

Evaluating Digital Public Relations Strategies Of The Surakarta City Tourism Office In Promoting Sustainable Tourism

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ABSTRACT

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This study evaluates the digital public relations (PR) strategy of the Surakarta City Tourism Office in enhancing sustainable tourism communication through social media and digital promotional content. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, and Product) evaluation model to assess the effectiveness, implementation, and impact of the city's digital communication practices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving tourism officials, creative community members, and online audiences. The findings reveal that Surakarta has made significant progress in adopting digital communication to strengthen its city branding as a cultural and creative destination. However, the integration of sustainability messages—such as environmental awareness, cultural preservation, and community empowerment—remains limited. From the input perspective, human and technological resources are available but require capacity development and consistent strategic alignment. In terms of process, the digital PR activities focus mainly on event promotion and aesthetic storytelling, while participatory and educational content is less emphasized. At the product level, digital engagement has improved visibility and audience interaction but has not yet resulted in long-term sustainability awareness. The study concludes that Surakarta's digital PR strategy is effective in enhancing destination image but less effective in embedding sustainability communication. Strengthening sustainability-driven storytelling, participatory collaboration, and digital capacity building is recommended to achieve more inclusive and responsible tourism communication. Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding the use of the CIPP evaluation model in the study of digital communication governance and sustainable destination management.



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Introduction

Tourism is a strategic sector that plays a vital role in driving economic growth, fostering cultural preservation, and strengthening the creative economy. As one of Indonesia's leading cultural cities, Surakarta (Solo) possesses rich cultural heritage, traditional arts, culinary diversity, and living traditions that contribute to its identity as a cultural tourism destination. Tourism in Surakarta not only supports local economic growth but also stimulates the creative industry through the involvement of micro, small, and

medium enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in crafts, culinary arts, and performance activities (BPS Surakarta, 2024). In the era of digital transformation, the paradigm of tourism communication has shifted significantly. Public Relations (PR) has evolved beyond traditional media into digital public relations, where social media, digital storytelling, and interactive platforms serve as the main communication channels between tourism institutions and the public (Breakenridge, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2017). Digital media not only act as promotional tools but also as spaces for co-creation and participatory dialogue. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (2023), more than 70% of Indonesian travelers search for destination references through social media before making travel decisions. This change underscores how social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become key instruments in shaping destination images and influencing tourist behavior (Dwivedi et al., 2022; H. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). The Surakarta City Tourism Office has implemented various initiatives to promote cultural tourism through digital platforms. Campaigns such as Visit Solo 2023 and Solo City of Heritage utilize visual narratives, short videos, and influencer collaborations to showcase local culture, culinary diversity, and creative industries.

These digital strategies successfully increased public engagement and improved the visibility of Solo's tourism brand. However, despite these achievements, the integration of sustainability messages—such as cultural preservation, environmental awareness, and community empowerment—remains limited. This finding aligns with UNWTO's (UNWTO, 2022) observation that many digital tourism campaigns in developing countries tend to emphasize aesthetic appeal rather than sustainable education or participatory governance. From an academic standpoint, previous research highlights the transformative role of digital communication in the tourism sector. Gretzel et al. (Gretzel et al., 2020) emphasize that effective digital tourism communication relies not only on visual appeal but also on authentic storytelling that evokes emotional connection and enhances tourists' sense of belonging. Similarly, Inversini and Rega (Inversini & Rega, 2020a) found that local community participation in digital communication fosters inclusivity and strengthens destination identity. Meanwhile, Kim et al. (S. Kim et al., 2022a) demonstrate that digital storytelling can be an effective tool for promoting sustainable tourism behavior when narratives reflect local culture and responsible travel values.

In the context of Surakarta, such integration between digital communication and sustainability remains a challenge. While digital PR activities successfully increase visibility and audience engagement, they have yet to effectively promote the principles of sustainable tourism. Current campaigns remain largely visual and event-driven, lacking narratives that educate audiences about cultural continuity, waste reduction, or the empowerment of local communities. As Sayer et al. (Sayer et al., 2015) and Pike (Pike, 2016) assert, sustainability in tourism communication requires a balanced focus on environmental, cultural, and economic dimensions. Based on these considerations, this study aims to evaluate the digital public relations strategy of the Surakarta City Tourism Office in enhancing sustainable tourism through social media and promotional video content. The research employs the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation model within a qualitative framework to assess communication effectiveness, audience response, and the contribution of digital strategies to the creative economy and sustainable development. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically: enriching the discourse on digital tourism communication, and providing policy recommendations for regional governments to develop innovative, inclusive, and sustainability-oriented communication strategies.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using the CIPP evaluation model (Context, Input, Process, and Product) developed by Stufflebeam (Stufflebeam, 2003). The model was selected because it allows for a holistic examination of how the Surakarta City Tourism Office implements and evaluates its digital public relations strategies within the framework of sustainable tourism development. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach supported by literature synthesis following Snyder (Snyder, 2019), ensuring methodological rigor in interpreting prior studies. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand social phenomena through participants' perspectives, natural settings, and contextual interpretations (Creswell, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 2022). In this study, qualitative design was chosen to explore how communication practitioners within the Tourism Office conceptualize, execute, and evaluate their digital strategies, as well as how these are perceived by creative community members and audiences.

Setting and Context

The research was conducted in Surakarta City (Solo), Central Java, Indonesia, a region known for its strong cultural identity and active creative economy. The Surakarta City Tourism Office serves as the primary agency responsible for tourism management, marketing, and destination promotion. The study was carried out between March and August 2025, a period during which several flagship cultural events—such as *Solo Batik Carnival*, *Solo Menari*, and *Festival Kuliner Solo*—were actively promoted through digital channels. These events provided relevant empirical contexts to observe how digital PR was used to enhance visibility and participation. This setting is particularly relevant because Surakarta's tourism policy is part of a broader initiative under the "Smart City–Smart Tourism" program, which emphasizes digitalization and sustainability integration in local governance. According to Dinas Pariwisata Kota Surakarta (Dinas Pariwisata Kota Surakarta, 2023), this program seeks to strengthen tourism competitiveness while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on three stakeholder groups directly involved in or affected by digital tourism communication:

1. Government officials — communication and promotion staff of the Surakarta City Tourism Office.
2. Creative community members and local entrepreneurs — including those involved in visual production, cultural events, and tourism content creation.
3. Tourists and social media audiences — who interact with or consume the city's digital promotional content.

The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least six months of involvement in tourism-related digital activities. This participant diversity aimed to ensure data triangulation, capturing perspectives from both message producers and receivers (Patton, 2022).

Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary techniques:

1. In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore strategies, challenges, and perceived outcomes of digital PR campaigns.
2. Observation: The researcher observed the Tourism Office's official social media channels—*Instagram (@pariwisatasolo)*, *YouTube (Explore Solo)*, and the website *solocity.travel*—to analyze content types, engagement patterns, and messaging strategies.
3. Documentation: Secondary data such as annual tourism reports, press releases, and digital analytics were reviewed to provide supporting evidence.

Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from different sources to enhance validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 2022). All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which involves six iterative steps:

1. Familiarization: Immersion in the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes.
2. Coding: Identifying meaningful segments related to the four CIPP components.
3. Theme generation: Grouping codes into overarching themes that reflect communication patterns and evaluation indicators.
4. Theme review: Refining and validating emerging themes against the dataset.
5. Defining and naming themes: Conceptualizing themes in alignment with research objectives.
6. Reporting: Presenting findings through interpretative narrative integrated with theoretical perspectives.

The CIPP model guided the overall interpretation process, enabling a comprehensive understanding of (1) contextual relevance, (2) strategic resources, (3) implementation processes, and (4) outcomes of the digital PR strategy. This analytical integration ensures that findings are both descriptive

and evaluative, addressing not only *what* is happening but also *how* and *why* it occurs (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Zhang et al., 2011).

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and rigor, this research employed several validation strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 2022):

- Triangulation: Combining interviews, observation, and documentation.
- Member checking: Confirming key interpretations with selected participants.
- Audit trail: Maintaining a transparent record of data collection and analysis procedures.

Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through consistent coding and peer review within the research team. Transferability was achieved by providing thick description of the research context, enabling other researchers to apply findings to similar tourism settings.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on the digital public relations (PR) strategy of the Surakarta City Tourism Office, analyzed using the CIPP evaluation model. The discussion integrates empirical results with theoretical perspectives on digital communication, creative economy, and sustainable tourism.

1. Context: Strategic Position of Digital Communication in Surakarta's Tourism Development

The City of Surakarta has positioned tourism as one of its strategic development priorities. As stated in the *Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPARDA) 2023–2028*, the local government envisions Surakarta as a “Cultural City with Global Competitiveness.” To achieve this, the Surakarta City Tourism Office (Dinas Pariwisata Kota Surakarta, 2023) has adopted a communication strategy emphasizing digital transformation and creative participation. Hapsari (Hapsari, 2022) also highlights that Indonesian cultural destinations face similar challenges in adopting smart tourism practices effectively. Field observations reveal that the Tourism Office manages multiple digital channels — such as Instagram (@pariwisatasolo), YouTube (Explore Solo), and the official website solocity.travel — serving as the main platforms for destination promotion. These media feature cultural events, culinary highlights, and traditional art performances, showcasing Surakarta's identity as a creative cultural hub.

However, the contextual analysis highlights a significant challenge: most digital promotional activities still focus on visual appeal and cultural celebration, with limited integration of sustainability messages. For instance, few posts discuss environmental awareness, local community empowerment, or cultural preservation efforts. Garcia and Pritchard (Garcia & Pritchard, 2023) argue that sustainability communication in tourism must employ creative storytelling to foster empathy and responsibility among travelers. This finding resonates with UNWTO's observation that many local tourism campaigns in developing countries prioritize exposure and entertainment rather than sustainable education. From a communication standpoint, this suggests that Surakarta's digital tourism strategy remains in a transitional phase — shifting from traditional promotion toward interactive engagement, yet still lacking a sustainability narrative. As Pike (Pike, 2016) emphasizes, destination marketing should not only attract visitors but also promote responsible behavior and long-term cultural resilience.

2. Input: Human Resources, Policies, and Technological Support

The input evaluation focuses on resources and policies that support the implementation of digital PR strategies. The findings show that the Surakarta City Tourism Office has established a small but dedicated digital team consisting of five communication staff members responsible for content creation, media relations, and visual production. The team collaborates with local creative groups such as *Solo Creative Forum* and *Kampoeng Batik Laweyan Community* to produce storytelling-based digital content. Institutionally, the Tourism Office operates under the Smart City–Smart Tourism Program, which aims to integrate technology into governance, tourism promotion, and public service. This aligns with Buhalis and Amaranggana's (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015) notion of *smart tourism ecosystems*, where data-driven strategies, collaboration, and innovation are key to destination competitiveness. As emphasized by Xiang et al. (Xiang et al., 2021), smart destination management requires integrating data analytics and interconnectivity within local tourism governance. Nevertheless, budget allocation remains a limitation.

Approximately 70% of the annual tourism promotion budget is still directed toward offline activities such as festivals, exhibitions, and printed materials. The limited funding for digital campaigns restricts the frequency and quality of online content. According to Macnamara (Macnamara, 2018), such imbalance often occurs in public sector communication where digital strategies are treated as supplementary rather than integral components of organizational planning. To strengthen digital PR performance, investment in human capital and digital infrastructure is crucial. Training staff in data analytics, content strategy, and social media management would enhance professionalism and ensure that sustainability values are consistently embedded in every communication initiative.

3. Process: Implementation of Digital Public Relations Strategy

The process evaluation examines how digital PR strategies are executed through daily communication activities. The study identifies three main strategic approaches used by the Tourism Office:

1. Informational strategy – disseminating event information, tourism news, and updates through social media posts and digital press releases.
2. Persuasive strategy – using storytelling, visual design, and cultural narratives to attract public interest.
3. Participatory strategy – involving communities through contests, *user-generated content (UGC)*, and collaborations with local influencers. Similar to Buhalis and Sinarta Click or tap here to enter text., co-creation in digital tourism communication enables the sense of ‘nowness’ and real-time collaboration between institutions and audiences.

A content analysis of 120 Instagram posts (January–July 2025) shows that 64% focus on event promotion, 25% highlight cultural and culinary themes, and only 11% emphasize sustainability or community empowerment. Despite this imbalance, the average engagement rate (4.2%) demonstrates significant public interest, especially in posts featuring traditional arts and culinary culture. This finding aligns with Sigala (Sigala, 2020), who notes that digital engagement in tourism increasingly depends on interactive media experiences that blur the line between producers and consumers.

However, the dominance of promotional content suggests a limited participatory dialogue with audiences. As Kim et al. (S. Kim et al., 2022b) argue, digital storytelling can foster deeper emotional connections and sustainable behavior when it portrays local people, traditions, and values, rather than only showcasing destinations. Similarly, Inversini and Rega (Inversini & Rega, 2020b) highlight that communication in tourism should evolve from information delivery to collaborative co-creation between institutions and communities. The Surakarta Tourism Office’s digital activities have laid a strong foundation for engagement, but to reach higher levels of interaction, the process must involve local voices more actively — through community-driven campaigns, virtual workshops, and sustainable tourism narratives.

4. Product: Outcomes and Impacts of the Digital PR Strategy

The product evaluation measures the outcomes of the implemented digital PR strategy. Based on internal analytics, the Tourism Office’s Instagram followers increased by 37% within one year, while overall interaction rates grew by 25% compared to 2024. These metrics indicate that the digital PR strategy effectively enhances visibility and strengthens the destination image of Surakarta as a vibrant cultural city. Nevertheless, the long-term sustainability outcomes remain modest. Interviews with creative entrepreneurs and community representatives reveal that digital collaborations mostly occur around short-term events and have not yet evolved into continuous partnerships. Community members expressed the need for greater inclusion in planning and storytelling processes, especially to ensure that tourism promotion reflects local perspectives and sustainability goals. This finding aligns with the observation of Richards and Raymond (Richards & Raymond, 2000) that *creative tourism* should emphasize interaction, authenticity, and shared experience rather than mere consumption. Likewise, Kotler et al. (Kotler et al., 2021) advocate for *human-centered marketing*, which prioritizes empathy, inclusion, and cultural values in communication.

The impact assessment thus reveals two layers of success:

- At the promotional level, digital PR has increased reach, visibility, and engagement.
- At the sustainability level, the strategy remains underdeveloped in embedding environmental and cultural education.

For Surakarta to advance as a sustainable tourism destination, its digital PR strategy must evolve toward value-based communication, focusing on local empowerment, participatory storytelling, and long-term cultural continuity.

5. Discussion: Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings demonstrate that digital transformation has reshaped how public institutions manage tourism communication. The case of Surakarta confirms that digital PR can effectively strengthen destination branding and audience engagement, but its sustainability impact depends on strategic integration and participatory governance. From a theoretical standpoint, this research reinforces Macnamara's (Macnamara, 2018) proposition that effective public communication should be multidimensional—evaluating not only message dissemination but also relationship quality and societal outcomes. It also validates the applicability of the CIPP model in tourism communication research, proving useful for assessing how contextual, operational, and outcome factors interact dynamically (Patton, 2022; Zhang et al., 2011).

Practically, this study suggests that local tourism offices must adopt a more systemic and collaborative digital PR approach, emphasizing:

1. Sustainability-driven storytelling, integrating cultural preservation and responsible tourism messages.
2. Digital capacity building for communication officers and creative collaborators.
3. Cross-sectoral partnerships involving local communities, private sectors, and academia to co-create authentic narratives. This corresponds with Rogerson and Baum (Rogerson & Baum, 2020), who emphasize that post-pandemic tourism communication must adapt through innovation and creative economy collaboration.

Through these measures, Surakarta could serve as a model for other cultural cities seeking to implement smart, creative, and sustainable tourism communication in Indonesia and beyond.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the digital public relations strategy of the Surakarta City Tourism Office has been effective in strengthening destination branding and enhancing online engagement. However, the integration of sustainability communication remains limited and predominantly promotional in orientation.

Implication: Practically, the findings suggest that local tourism institutions need to incorporate sustainability-driven storytelling into digital campaigns. Emphasizing cultural preservation, environmental responsibility, and community empowerment can enhance not only destination image but also long-term social value. Theoretically, this research confirms the applicability of the CIPP evaluation model in assessing digital communication governance in tourism contexts.

Limitation: This research is limited to qualitative analysis within a single municipal tourism office and relies primarily on interview data and social media observation. Quantitative measurement of audience perception and behavioral change was not conducted.

Recommendation for Future Research: Future studies are encouraged to apply mixed-method approaches incorporating survey-based audience analysis, digital analytics modeling, and comparative studies across multiple cultural cities to obtain broader generalization and deeper evaluation of sustainability impact.

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