



# Eco-Branding in Silence: Digital Communication Challenges in A Low-Traffic Coastal Tourism Destination

Dwi Nurrahmi Kusumastuti <sup>1</sup>, Adelinta Pristia Defi <sup>2</sup>

Universitas Diponegoro

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## CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: [amikusumastuti@live.undip.ac.id](mailto:amikusumastuti@live.undip.ac.id)

## ABSTRAK

*Branding* lingkungan penting untuk mempromosikan destinasi wisata di pasar yang kompetitif dan berorientasi keberlanjutan. Namun, destinasi yang masih berkembang sering mengalami “digital silence”, karena kurangnya komunikasi yang konsisten dan terstruktur. Kasus di Pantai Maron, Semarang menunjukkan kondisi tersebut. Dikelola oleh TNI Angkatan Darat (Skadron-11/Serbu) dengan tanpa dukungan profesional bidang pariwisata atau komunikasi, kawasan ini aktif melakukan kegiatan ekologis seperti penanaman mangrove dan pembersihan pantai, tetapi belum mampu mengomunikasikannya secara efektif secara *online*. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, analisis konten, dan telaah dokumentasi. Informan penelitian terdiri dari satu informan kunci berinisial GA yang berperan sebagai pengelola destinasi sekaligus admin media sosial Pantai Maron. Sebanyak 19 unggahan Instagram periode April–Juni 2025 dianalisis berdasarkan tema, keterlibatan, dan storytelling visual. Hasil analisis menunjukkan pemahaman nilai lingkungan sudah ada, tetapi komunikasi masih informal dan tidak terkoordinasi. Hanya 21,1% konten membahas isu lingkungan seperti sampah dan mangrove, sedangkan 52,6% berupa foto pemandangan tanpa konteks edukatif. Tingkat keterlibatan rata-rata 3,61% melampaui standar industri, tetapi interaksi didominasi respons pasif (*likes*) dengan sangat sedikit komentar. Tidak ditemukan konten buatan pengguna maupun narasi komunitas. Kesimpulannya, terjadi fenomena “eco-branding in silence”: konservasi berjalan, namun komunikasi digital minim. Rekomendasi utama penelitian ini meliputi penguatan kapasitas kelembagaan, strategi komunikasi digital, dan kolaborasi dengan universitas serta LSM.

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has become a significant global agenda amid increasing environmental pressures and the growing demand for destinations that are not only attractive but also ecologically responsible (Weaver et al., 2008). In this context, the concept of eco-branding has emerged as a strategic approach that integrates sustainability values into the identity and communication of tourist

destinations (Sanjaya et al., 2024). One key element of modern eco-branding is the use of digital media as the primary channel for shaping tourist perceptions and engagement.

However, many newly established tourist destinations especially those lacking a strong tourism management system face major challenges in developing effective communication strategies. Limitations in human resources, lack of digital literacy, and the absence of institutional support become the main

obstacles to building a sustainable digital presence (Mgonja et al., 2015). Many challenges are clearly seen in the case of Pantai Maron, a coastal destination in Semarang, Indonesia, which is managed by a non-commercial institution. Based on interviews with the site manager and the Instagram administrator conducted in the first quarter of 2025, the destination was reported to receive relatively low and irregular visitor numbers.

Instagram, as the most dominant visual platform in tourism marketing, offers great opportunities to build ecotourism narratives. However, in practice, not all destinations are able to optimize the potential of this platform (Roy et al., 2024). The phenomenon of digital silence where official destination accounts are rarely updated or fail to convey sustainability messages can hinder branding efforts and make it difficult for destinations to compete in an increasingly visual and connected tourism market (Fronzetti Colladon et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a study by Islam et al., (2025) emphasizes that the success of green marketing campaigns largely depends on visual consistency, community engagement, and narratives that resonate with ecological values. Without these elements, environmental communication may appear artificial and fail to build audience loyalty. In the case of Pantai Maron, the official Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang showed limited activity. As of the first quarter of 2025, the account had 178 followers and 20 posts since its creation on May 27, 2024, with minimal sustainability-related narratives, and had yet to establish a strong digital identity.

Based on this context, this study aims to examine the challenges and obstacles in building eco-branding through digital media at lesser-known coastal tourist destinations. Through a case study of Pantai Maron, this article analyzes the gap between its ecological potential and the reality of its limited digital communication. The focus is given to the dimensions of narrative, participation, and institutional readiness in adopting sustainable communication strategies.

In recent years, integrating sustainability principles into destination branding has been strongly influenced by the rapid development of digital platforms and algorithm-driven visibility. Destinations that successfully construct

consistent environmental narratives online often gain higher credibility and long-term visitor trust. Reports from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023) highlight that sustainability has become one of the primary dimensions of competitiveness in tourism development, while a global survey shows that more than 70% of travelers are willing to choose environmentally responsible destinations (Booking.com, 2023)

These findings indicate that digital eco-branding is not merely a promotional strategy but an ethical communication responsibility. Consequently, digital storytelling and interactive engagement play a vital role in shaping the perceived authenticity of eco-tourism efforts, particularly among younger and digitally literate audiences.

Furthermore, the post-pandemic tourism recovery period has accelerated the transition toward digital-first communication strategies. Small and emerging destinations are increasingly expected to demonstrate transparency in their ecological practices through online content that combines visual appeal and educational narratives. However, when these communication efforts are absent or inconsistent, destinations risk being perceived as indifferent or uncommitted to sustainability goals.

This research seeks to contextualize the issue of digital silence within the broader discourse of environmental communication by examining how underdeveloped management structures and limited digital capacity contribute to a communication gap between ecological action and public perception. Specifically, it aims to (1) examine the representation of sustainability narratives in Pantai Maron's digital communication, (2) analyze audience engagement patterns using the COBRA framework, and (3) identify institutional constraints that shape the phenomenon of eco-branding in silence. Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) How are environmental sustainability values represented in Pantai Maron's digital communication content? (RQ2) What forms of audience engagement emerge from the destination's Instagram activity? and (RQ3) What institutional factors contribute to the persistence of eco-branding in silence?

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### The Concept of Eco-Branding in Coastal Tourism

Eco-branding is a strategy to build the image of tourist destinations based on environmental sustainability values. In coastal contexts, eco-branding involves not only promoting natural beauty but also telling stories about environmental conservation, community involvement, and eco-friendly practices (Sanjaya et al., 2024; Kuku Mulyanto et al., 2023). Such branding is essential for attracting ecologically conscious travelers and strengthening the identity of destinations amid global competition.

Eco-branding models in tourism generally include four main elements: (1) Ecological narratives in digital media, (2) Consistent green visuals, (3) Local community engagement, and (4) Credibility of information sources. Destinations that successfully integrate these elements tend to have higher visitors' loyalty (Mgonja et al., 2015).

**Table 1.**  
*Strategic Components of Digital Eco-Branding in Coastal Destinations*

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Ecological Narrative	Digital stories about conservation, local culture, and environmental impact
Green Visuals	Visual aesthetics: green colors, symbols, infographics in the feed
Community Engagement	Collaborative content, local testimonials, participatory activities
Message Credibility	Reliable sources, consistent messages, beyond mere 'greenwashing'

Source: Developed by the authors through thematic categorization of Instagram content analysis, adapted from Sanjaya et al. (2024) and Mgonja et al. (2015).

### Digital Communication Challenges in Emerging Destinations

Emerging tourist destinations often face serious challenges in developing effective digital communication. Barriers such as the lack of digital expertise, absence of promotional budgets, and lack of institutional structures make consistent eco-branding strategies difficult to implement (Mgonja et al., 2015; Sciacca, 2023). In the context of Pantai Maron, the Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang is rarely updated, lacks clear ecological narratives, and

has not established digital community connections.

Roy et al., (2024) highlight that the success of social media campaigns in sustainable tourism depends on emotional and participatory user engagement. Without interaction triggers or reflective content, engagement remains passive. This condition is known as digital silence a situation where digital media is technically active but lacks meaningful or strategic influence.

### Theoretical Expansion of Eco-Branding Models

The development of eco-branding within tourism studies has evolved from a simple marketing perspective into a multidimensional communication framework. Destination competitiveness increasingly depends on the integration of environmental, social, and experiential values that shape the visitor's perception of authenticity (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Eco-branding, therefore, is not merely a visual identity but a representation of ethical values communicated through consistent narratives, participatory storytelling, and transparent information systems. In this view, branding serves as a socio-cultural process that links ecological practices with symbolic meaning, shaping how tourists emotionally connect with destinations.

Several models of sustainable branding emphasize the alignment between *brand identity*, *visitor experience*, and *community participation*. For instance, the Sustainable Destination Branding Model proposed by López-Sánchez & Pulido-Fernández (2016) highlights that tourists' emotional attachment grows when environmental narratives are presented alongside tangible conservation outcomes. Similarly, Font & McCabe (Font & McCabe, 2017) note that credibility in green marketing depends on how well destinations demonstrate measurable impact rather than relying on slogans or aesthetic imagery alone (Toubes & Araújo-Vila, 2022). Thus, digital eco-branding requires a hybrid approach that blends storytelling, evidence-based communication, and participatory engagement to maintain both trust and loyalty.

## Comparative Insights from Global Practices

Globally, numerous destinations have succeeded in utilizing digital eco-branding to strengthen their sustainability reputation. Costa Rica's national tourism campaign, "Essential Costa Rica," is often cited as a benchmark case for integrating ecological values with digital storytelling (Fidarijanthy, 2019). The country's online platforms consistently communicate conservation actions such as reforestation and biodiversity protection, framed within narratives of national identity. In Southeast Asia, Thailand's "Amazing Thailand Go Local" campaign also demonstrates how digital engagement can empower rural communities through locally produced content emphasizing environmental stewardship (TATnews.org, 2018). These cases reveal that institutional coordination and digital literacy are central to bridging ecological values with audience perception.

Indonesia has also initiated several green communication programs, such as the "Wonderful Indonesia Sustainable Tourism" initiative launched by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy in 2021.

However, previous studies indicate that the adoption of sustainable digital strategies in tourism destinations often varies depending on institutional capacity, managerial readiness, and technological resources (Toubes & Araújo-Vila, 2022). This reinforces the relevance of studying destinations like Pantai Maron, which represent the lower spectrum of digital readiness but hold significant ecological potential. Understanding these structural limitations can contribute to broader discussions on developing more inclusive and context-sensitive eco-branding strategies.

## Digital Storytelling and Eco-Brand Authenticity

The role of digital storytelling in eco-branding has gained increasing scholarly attention. According to Pera & Viglia (2022), storytelling creates emotional proximity between tourists and destinations, transforming sustainability messages into relatable human experience. In social media contexts, narrative-driven visuals such as short videos, testimonials,

and participatory campaigns can effectively communicate authenticity, provided they align with real on-site activities. This "story-practice alignment" is critical for avoiding *greenwashing*, where environmental messages are not supported by genuine ecological efforts.

In addition, the use of visual semiotics color, composition, and symbolism plays a vital role in reinforcing eco-brand authenticity. Previous research found that green-toned imagery, natural textures, and organic compositions enhance perceived trust in eco-brands, especially when combined with transparent captions and credible data sources (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Therefore, visual storytelling should be regarded not only as an aesthetic tool but as an ethical component of environmental communication. In the context of low-traffic destinations, optimizing this visual-narrative coherence can significantly increase visibility while maintaining cultural and ecological integrity.

## Summary of Literature Review

From the theoretical and empirical perspectives discussed above, it can be concluded that eco-branding in tourism represents a dynamic intersection between environmental ethics, digital communication, and participatory governance. The main determinants of success include institutional commitment, visual consistency, narrative authenticity, and audience engagement. Despite growing global awareness of sustainability, many emerging destinations continue to struggle with translating on-site ecological actions into coherent digital narratives. This literature gap justifies the current study's focus on Pantai Maron, where ecological potential coexists with communication silence. By contextualizing eco-branding challenges in small-scale destinations, this research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable digital transformation in tourism.

## Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study approach. According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life

context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. This approach is especially appropriate for addressing “how” and “why” questions in situations where contextual conditions are integral to the phenomenon under investigation. Given that eco-branding practices at Pantai Maron are embedded within institutional structures, managerial limitations, and local socio-cultural dynamics, a qualitative case study design enables an in-depth and context-sensitive examination of underdeveloped digital communication practices. The single case design strengthens the analytical capacity to capture the unique characteristics of Pantai Maron, including its military-based management structure and the absence of professional branding mechanisms within the formal tourism sector. To ensure methodological rigor, this study employs data triangulation through content analysis, engagement metrics, semi-structured interviews, and field observations, while adhering to the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with one key informant, identified by the initials GA, who served as both the site manager and the Instagram administrator of Pantai Maron to explore institutional perspectives and communication practices, content analysis of 19 Instagram posts published between April and June 2025 to identify dominant visual themes, narrative patterns, and sustainability-related messaging, and documentation review to contextualize organizational and managerial structures.

Interviews were guided by an interview protocol and analyzed thematically to capture recurring meanings and interpretations, while social media content was examined based on visual themes, narrative presence, and engagement metrics to assess the effectiveness of digital eco-branding practices. This multi-method approach enabled data triangulation to enhance analytical rigor and credibility.

## Research Object and Unit of Analysis

The object of this research is the official Instagram account of Pantai Maron (@pantaimaronsemarang) and the digital communication system supporting the beach’s tourism management. The units of analysis include (1) all uploaded content, including photos, videos, and captions published during April–June 2025, totaling 19 posts; (2) digital engagement data, particularly the number of likes and comments associated with each post; (3) results from semi-structured interviews with one key informant (GA), who served as the site manager and Instagram administrator of Pantai Maron; and (4) field observations as well as external reposts or public comments related to Pantai Maron’s digital presence. These multiple data sources enable methodological triangulation to enhance the validity and depth of analysis regarding the phenomenon of eco-branding in silence.

The Instagram account was chosen based on its relevance in shaping the public’s digital perception of tourist destinations. Interviews and observations were used as triangulation to understand factors contributing to limited digital activity. Analysis emphasized the relationship between environmental narrative potential and the reality of social media communication.

## Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through several systematic stages. First, the researcher carried out non-participatory observation by monitoring the official Instagram account to examine content types, posting patterns, visual presentation, and audience interaction without direct involvement. This observation provided an initial understanding of the digital communication practices being studied.

Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted with one key informant (GA), who managed the destination and its Instagram account. These interviews followed a flexible guideline, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences, roles, and perceptions while still ensuring consistency across informants. In parallel, digital documentation was gathered by

collecting screenshots of Instagram posts, saving caption transcripts, and archiving relevant visual and textual materials to support data analysis.

Finally, field notes were systematically recorded during observations and interviews to capture visual context, situational conditions, and on-site dynamics that could not be fully represented through digital data alone. Together, these steps ensured comprehensive and triangulated data to support the research findings. Observations were systematically conducted to capture communication patterns, content intensity, and audience responses. Interviews aimed to open reflective discussions with managers on the lack of digital promotion and their expectations of social media roles. Digital documentation served as a tool for coding content and categorizing communication strategies.

### Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis employed qualitative content analysis based on thematic categories. Three main categories were defined based on previous studies and initial observations: (1) sustainability narratives (eco-narratives), (2) visual and symbolic strategies, and (3) digital participation and community engagement. Each category was examined in terms of frequency, content quality, and its alignment with eco-branding principles. Additionally, the COBRA model, encompassing Consumption, Contribution, and Creation, was applied to analyze the different forms of audience engagement on social media.

As a complementary quantitative indicator, engagement rate (ER) was calculated:

$$ER = \frac{\text{Comment} + \text{Like}}{\text{Followers}} \times 100\% \text{ (Arief, 2019)}$$

In addition to the qualitative content analysis approach, this study also employs quantitative indicators to support the mapping of digital communication effectiveness. One such indicator is the engagement rate (ER), which generally reflects the level of audience involvement with content published on social media. ER is calculated based on the total number of interactions (likes and comments) divided by the number of followers and has become a standard metric for measuring the

performance of digital campaigns in the tourism sector. This approach is used to provide a comprehensive view of how well audiences respond to the visual narratives and messages constructed through the destination's digital channels.

### Methodological Considerations and Research Validity

The use of a qualitative single-case design in this study is grounded in the assumption that the phenomenon of "eco-branding in silence" can only be fully understood by exploring its contextual complexity. While quantitative methods could measure engagement metrics more precisely, they would not capture the institutional, cultural, and communicative nuances that underpin digital silence. As Yin Robert (2018) emphasizes, case study research allows for "analytic generalization," where the findings can inform theory development rather than statistical inference. This approach is thus appropriate for examining underexplored social phenomena that depend on human interpretation and institutional dynamics (Yin Robert, 2018).

Furthermore, the study employs multiple data sources Instagram content, interviews, field notes, and digital documentation to ensure triangulation and strengthen research credibility. Triangulation not only validates findings through cross-verification but also mitigates potential researcher bias. The interviews were designed as semi-structured to allow flexibility while maintaining thematic focus on environmental communication practices, institutional constraints, and audience participation. To enhance reliability, the researcher conducted member checking with participants, confirming the accuracy of key interpretations and ensuring that local perspectives were fairly represented.

### Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

The qualitative validity of this research was reinforced by combining interview data, content analysis, field observations, and digital documentation creating a multi-voiced understanding of eco-branding practices at Pantai Maron. Reliability was maintained through consistent data coding procedures,

where each post and interview transcript was categorized according to pre-defined thematic clusters: sustainability narratives, visual strategies, and digital engagement. Inter-coder reliability was verified by conducting an independent review of selected data samples to ensure coherence in theme classification.

Ethically, the study adheres to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality. All interviewees were briefed about the study's purpose, and their participation was voluntary. Since the research involved an institutional actor (the Indonesian Army's Squadron-11/Serbu), special attention was given to maintaining neutrality and avoiding any disclosure of sensitive internal information. Visual content from social media was used solely for analytical purposes and cited responsibly according to fair use guidelines for academic research.

### Analytical Framework and COBRA Model Application

The COBRA framework standing for *Consumption, Contribution, and Creation* serves as the analytical foundation for understanding audience interaction with Pantai Maron's digital content. According to Muntinga et al., (2011), *consumption* refers to passive behaviors such as viewing and liking, *contribution* involves commenting or sharing, and *creation* represents user-generated content. This framework was chosen for its suitability in mapping participatory engagement on social media platforms like Instagram. By applying COBRA to the analyzed posts, the research identifies the dominance of passive engagement and highlights the absence of participatory or co-creative behaviors.

The inclusion of both qualitative coding and engagement rate calculations provides a balanced methodological approach capturing the interpretive depth of communication strategies and the quantitative reflection of audience response. This hybrid methodology allows for a holistic evaluation of eco-branding effectiveness in underdeveloped digital contexts, aligning with recent recommendations by (Islam et al., 2025) and Sanjaya et al. (2024) for multi-dimensional assessment in sustainable tourism communication studies.

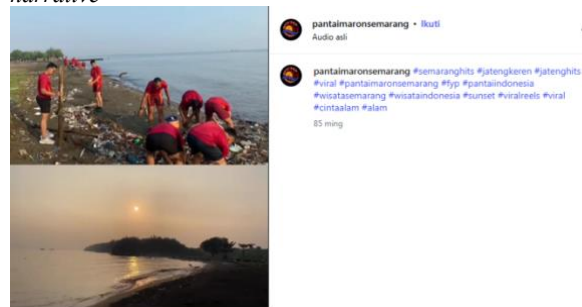
This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a single case study design focusing on Pantai Maron as a coastal destination with limited digital activity. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the phenomenon of silent eco-branding, where destinations have ecotourism potential but lack active digital presence and structured environmental communication strategies (Robert, 2018)

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Sustainability Narratives (Eco-Narratives) Visual and symbolic strategies

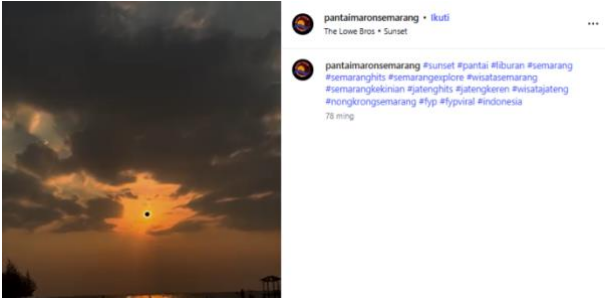
Of the 19 Instagram posts analyzed from April to June 2025, only 4 posts (21.1%) included messages or themes directly related to environmental activities, such as mangrove planting or beach cleanups. This limitation is further reflected in interview findings. The key informant (GA) stated, "We do not have a specific plan to frame environmental activities as part of branding; we simply document what happens" (Interview, May 2025). This statement suggests the absence of a structured digital branding strategy, where environmental actions are treated as incidental documentation rather than strategically positioned sustainability narratives. As a result, most content focuses on visual aesthetics, such as sunsets and waves, without accompanying narratives that convey sustainability commitments. This indicates that visual elements have not been strategically directed to build a coherent ecotourism identity (see Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1**  
*Environmental activity without supporting sustainability narrative*



Source: Author's field observation and content analysis of the official Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang, April–June 2025.

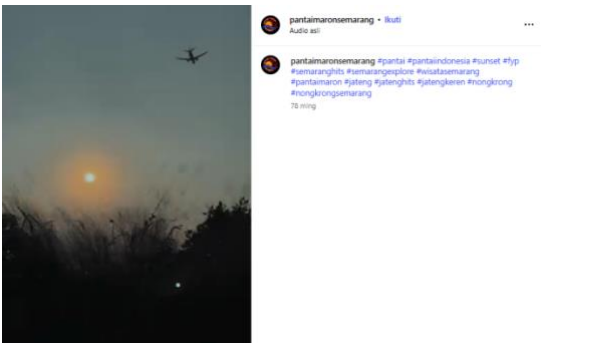
**Figure 2**  
*Aesthetic-oriented Instagram content emphasizing scenic visuals.*



Source: Author’s field observation and content analysis of the official Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang, April–June 2025.

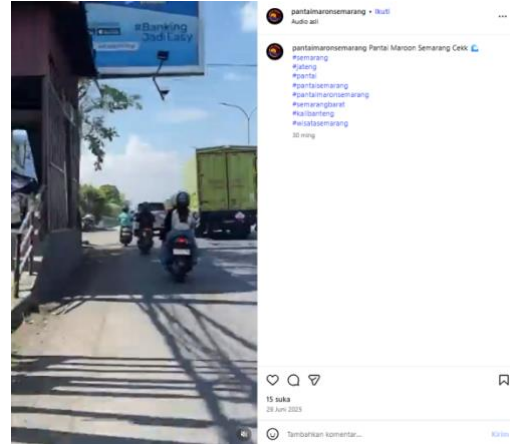
Visual observations further showed that environmental symbols such as green color schemes, recycling icons, or thematic hashtags (#greenpantaimaron) were rarely used across posts, indicating a lack of visual coherence and symbolic reinforcement of environmental values (Figure 3). This reflects a weak awareness of the importance of visual consistency in eco-branding strategies (Islam et al., 2025; Sanjaya et al., 2024).

**Figure 3**  
*Absence of eco-symbolism and visual consistency.*



Source: Author’s field observation and content analysis of the official Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang, April–June 2025.

**Figure 4**  
*Passive audience engagement with no comment interaction.*



Source: Author’s field observation and content analysis of the official Instagram account @pantaimaronsemarang, April–June 2025.

Despite achieving a relatively high engagement rate, audience interaction remained largely passive. Across the observed period, interactions were dominated by likes, with only seven comments recorded and no evidence of user-generated content or community storytelling. This lack of participatory communication indicates that sustainability narratives were not co-created with audiences, but rather consumed superficially, limiting their potential impact on environmental awareness and place identity formation.

These findings reflect a broader challenge faced by emerging ecotourism destinations, where on-site environmental practices are not effectively translated into coherent digital eco-narratives. Consistent with previous studies, the absence of narrative framing and participatory engagement weakens the authenticity and persuasive power of sustainability communication on social media. Without strategic visual consistency and community involvement, digital platforms risk functioning merely as aesthetic showcases rather than as tools for environmental education and identity-building.

## Digital Participation and Community Engagement

The numerical engagement was as follows: 620 likes and 7 comments across 19 posts and 174 followers. With the formula applied:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Engagement Rate} &= \frac{620 + 7}{174} \times 100\% \\ &= 3.61\% \end{aligned}$$

This number exceeds the digital tourism industry average (1.8%–2.2%) (Islam et al., 2025). However, the dominant form of engagement likes indicates passive involvement (consumption) rather than active (contribution/creation), in line with the COBRA framework (Roy et al., 2024).

The interview with GA revealed that most content was uploaded by military personnel without digital communication training. There were no special agendas to involve local communities in content creation or promotional campaigns. Posts showing environmental actions were initiated by individual managers, not from strategic collaborations with communities or educational institutions.

## Institutional Readiness in Digital Communication Strategy

The interview with GA revealed revealed that Pantai Maron lacks institutional structures for professional communication or promotion. There are no designated digital campaign budgets, editorial calendars, or professional branding teams. Instagram account activity is mostly based on individual initiative, not institutional policy.

This situation underscores that silent eco-branding is not merely due to lack of creativity but rather institutional weakness. The absence of training support, communication guidelines, or external partnerships hinders Pantai Maron's potential as an ecotourism destination. As noted by Sciacca (2023), digital gaps in small destinations often result from human resource limitations and the lack of institutional networks for cross-sector promotion.

Comparatively, several coastal destinations in Indonesia such as Bali's Sanur

Beach and Lombok's Mandalika have successfully implemented integrated eco-branding strategies that combine local narratives, visual storytelling, and cross-sector collaboration. Studies by Mulyanto et al. (2023) and Sanjaya et al. (2024) highlight that these destinations maintain consistent digital engagement by partnering with universities and environmental NGOs, allowing them to transform on-site conservation into shareable online stories. Such practices illustrate that institutional collaboration and narrative coherence are key factors in sustaining eco-brand authenticity. The contrast with Pantai Maron reveals how the absence of structured partnerships and communication planning limits the visibility of existing environmental efforts, creating a perception gap between ecological reality and digital representation.

Building upon the findings above, the discussion highlights three interconnected dimensions of eco-branding in silence at Pantai Maron: cultural and institutional communication barriers, visual storytelling limitations, and passive audience participation.

### 1. Digital Silence as a Cultural and Institutional Phenomenon

The findings suggest that digital silence in eco-branding is not merely a technical issue but also a cultural and institutional one. Environmental activities are conducted operationally, yet they are not systematically translated into strategic digital narratives. This reflects a communication culture that prioritizes operational execution over public engagement, consistent with Weaver (2008), who argues that sustainable tourism initiatives often fail when communication strategies are treated as secondary to conservation efforts. Consequently, Pantai Maron's social media functions primarily as documentation rather than as a strategic eco-branding platform.

### 2. The Role of Visual Storytelling in Eco-Brand Authenticity

Visual storytelling plays an important role in shaping sustainability perception. Stepchenkova & Zhan (2013) emphasize that imagery combining natural aesthetics with ecological meaning can strengthen emotional

attachment and destination loyalty. However, Pantai Maron's Instagram content remains dominated by scenic visuals without narrative integration that communicates environmental commitment. Previous studies also highlight that visual consistency, eco-symbolism, and transparent communication strengthen eco-brand trust and authenticity (Font & McCabe, 2017; Kukuh Mulyanto et al., 2023; Sanjaya et al., 2024). From a semiotic perspective, images communicate both denotative and connotative meanings (Hatam et al., 2021). In Pantai Maron's case, visual content mainly denotes natural beauty while rarely conveying environmental responsibility or stewardship.

### 3. Participatory Engagement and Co-Created Authenticity

The literature highlights that eco-brand authenticity increasingly depends on participatory engagement and co-creation (Pera & Viglia, 2022). Through the COBRA framework, meaningful digital engagement evolves from passive consumption toward active contribution and creation. Although Pantai Maron achieved an engagement rate above the tourism industry benchmark, interactions remained predominantly passive, characterized mainly by likes rather than comments or user-generated content. This finding aligns with Roy et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of interactive participation in sustainable tourism communication. Encouraging testimonial sharing, conservation-based hashtags, and participatory digital campaigns could strengthen community-oriented communication and enhance eco-brand authenticity.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the phenomenon of eco-branding in silence in Pantai Maron by addressing three research questions: (RQ1) how environmental sustainability values are represented in digital communication content; (RQ2) what forms of audience engagement emerge from Instagram activity; and (RQ3) what institutional factors contribute to the persistence of digital silence.

Regarding RQ1, the findings reveal that sustainability narratives are minimally represented in Pantai Maron's Instagram content. Although environmental activities such as

mangrove planting and beach clean-ups are conducted on-site, only a small proportion of posts explicitly frame these activities as part of a coherent sustainability narrative. Visual content predominantly emphasizes aesthetic scenery rather than environmental symbolism or structured eco-storytelling. This indicates that ecological practices exist, but they are not strategically translated into digital brand identity, resulting in weak eco-brand authenticity.

In response to RQ2, the study finds that audience engagement is numerically above the average tourism industry benchmark. However, engagement is largely passive, dominated by likes rather than comments, dialogue, or user-generated content. Based on the COBRA framework, audience behavior remains at the consumption level and does not progress toward contribution or creation. Consequently, digital participation does not significantly strengthen community-based eco-brand identity.

Concerning RQ3, the findings demonstrate that institutional constraints are central to the persistence of eco-branding in silence. The absence of structured communication strategies, limited digital capacity, lack of professional branding personnel, and the absence of editorial planning frameworks contribute to a gap between ecological action and public perception. Environmental communication is conducted incidentally rather than systematically, reflecting low institutional readiness for strategic digital engagement.

Overall, this study concludes that eco-branding in silence is not merely a communication failure but a structural and organizational challenge. Eco-brand authenticity requires the integration of ecological performance, participatory engagement, and coherent digital storytelling supported by institutional commitment. Without these interconnected elements, environmental practices remain under-communicated and their reputational value remains untapped.

To address these challenges, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, strengthening human resource capacity through training in environmental communication, digital content design, and ecotourism storytelling is essential. This would enable managers to construct informative, persuasive, and visually coherent sustainability narratives.

Second, the development of internal communication frameworks such as editorial calendars, visual identity guidelines, and thematic content planning is necessary to ensure consistency and long-term strategic direction.

Third, cross-sector collaboration with local communities, university students, and environmental non-governmental organizations should be institutionalized to generate authentic and participatory content. Encouraging user-generated content through interactive campaigns, testimonials, or hashtag initiatives would help shift engagement from passive consumption toward active co-creation.

Fourth, identifying and collaborating with relevant digital actors, including local eco-influencers, may expand outreach and enhance credibility within trusted online networks.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the discourse on sustainable tourism communication by conceptualizing eco-branding in silence as an analytical lens that highlights the gap between ecological action and digital representation. Unlike studies that emphasize successful eco-branding models, this research demonstrates how institutional limitations can suppress environmental narratives despite genuine sustainability efforts.

From a policy standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of developing structured digital environmental communication guidelines for small and emerging destinations. Strengthening collaboration between local authorities, academic institutions, and communities can bridge the gap between on-site conservation and online visibility.

Future research may expand this framework by conducting comparative multi-destination studies, analyzing cross-platform communication strategies, or exploring the role of artificial intelligence in supporting sustainable digital storytelling. Such directions would further refine the integration of institutional readiness, participatory communication, and eco-brand authenticity in the evolving landscape of digital tourism.

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