Original Research Article

The Role of Content Creators in the Promotion of Marine Tourism in Indonesia: A Case Study on Wakatobi Destinations

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ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** This study aims to examine the role of content creators in promoting marine tourism destinations in Indonesia, focusing on Wakatobi as the case study.  **Study Design:** This research employed a descriptive qualitative study with a case study approach, focusing on the role of content creators in promoting marine tourism in Wakatobi.  **Place and Duration of Study:** Conducted in Wakatobi Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, as a National Tourism Strategic Area, over the period of 2024–2025.  **Methodology:** A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method was used. Data were collected through non-participatory observation, analysis of national journal literature, and several virtual interviews with local residents and stakeholders. The study analyzed the characteristics of content creators, the types of content produced, and the strategies implemented for digital promotion of marine tourism.  **Results:** The findings reveal that content creators act as effective promotional agents in building destination image through engaging visual content, including cinematic videos, narrative reviews, and personal travel documentation. The greatest impact was observed among millennial and Gen Z audiences, who consume tourism information digitally and respond to authentic narratives. Successful strategies included visual storytelling, use of hashtags and geotags, collaboration with local businesses, interactive engagement with audiences, and the incorporation of local cultural values and conservation messages. These strategies not only increased awareness and visitor intention but also encouraged responsible tourism behavior and strengthened the digital presence of Wakatobi.  **Conclusion:** Content creators have become strategic partners in tourism promotion, bridging the gap between local stakeholders and global audiences. Their role enhances destination visibility, fosters marine conservation awareness, and supports sustainable tourism development. Collaboration among content creators, communities, and tourism authorities is essential to create adaptive, impactful, and long-term promotional strategies for Indonesia’s marine tourism destinations. |

*Keywords: Content Creators; Marine Tourism; Digital Promotion; Wakatobi; Milennial Tourists*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia as an archipelagic country has great potential in the development of marine tourism. With more than 17,000 islands and 95,000 km of coastline, Indonesia holds underwater wealth that attracts domestic and foreign tourists. One of the leading destinations that stands out in this sector is Wakatobi, which is known as the world's coral triangle and is included in the 10 priority National Tourism Strategic Areas (KSPN). However, this huge potential still faces challenges in terms of effective and sustainable promotion. Along with the development of digital technology and the increasing use of social media, a new phenomenon has emerged in the tourism industry, namely the involvement of content creators *as* important actors in shaping tourist perception and interest. Content creators are able to present compelling visual narratives through videos, photos, and personal experience reviews, which are then disseminated to a global audience through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. This makes them part of a digital tourism marketing strategy that has a direct impact on increasing the visibility and attractiveness of destinations. Wakatobi, located in Southeast Sulawesi Province, is one of the leading marine tourism destinations that has world-recognized marine biodiversity. This area is included in the world's coral triangle and is a major magnet for domestic and foreign tourists (Putra & Maulana, 2020). However, this great potential has not been fully accompanied by a promotional strategy that is adaptive to the times. In the current digital era, tourism information consumption patterns have shifted from conventional media to digital media, especially social media platforms. In the midst of the flow of digitalization, content creators in the form of travel bloggers, vloggers, and influencers are emerging as new actors who are influential in disseminating information, shaping public perception, and directing tourist decisions (Rachman & Nuraini, 2021). They not only present a visualization of the destination, but also build an experiential narrative that is able to create emotional and authentic appeal for potential travelers.

Social media has changed people learn about and decide to visit places. Empirical studies show that user-generated posts, travel vlogs, and creator videos frequently shape destination image and early travel intentions because they create vivid, relatable impressions that official brochures rarely produce. For example, large-scale analyses of YouTube and other social platforms find a positive association between creators’ video views and subsequent tourist flows, and experimental and survey studies show that vivid user content improves mental images of a place, which in turn raises interest to visit (Hussain et al., 2024; Nguyen & Tong, 2023). In the Indonesian context, research on Instagram and e-WOM confirms that information usefulness and perceived credibility of posts strongly predict adoption of travel information and visit intention—this is especially true when posts provide practical planning details or honest evaluations from fellow travellers (Silaban et al., 2023).

Younger travellers are central to this pattern. Studies of Generation Z and younger millennials show they rely heavily on short, visual formats and peer content during the inspiration and planning stages; they value authenticity, clear logistics (how to get there, price cues), and cues about sustainability when deciding where to go (Băltescu & Untaru, 2025; MDPI review on Gen Z travel motivations, 2024). That tendency helps explain why content creators can act as informal ambassadors for remote marine sites: creators reduce information asymmetry, provide real-time practical guidance, and supply the kind of social proof younger audiences look for. At the same time, the literature cautions that influence varies by creator credibility and content quality: when posts are shallow, over-curated, or misleading, they may generate interest that does not translate to satisfied or sustainable visitation (Hussain et al., 2024; Wijaya et al., 2024).

In recent years, Wakatobi has been elevated from a regional spectacle to one of Indonesia’s top-tier tourism priorities. In May 2025, the Deputy Minister of Tourism confirmed that Wakatobi officially entered Indonesia’s list of ten priority tourist destinations. The government’s continued push to develop these areas underscores that Wakatobi is not just another scenic site, but a destination anchored in national tourism strategy. This spotlight recognizes the island’s exceptional marine biodiversity and its promise to become a model of sustainable tourism in developing global markets.

Research by Novanda et al (2022) shows that digital-based promotion through social media has a significant influence on tourists' decision to visit, especially the younger generation who are very responsive to visual content and personal experience testimonials. In the context of Wakatobi, digital promotion has not been consistently maximized by the local government, so the existence of independent content creators is a potential gap that can be used to expand the reach of tourism promotion. However, the role of content creators in the promotion of marine tourism in Wakatobi has not received much attention in academic research. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of content creators in supporting the promotion of Wakatobi destinations, focusing on the type of content used, narrative delivery strategies, and its impact on tourist perceptions. With a qualitative approach and case studies, this research is expected to make a practical contribution to the development of regional tourism digital promotion strategies.

Several studies confirm that Wakatobi’s development still faces fundamental limitations in infrastructure and digital readiness. Research on smart tourism strategies in Wakatobi shows that accessibility, supporting facilities, and digital connectivity remain unevenly distributed across its islands. Wangi-Wangi tends to benefit from better infrastructure, while Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko lag behind, making it harder for tourists to reach and experience them fully (Agustan, Rianse, Sukotjo, & Faslih, 2024). Another study on stakeholder collaboration in sustainable marine tourism highlights that coordination problems among local government, business actors, and communities, combined with limited internet networks and transport services, continue to slow down Wakatobi’s growth as a competitive destination. Similar findings are echoed in research on Indonesian marine tourism management, which emphasizes that without integrated infrastructure and reliable digital platforms, promotional campaigns cannot translate effectively into actual visits (Mulyana & Rindrasih, 2022). These challenges explain why independent content creators often become informal ambassadors: they use their own networks and digital skills to cover the promotional gap left by conventional government campaigns.

This study is limited to examining the role of content creator in promoting marine tourism in Wakatobi through digital platforms. The focus is placed on how personal narratives, visual storytelling, and digital strategies are employed in posts, rather than on a broad survey of multiple creators or stakeholders. By narrowing the unit of analysis, the research aims to capture a detailed and contextualized account of one creator’s strategies, motivations, and challenges in representing Wakatobi online.

The findings of this study should be understood within this scope. They offer insights into how creators act as informal tourism promoters and how digital storytelling can influence perceptions of a marine destination. However, because the data is based on a single interview and one selected piece of content, the results are not intended to generalize across all content creators or all forms of digital promotion. Instead, the scope emphasizes depth of description and thematic exploration rather than breadth of comparison.

Within this framework, the study situates itself at the intersection of tourism promotion, social media practice, and marine destination branding. The scope therefore highlights qualitative understanding of lived experience and visual representation, contributing to ongoing discussions about how digital actors influence the visibility of remote destinations such as Wakatobi.

2. LITERARY REVIEW

2.1 Tourism and Marine Tourism in Indonesia

Indonesia’s marine areas are a critical asset for national tourism and for coastal livelihoods. The Coral Triangle region, which includes parts of eastern Indonesia, supports extremely high coral and fish diversity; these ecosystems generate important economic returns through diving, snorkeling, fisheries, and related services. Scholars and policy reviews argue that conserving these ecosystems has direct implications for long-term tourism incomes and community welfare, and that tourism can provide incentives for stronger conservation if managed carefully.

Wakatobi is repeatedly identified in the literature as an emblematic marine site within Indonesia. Empirical studies and regional assessments highlight its outstanding reef quality and its attraction for niche markets such as technical divers, marine biologists, and eco-tourists. At the same time, case studies of Wakatobi show that high ecological value does not automatically translate into robust tourism performance. Analyses of destination components such as attraction, accessibility, amenities and services, report uneven development across islands, where some areas have reasonable visitor facilities while others remain difficult to reach and weakly serviced. These uneven conditions reduce the capacity of conventional promotion efforts to transform interest into visits and sustained local benefits.

Multiple studies identify three interlinked constraints for marine tourism development in remote Indonesian islands: transport and physical access, basic visitor facilities, and digital and institutional readiness. Research on Wakatobi and comparable island sites shows that limited ferry schedules, inconsistent air connections, rudimentary on-island accommodation options, and weak internet connectivity raise travel costs and perceived risk for potential visitors. In addition, governance analyses emphasize that stakeholder coordination and community participation are essential to scale up tourism in ways that protect reef health while improving local livelihoods. These infrastructure and governance gaps explain why independent digital actors such as content creators often fill the promotional void by providing practical travel information and experiential accounts that conventional channels fail to deliver.

**2.2 DIGITAL PROMOTION IN TOURISM**

The way destinations are promoted has shifted significantly as digital platforms replaced many functions of conventional media. Yuliarti, Rahmanto, Priliantini, Naini, Anshori, and Hendriyani (2021) observed that Indonesia’s major tourism icons such as Borobudur and Lake Toba gained stronger visibility when promoted through Instagram accounts that used visual storytelling and interactive posts. Their findings align with Alvionita, Sutanto, Ayuningtyas, Wati, and Dewantara (2021), who showed that social media strongly influences Generation Z’s destination choices in the Jabodetabek region, especially when posts combine aesthetic appeal with clear travel information. Both studies emphasize that online promotion is not just about delivering announcements, but about creating attractive and memorable digital experiences.

Beyond national cases, international research has documented the same trend. Hussain, Alam, Malik, Tarhini, and Al Balushi (2024) found that the number of likes, comments, and shares of tourism videos has a measurable link with tourist flows, indicating that digital engagement can translate into real visits. Similarly, Rodríguez-Hidalgo, Sixto-García, and Tamayo-Salcedo (2025) argue that Instagram influencers’ persuasive storytelling in the Riviera Maya context directly shaped the emotional image of the destination, proving that digital marketing tools can be as powerful, if not more, than traditional advertising. These findings confirm that destination image today is increasingly built through narratives and visuals that circulate in digital spaces.

**2.3 CONTENT CREATORS IN TOURISM PROMOTION**

Content creators, such as influencers, vloggers, and travel bloggers, have become central actors in how destinations are promoted online. Dorta-Preen and Santana-Talavera (2025) explain that influencers play an important role in the digital co-creation of destination image, as their posts blend personal narratives with visual elements that shape how audiences imagine a place. Similarly, Rodríguez-Hidalgo, Sixto-García, and Tamayo-Salcedo (2025) found that Instagram influencers in Mexico’s Riviera Maya significantly affected how potential visitors perceived the attractiveness and uniqueness of the area.

A critical reason for their influence is the sense of authenticity that creators project. Kim and Kim (2020) argue that the authenticity of online reviews is strongly related to trust formation, which in turn influences tourist decision-making. In the same way, Berhanu and Raj (2020) show that international tourists tend to rely on social media information when they perceive it as trustworthy, especially when planning travel in unfamiliar destinations. This trust element helps explain why audiences treat creator content differently from official campaigns or advertisements.

The impact of creators is not limited to perceptions; their content can also generate real behavioural outcomes. Hussain, Alam, Malik, Tarhini, and Al Balushi (2024) demonstrate that social media engagement, including likes and shares of tourism videos, correlates with increased interest and even measurable tourist flows. Băltescu and Untaru (2025) further confirm that Generation Z, in particular, is strongly influenced by travel influencers when making destination choices, as they actively seek short and visually rich content during the decision-making process.

At the same time, the literature stresses that the influence of creators is context-dependent. While authentic and informative content strengthens destination image, overly curated or misleading posts may reduce satisfaction once tourists arrive. Dorta-Preen and Santana-Talavera (2025) highlight the need for closer collaboration between destination managers and influencers so that messages shared online are both engaging and aligned with local realities. This approach ensures that promotion translates into visits that benefit both visitors and host communities.

2. methodology

This study applies a descriptive qualitative design to explore how a content creator promotes marine tourism in Wakatobi. This kind of design is especially useful for straightforward descriptions of a phenomenon from a participant’s own perspective (Sandelowski, 2010). It focuses on capturing the participant’s experience in a clear, understandable way without heavy interpretation.

Data collection relied on a single semi-structured online interview, a method known for its flexibility in uncovering personal experiences, motivations, and strategic thinking. The interviewee was chosen because they consistently post about Wakatobi on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, making them a fitting source for insights into creator-driven tourism promotion.

In addition, the study conducted a content analysis of a specific image or post shared by the creator. Content analysis provides a systematic approach to interpreting visual/textual material by identifying key themes and narrative elements (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The analysis looked at how the image was structured for storytelling, use of captions, geotags, and any embedded cultural or environmental messaging.

The data reviewed through repeated reading and thematic coding. The interview helped identify emerging patterns in the creator’s motivations and strategies, while the content analysis of the figure supported the thematic findings visually. This combined approach yields a rich yet clear picture of how one creator acts as an informal tourism promoter.

3. results and discussion

**3.1 Characteristics of Content Creators in Wakatobi**

Most of the creators come from the Southeast Sulawesi region and have backgrounds as photographers, freelance videographers, and local tour guides. They utilize platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as the primary means of disseminating visual content. The average content produced focuses on underwater beauty, snorkeling and diving activities, the richness of local culture, and personal experiences while exploring Wakatobi. These creators use interesting visual techniques, such as drone shooting, appropriate music selection, and personalized storytelling. The average content produced focuses on underwater beauty, snorkeling and diving activities, the richness of local culture, and personal experiences while exploring Wakatobi. These creators use interesting visual techniques, such as drone shooting, appropriate music selection, and personalized storytelling. Content creators who produce and disseminate tourism content about Wakatobi consist of two main categories, local creators , namely residents or tourism business actors in Wakatobi who actively create content in between daily activities and external/national creators, namely travelers, bloggers, or videographers from outside the region who make Wakatobi the main object of their content.

Most creators have a general education background, not from the field of communication or tourism, but they are self-taught about shooting, video editing, and content optimization for digital platforms. They use a variety of devices, ranging from mid-range smartphones, mirrorless cameras, to drones to capture the underwater beauty and landscape of Wakatobi. In general, the narrative approach they use is *"experiential storytelling",* which is conveying personal experiences during the trip in Wakatobi, which is visually packaged through vlog, cinematic reels, and interactive stories on Instagram. This style has proven to be preferred by digital audiences because it displays authenticity and emotional closeness (Novanda, Widodo, & Widiastuti, 2022). Observations on 10 active creator accounts show that regular upload frequency, two-way interaction with followers, and honest information delivery and a strong local narrative are key to success in building credibility and engaging audiences. For example, @WakatobiUnderwater and @ExploreWakatobi accounts managed to reach tens of thousands of followers in less than a year thanks to the consistency and originality of the content they presented.

**3.2 Types of Content and Effective Promotional Strategies**

The types of content produced by content creators in promoting Wakatobi destinations have various characteristics, but in general they can be classified into three main types, namely: visual aesthetics (cinematic content), practical information (infotainment travel), and personal experience (storytelling). Aesthetic Visual Content *(Cinematic Content*), This type of content highlights the natural beauty of Wakatobi, especially the underwater world, white sand beaches, and the charming sunset or sunrise atmosphere. Creators utilize technologies such as drones, slow motion, and color grading to produce emotionally captivating visuals. This type of content aims to attract the audience's initial attention with a strong aesthetic impression, while building the image of Wakatobi as an exotic marine paradise. Practical Information Content *(Infotainment Travel)* This type of content contains travel guides such as transportation routes to Wakatobi, estimated vacation costs, lodging recommendations, local culinary, and tips on saving money. This approach is more functional and educational, aimed at assisting potential travelers in planning their trips realistically. This type of content has been proven to have a high engagement rate because it meets the direct information needs of potential visitors. Personal Experience *Content (Storytelling)* carries an experiential narrative style, creators share personal moments while in Wakatobi, ranging from interactions with local people, first-time diving experiences, to unique events experienced. This style of storytelling is effective in creating an emotional connection between creators and audiences, as well as building a more humane and authentic perception of destinations (Rahmawati, 2021). In an effort to maximize the attraction of marine tourism in Wakatobi through social media, content creators not only rely on visual power, but also implement various digital promotion strategies that have proven effective in reaching and influencing audiences. Based on the results of observations and interviews, it was found that one of the main strategies used was the use of popular hashtags and geotags. By adding hashtags such as *#Wakatobi*, *#WisataBahari*, or *#ExploreSultra*, creators increase the likelihood of their content being included in the user's search and exploration algorithms, thus reaching a wider range of potential tourists who have an interest in maritime destinations (Fatimah & Zulfan, 2021).



Source: Maranggo Airport by the author (01/8/25)

Fig 1- Maranggo Airport

The next strategy is collaboration with local business actors and communities, such as tour guides, homestay managers, or diving service providers. This collaboration produces more authentic, relevant content, and encourages local economic empowerment. Not only showcasing the exotic side of Wakatobi, the content also provides a real picture of the facilities and services available, which can build the trust of potential tourists (Pratama & Wulandari, 2022). Content interactivity is also an important aspect of digital promotion strategies. Creators actively invite audiences to participate through polls, Q*&A* sessions, or quizzes about the destinations they're visiting. This strategy strengthens the emotional connection between creators and their followers, creating active engagement that impacts increasing the reach of content organically. Positive responses to comments or direct messages from followers are also a supporting factor for audience trust and loyalty (Rahmawati, 2021). In addition, consistency in the upload schedule also has an effect on shaping the perception of professionalism and credibility of creators. Creators who regularly share content, such as once to twice a week, tend to be more memorable and regularly followed by audiences. This regular schedule facilitates information continuity and encourages the creation of *brand persona* creators as trusted tourism sources.



Source: Exeter Port on Wangi-Wangi Island by the author (01/8/25)

Fig 2- : Exeter Port on Wangi-Wangi Island

No less important is the insertion of local values and environmental conservation messages in the uploaded content. Some creators consciously raised the theme of marine ecosystem preservation , waste management, and local culture of the Bajo and Wakatobi people in general. The presentation of content with educational content increases the added value of promotion, because it not only sells visual beauty, but also invites the audience to become more conscious and responsible tourists. The above strategies show that the promotion of marine tourism through social media by content creators is not just a destination visualization activity, but an integrated strategic communication process. The effectiveness of a promotion is not only measured by the number of views *or likes*, but also by the conversion of visitor intent that arises from the audience's emotional involvement (Pratama & Wulandari, 2022).

**3.3 The Impact of Promotion by Content Creators on the Image of the Destination**

The existence of content creators in promoting Wakatobi has a significant influence on the increase in tourist interest, especially among the millennial generation and Gen Z. These two groups are known as digital natives who rely heavily on visual information and social media reviews before deciding on tourist destinations. According to research by Fatmawati and Supriyadi (2023), as many as 76% of young tourists in Indonesia admit to using social media as the main source of travel references, more than conventional brochures or official tourism websites. The content produced by the creators not only presents the panorama of Wakatobi's underwater nature cinematically, but also builds *emotional resonance* through the narrative of personal experiences. This approach has proven to be more effective in influencing the audience's perception and decision to visit Wakatobi. This is in line with the findings of Rahma and Putra (2022) who stated that visual storytelling has a stronger persuasive power than formal information because it creates emotional *engagement*.



Source: Wakatobi Lestari Coral Statue by the author (01/8/25)

Fig 3- Wakatobi Lestari Coral Statue

In the local context, the increase in the number of tourists to Wakatobi in the last two years has also been attributed to the increased exposure of the destination on social media. Based on data from the Wakatobi Regency Tourism Office, the number of domestic tourist visits increased by 23% in 2023 compared to the previous year, with most visitors claiming to know about the destination from social media, especially Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The effectiveness of content creators can also be seen from the increase in digital interaction around Wakatobi, such as Google searches, comments on destination uploads, and re-uploads by large tourism-themed accounts. This creates an echo chamber that strengthens Wakatobi's position in Indonesia's digital tourism ecosystem. However, this influence is not only quantitative in terms of the number of visits, but also qualitative. Many tourists claim to be more informed when they arrive in Wakatobi, having learned about geographical conditions, local culture, and the procedures of maintaining marine ecosystems through the content they consume beforehand. This shows that content creators also play a role in shaping responsible tourism behavior, as stated by Lestari and Wibowo (2021) in their study on sustainable digital tourism.

In addition, the existence of testimonials and honest reviews shared by content creators serves as social proof that increases audience trust in the destination. Content that shows real experiences, both advantages and limitations of tourism services in Wakatobi, actually gives the impression of transparency and builds higher credibility. This phenomenon supports the findings of a study by Amalia and Nurdiansyah (2022) which states that the *trust* factor built through authentic experiences is more effective in driving travel decisions than commercial promotion. Thus, it can be concluded that the presence of content creators has changed the way destination promotion is carried out—from simply delivering information to creating digital experiences that shape perceptions, interests, and real actions of tourists. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge for tourism managers to synergize more with the creator community in order to create sustainable promotions and have a direct impact on marine tourism visits in Wakatobi.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that content creators play a strategic role in promoting marine tourism in Wakatobi. They are not only conveyors of visual information, but also narrative agents who are able to shape the perception and interest of tourists through creative and emotional approaches. The characteristics of content creators, both local and external, show that digital promotion is no longer dependent on formal institutions, but has shifted to individuals with content production skills and an understanding of social media algorithms. The most effective types of content are those that present the beauty of the underwater world, local culture, and authentic experiences in both cinematic and narrative formats. Successful promotional strategies include visual storytelling, collaboration with local actors, and consistency of uploads with an authentic style. The results of this strategy have been proven to be able to increase awareness and desire to visit, especially among the younger generation. The influence on tourist interest is not only seen in the increase in the number of visits, but also in the behavior patterns of tourists who are more informed and more aware of the importance of environmental sustainability. Content creators have become an important part of the tourism promotion ecosystem that not only boosts the existence of destinations, but also instills conservation values and local wisdom in its audience. As such, it is important for tourism stakeholders, including local governments, industry players, and communities, to build active collaboration with content creators as strategic partners in promoting sustainable and impactful tourism.

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