and community empowerment represents a critical area for investigation, particularly in contexts in which digital literacy levels and technological access vary within communities.

Sumber Urip Tourism Village, officially designated under Rejang Lebong Regent's Decree No. 180.408.VII of 2019 provides an ideal case study for examining the intersection between website utilization and community empowerment through participatory analysis. Located in Kabupaten Rejang Lebong, Provinsi Bengkulu, this village possesses diverse tourism assets including natural attractions, agricultural experiences, and Rejang cultural traditions that require sensitive and authentic digital representation. The village's recent official designation as a tourism destination coincides with increasing recognition of the importance of digital promotion, creating opportunities to examine how community members participate in website development processes and whether such participation enhances their empowerment in tourism development decisions.

The concept of community empowerment in tourism contexts encompasses multiple dimensions that must be considered when analyzing website utilization effectiveness. Psychological empowerment involves enhanced community confidence and self-efficacy in tourism-related decision making, while organizational empowerment refers to strengthened community institutions and collective capacity for tourism management. Political empowerment encompasses increased community influence over tourism policies and benefit distribution mechanisms (Purnomo et al., 2020; Strydom et al., 2019). Website utilization can potentially contribute to all of these empowerment dimensions, but only when community participation is meaningful and sustained throughout the digital promotion process.

Participatory analysis has emerged as a crucial methodological approach for understanding how website utilization impacts community empowerment, as it prioritizes community perspectives and experiences over external assessments of digital promotion effectiveness. This approach recognizes that empowerment outcomes can only be accurately assessed through community members' evaluations of

their participation levels, decision-making influence, and benefit-sharing experiences. Research on community-based tourism demonstrates that participatory approaches to tourism development analysis produce more accurate and actionable insights than externally imposed evaluation frameworks (Purnomo et al., 2020). In the context of website utilization, participatory analysis examines how community members experience and evaluate their involvement in digital promotion processes rather than focusing solely on technical website performance metrics.

The sustainability of community empowerment through digital promotion critically depends on authentic community participation in website development, content creation, and ongoing management processes. Studies on rural tourism website development reveal that technical success does not automatically translate into community empowerment, particularly when website development is externally driven without meaningful community involvement (Pato & Duque, 2021). The challenge lies in ensuring that website utilization serves community empowerment objectives, rather than merely improving destination marketing efficiency. This requires examining not only what communities do with websites, but also how they participate in website-related decision-making processes and whether such participation enhances their agency in tourism development.

Furthermore, the Indonesian context presents unique considerations for understanding community empowerment through website utilization, as traditional social structures, cultural values, and economic patterns influence how communities engage with digital technology. Research on sustainable tourism management in Indonesian destinations emphasizes the importance of understanding local community dynamics and ensuring that tourism development tools, including digital promotion platforms, serve community interests rather than external commercial objectives (Purnomo et al., 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of website utilization as a community empowerment tool depends on how well digital promotion processes align with the existing community structures and decision-making patterns.

Current trends in website development technology offer increasingly accessible solutions for small-scale tourism destinations, potentially reducing technical barriers to community participation in digital promotions (Sebastian et al., 2023). However, accessibility alone does not guarantee empowerment, as meaningful participation requires not only technical access, but also community capacity, motivation, and institutional support for sustained engagement. The integration of website development with broader community capacity-building initiatives suggests potential pathways for ensuring that digital promotion serves empowerment objectives (Rizaldi et al., 2023). This integration requires a careful analysis of how website utilization intersects existing community development processes and institutions.

The optimization of website visibility and user engagement through technical improvements such as search engine optimization represents an important dimension of effective digital promotion (Setiawan et al., 2020; Zhou & Yu, 2022). However, from a community empowerment perspective, the critical questions are whether communities participate in decisions about website optimization strategies and whether improved website performance translates into enhanced community benefits. Website utilization analysis must, therefore, examine both technical effectiveness and community participation patterns to understand how digital promotion impacts empowerment outcomes.

This study addresses these complexities through participatory analysis of website utilization in Sumber Urip Tourism Village, examining how community members experience and evaluate their involvement in digital promotion processes. This study investigates whether website development and management can serve as tools for community empowerment or merely improve destination marketing efficiency without meaningful community benefits. By prioritizing community perspectives and experiences, this research contributes to the understanding of how digital promotion can be designed and implemented to support genuine community empowerment in rural tourism contexts.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond academic inquiry to inform practical strategies for implementing digital promotion as a community empowerment tool in the Indonesian rural tourism context. While the existing literature demonstrates the technical importance of website functionality for tourism promotion (Vila et al., 2021; Wijaya et al., 2020), limited research has examined how communities actually participate in website utilization processes and whether such participation enhances their empowerment in tourism development. This study fills this gap by integrating participatory

analysis with community empowerment frameworks, providing insights for designing digital promotion initiatives that prioritize community agencies and sustainable development outcomes in rural Indonesian tourism villages.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital Tourism and Community Empowerment

Community empowerment in tourism contexts encompasses the ability of local populations to meaningfully participate in tourism planning, benefit equitably from tourism activities, and maintain agency over their cultural representation (Purnomo et al., 2020). Digital platforms, particularly websites, can either facilitate or hinder empowerment processes depending on their design, management, and community integration approaches. Hu et al. (2022) argue that genuine tourism empowerment requires four dimensions: economic empowerment through equitable benefit distribution, social empowerment via community cohesion and skill development, psychological empowerment through increased confidence and pride, and political empowerment via enhanced decision-making capacity. Digital promotional tools can contribute to these dimensions when developed and managed through participatory approaches that prioritize community needs and perspectives. However, digital tourism development often reproduces existing power structures, with educated elites monopolizing digital opportunities while marginalized community members remain excluded (Buhalis, 2020). This digital stratification can exacerbate inequalities rather than promote inclusive development, highlighting the need for intentional empowerment-oriented digital strategies.

2.2. Participatory Communication in Digital Tourism

Participatory communication theory emphasizes community agency in communication processes, advocating bottom-up approaches that prioritize local voices and needs (Freire, 2018; Sulaiman et al., 2024). In digital tourism contexts, this translates to involving communities in website design, content creation, and management decisions, rather than imposing external digital solutions. Effective participatory digital communication requires addressing structural barriers, including digital literacy, technological access, and the cultural appropriateness of digital platforms (Turmudi, 2019). Communities must possess both technical skills and critical awareness to navigate digital spaces, while maintaining cultural integrity and achieving development objectives. Research has demonstrated that participatory digital approaches yield more sustainable outcomes, higher community satisfaction, and authentic cultural representation than top-down digital interventions (Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). However, implementing participatory digital communication requires significant time investment, capacity building, and support systems.

2.3. Cultural Capital and Digital Representation

Zhao and Li's (2024) concept of cultural capital is particularly relevant in digital tourism contexts, where communities' cultural assets are transformed into digital commodities for tourism consumption. This transformation process raises questions about ownership, authenticity, and community agency in shaping digital representation. Digital platforms can either preserve and revitalize cultural practices by providing documentation and transmission mechanisms or contribute to cultural commodification by reducing complex traditions to simplified tourist-friendly presentations (Gutierriz et al., 2025). The balance between accessibility and authenticity requires careful navigation, with meaningful community participation in digital content decisions and new combinations in tourism development. Moreover, digital cultural representation often reflects existing power dynamics, with certain community members' perspectives being privileged over others. Ensuring diverse voices and authentic representation requires intentional inclusion strategies and ongoing community dialogue regarding digital identity construction.

2.4. Digital Divide and Rural Tourism Development

The digital divide encompasses disparities in technological access, digital skills, and meaningful Internet usage across different population groups, which is particularly evident in the context of sustainable rural tourism development (Geng et al., 2025). In rural tourism contexts, this divide manifests through limited Internet infrastructure, insufficient digital literacy programs, and generational gaps in technology adoption. Digital exclusion can perpetuate tourism development inequalities, with digitally connected community members capturing disproportionate benefits, while others remain marginalized (Reindrawati, 2023). Addressing the digital divide in tourism requires comprehensive approaches, including infrastructure development, skills training, and culturally appropriate technology integration, to ensure equitable participation in digital tourism ecosystems. Furthermore, tourist-side digital divides affect destination accessibility, with certain demographic groups being unable to access or effectively use digital tourism information. This creates selective tourism development that may not align with community preferences or principles of sustainable tourism.

2.5. Community-Based Tourism Development Frameworks

Community-based tourism (CBT) emphasizes local ownership, control, and benefit distribution in tourism development (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Digital promotional tools should align with CBT principles by facilitating rather than undermining community control over the tourism development processes. Successful CBT requires strong social capital, effective governance structures, and equitable participation mechanisms (Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023). Digital platforms can strengthen these elements by facilitating communication, knowledge sharing, and collective decision-making processes, when designed with community needs in mind. However, digital CBT implementation faces challenges including technical complexity, ongoing maintenance requirements, and potential conflicts between traditional governance structures and digital platform management demands.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using participatory action research (PAR) methods that recognize community members as co-researchers in examining website utilization through a community empowerment lens (Kindon et al., 2007). This approach adopts a transformative paradigm that acknowledges power relationships and seeks to generate knowledge-supporting community empowerment objectives (Freire, 2018). This methodological framework prioritizes community voices and participatory communication through digital platforms, as emphasized by Turmudi (2019), in which community participation becomes key in developing effective digital communication. The research was conducted in the Sumber Urip Tourism Village, Rejang Lebong Regency, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia, selected for its official tourism village designation and active website presence. Participants included key stakeholders: Sri Wahyudi (Village Head), Yadi Susanto (Village Enterprise Advisor), Sigit Widianto (Village Enterprise Chairman), Yulian Adi Pratama (Tourism Unit Head), Setio Hani (Tourism Unit Treasurer), and Fajar Ahmadi and Adi Darmasyah (promotion administrators). The involvement of various stakeholder levels reflects a holistic approach to understanding community-based tourism management dynamics (Geng et al., 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2024).

Five integrated methods were used for data collection. First, the website content analysis of desasumberurip.com examined technical functionality, cultural representation, and community participation following the frameworks of Vila et al. (2021) and Sari and Batubara (2021). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore community experiences with digital tourism promotion, digital literacy, and cultural representation, consistent with Reindrawati's (2023) approach. Third, focus group discussions addressed collective perspectives on digital tourism development by adopting Community-Based Tourism principles (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019). Fourth,

participant observations documented daily community interactions with digital technologies, as applied by Purnomo et al. (2020). Fifth, documentation and archival analysis collected documents related to website development and digital promotion, following Angelina et al. 's(2022) approach.

Data were analyzed using an integrated inductive thematic approach, including data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and final interpretation (Strydom et al., 2019). Website content analysis was integrated based on empowerment dimensions: economic (benefit distribution, local business promotion), social (community representation, skill development), cultural (authentic representation, cultural preservation), and political (participation in digital decisions, governance integration), referring to the indicators by Krittayaruangroj et al. (2023). Participatory validation was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to community participants to ensure the analytical accuracy and community ownership of research outcomes. Validity was strengthened through the triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, and ongoing reflexivity. Limitations include restricted generalization from a single case study design, language barriers, and seasonal variations not fully captured; however, the qualitative approach enables a deep understanding of specific contexts and participants' subjective experiences aligned with community empowerment objectives and sustainable tourism research trends (Buhalis, 2020; Gutierriz et al., 2025; Sigala, 2020).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Website Utilization as Digital Promotion Media

The emergence of desasumberurip.com represents a strategic initiative by the management of Sumber Urip Tourism Village to leverage digital technology for enhancing destination competitiveness. The decision to shift toward digital media is inseparable from global trends in the tourism sector, where tourist behavior patterns increasingly depend on online information sources before making travel decisions (Buhalis, 2020; Gretzel et al., 2021). Websites serve as bidirectional communication channels that potentially strengthen emotional connections between destinations and tourists (Zhou & Yu, 2022). However, the findings of this study indicate that website utilization in Sumber Urip still focuses on basic information functions such as presenting tourism destination data, cultural activities, and promoting MSME products. The website has not yet been fully utilized as an intensive interaction tool, for instance, by leveraging user-generated content (UGC) technology or comment features that enable tourists to share experiences directly on the village platform. This constitutes one of the key elements of successful e-tourism, as highlighted by Dwityas et al. (2020), who emphasized that user-generated content (UGC) has a strong influence on creating tourist trust and decision-making.

Furthermore, the dominance of static content renders the website less capable of responding quickly to changing conditions such as ticket price changes, cultural activity schedules, or tourism package promotions. This condition distinguishes Sumber Urip from best practices elsewhere, such as those implemented in Donowati Tourism Village, where the use of dynamic CMS-based websites has been proven to increase tourist interaction and content update frequency (Angelina et al., 2022). Information freshness is particularly crucial in the tourism sector, as tourists now prioritize current updates before traveling (Sigala, 2020). The study also found that a website's potential as a branding tool has not been fully explored. For instance, the Sumber Urip website has not extensively utilized storytelling to strengthen destination images. As emphasized by Wijaya et al. (2020), digital storytelling is an important element capable of presenting destination uniqueness emotionally and personally. Stories about the Sedekah Bumi tradition, tales of MSME craftspeople, and tourist testimonials can serve as highly engaging interactive content.

4.2. Digital Identity and Website Management

The decision to choose desasumberurip.com reflects awareness of the importance of digital identity consistency. A domain name that corresponds to the village name facilitates online search

processes while enhancing destination credibility (Sari & Batubara, 2021). This is particularly important considering that, in the digital era, online identity often becomes the first impression tourists receive (Buhalis, 2020; Gretzel et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this study found that merely having a relevant domain was insufficient. Digital identity requires strong and consistent content that reflects local values, culture, and village characteristics. The content of the Sumber Urip website remains predominantly informational without a deeper exploration of local narratives. Research by Gutierriz et al. (2025) emphasizes that tourism digitalization is not merely about technology, but also about how destinations present their "soul" or local character that differentiates them from other destinations. The case of domain non-renewal resulting in website downtime serves as a valuable lesson for managers. This demonstrates that website management requires sound technical understanding and management. Rizaldi et al. (2023) identified similar problems in many tourism villages, namely weak commitment and oversight of website technical aspects. Managers in Sumber Urip have begun to anticipate this with the latest content update in November 2023; however, future strategies require more structured approaches, such as using automatic domain renewal reminders or involving local digital experts more intensively.

Beyond the domain issues, the static nature of the Sumber Urip website presents challenges. While static websites are cost-effective and easier to manage with limited personnel (Sebastian et al., 2023), they limit a website's ability to present dynamic information. In tourism destination contexts, information changes occur frequently, from price promotions and new attraction additions to cultural activity announcements. Dynamic CMS-based websites such as those implemented in Baluwarti Surakarta (Wijaya et al., 2020) enable administrators with limited technical capabilities to perform rapid content updates. This finding strongly supports tourism destinations in highly competitive markets.

4.3. Content Quality and Interactive Features

The Sumber Urip website already possesses a reasonably good menu structure, displaying information on village history, natural tourism potential, culture, agro-tourism, MSMEs, and management contacts. However, an in-depth analysis reveals that content quality remains relatively shallow, particularly regarding MSME aspects that lack stories behind products, pricing, or ordering procedures. Storytelling serves as a crucial element in digital tourism destination marketing, as emphasized by Wijaya et al. (2020) and Angelina et al. (2022). Human stories behind products, production processes, and the unique cultural contexts surrounding local products often become emotional factors capable of attracting tourist interest and building destination loyalty (Zhou & Yu, 2022). The website navigation features are simple and accessible. However, much destination information remains incomplete, such as recent photos, detailed addresses, and supporting facilities. This aligns with the findings of Pato and Duque (2021), who emphasized the importance of information completeness, including visual elements, for building emotional connections between visitors and destinations. This deficiency also corresponds to the findings of Setiawan et al. (2020), who confirmed that incomplete information on destination websites can reduce visitor trust and potentially make them hesitant to visit.

The Quick Search feature does not function optimally. When tested with keywords such as tourism package prices or event schedules, the search results were irrelevant or failed to appear. Vila et al. (2021) noted that effective search features constitute one of the quality indicators for tourism websites, as they affect the overall user experience. This search feature weakness requires immediate attention so that the Sumber Urip website can provide professional digital experiences and facilitate prospective tourists' access to the needed information. One positive aspect is the integration of Google Map-based site maps, which helps prospective tourists recognize village area layouts, important facility locations, and access routes to tourism destinations. This aligns with the findings of Pato and Duque (2021), who demonstrated that interactive maps significantly assist in visit planning. However, more advanced innovations, such as virtual tours or augmented reality (AR), have not been implemented, even though such technologies are capable of increasing tourist engagement (Buhalis, 2020). The presence of such interactive features enhances tourists' digital experience value while differentiating Sumber Urip Village from other destinations.

4.4. Community Empowerment and Digitalization Challenges

Desasumberurip.com serves as not only a promotional tool but also a community empowerment instrument. This is evident from the involvement of several village youths as website administrators and digital promotion teams. This phenomenon aligns with the community empowerment concepts promoted by Freire (2018) and Kindon et al. (2007), who emphasized the importance of communities becoming development subjects rather than mere objects. Digitalization has become a means for channeling knowledge and skills and opening new economic opportunities for village communities. However, this study demonstrates that community participation in digital management remains focused on small groups with better digital literacy. Most community members, particularly older individuals, still feel unfamiliar with digital technologies. This condition reflects challenges identical to the findings of Reindrawati (2023), namely, participation gaps due to knowledge and technology access disparities in tourism villages. Another challenge is the weak Internet connectivity in several villages. Turmudi (2019) noted that digital infrastructure barriers constitute one of the most significant factors limiting the implementation of equitable digitalization in Indonesian rural areas.

In the context of economic empowerment, the website has begun opening pathways for MSME products to gain wider recognition. Several MSME actors acknowledge that website presence increases their pride because their products can now be accessed beyond their local areas. However, direct economic effects, such as online ordering features or interactive product catalogs, remain insignificant because of the absence of integrated marketing systems. This differs from the situation in Donowati, where websites serve not only as product showcases, but also facilitate transactions (Angelina et al., 2022). This indicates that the digital economic potential in Sumber Urip remains substantial, but requires feature development and further assistance. Furthermore, websites as social empowerment instruments require courage to present community voices in their digital narratives. The Sumber Urip website still appears to be managed top-down, with content primarily originating from administrators rather than the broader community. Research by Hu et al. (2022) and Sulaiman et al. (2024) demonstrates that participatory communication in digital platforms increases community ownership, solidarity, and trust in village development programs. Therefore, future efforts require broader involvement, such as opening spaces for village residents to submit content, photos, stories, and tourism reviews directly to the website. In sustainability contexts, Geng et al. (2025) emphasized that digitalization must be understood not merely as technology adoption but as a more inclusive and sustainable social transformation process. This presents challenges and significant opportunities for Sumber Urip Village. Their website already serves as a solid foundation, but still requires feature innovation, human resource capacity building, and integration of more comprehensive digital strategies in promotional, social interaction, and economic empowerment aspects.

5. CONCLUSION

The website desasumberurip.com has become an important initial step in the digital promotion of Sumber Urip Tourism Village, and has begun to open opportunities for community empowerment, particularly involving young people as content managers. However, its current use remains limited to informative functions with static content and minimal interactivity; thus, it does not fully support dynamic and participatory digital promotion. Key challenges include limited digital literacy in the broader community, technological infrastructure constraints, and the absence of integrated online transaction features for local MSME products. Website development should focus on enhancing storytelling-based content, migrating to a dynamic system for easier content updates, and encouraging broader community participation. With these strategic efforts, the website has the potential to become a digital transformation tool that not only promotes tourism, but also strengthens the village's identity and community-based economic empowerment.

Ethical approval

Not Applicable.

Informed consent statement

Not Applicable.

Authors' contributions

R.M.I. conceptualized and drafted the manuscript, particularly focusing on the writing and methodology. E.S. contributed to the refinement of the theoretical perspectives and reviewed and edited the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript and were jointly accountable for its content.

Statement of Disclosure

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Elyusra is a lecturer at Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu in the Indonesian Language and Literature Education Study Program. Her research focuses on literary studies and learning. Her literary analysis concentrates on the prose fiction genre using an interdisciplinary approach. Her literature learning research focuses on the research and development of learning models. The aspects of literature learning that became the focus of her research were learning outcomes, learning models, teaching materials, and assessments. The literature learning models that she developed were oriented toward neuroscience, brain-based, and multimodal literature learning. Her scholarly publications have appeared in national journals and international conferences.

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