

Exploring Tourist Experience in Gorontalo through Social Media Data: A Netnographic Approach

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 28 April 2026 Accepted: 08 June 2026 Published: 27 June 2026	<i>This study explores tourist experiences in Gorontalo through social media narratives, employing a netnographic approach to capture the meanings embedded in user-generated content (UGC). As emerging destinations increasingly rely on digital visibility, understanding how experiences are constructed and communicated online becomes critical. This research analyses approximately 750 posts from Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), focusing on textual captions, comments, and visual context to identify key experiential patterns. The findings reveal four dominant dimensions of tourist experience: natural immersion, cultural encounter, emotional resonance, and infrastructural negotiation. Tourists frequently frame Gorontalo as a “hidden paradise”, emphasising marine biodiversity, authentic local interactions, and a sense of tranquillity and personal restoration. These narratives highlight the interplay between cognitive and affective dimensions of experience, where physical attributes and emotional responses are co-constructed through digital storytelling. At the same time, the presence of infrastructural challenges introduces a nuanced perspective, suggesting that limitations in accessibility and facilities are often interpreted as part of the destination’s authenticity rather than purely negative attributes. The study contributes theoretically by extending the understanding of tourist experience as a multi-dimensional and socially constructed phenomenon within digital environments. It introduces the concept of “experiential authenticity in emerging destinations” and demonstrates the value of netnography in capturing lived experiences through naturally occurring data. Practically, the findings offer insights for destination managers to develop sustainable, experience-based tourism strategies while leveraging social media narratives. Overall, this research highlights the role of digital platforms in shaping how tourist experiences are produced, shared, and interpreted in contemporary tourism.</i> Keywords: <i>experiential authenticity, netnography, social media, tourist experience, user-generated content (UGC);</i>



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INTRODUCTION

As digital technologies increasingly mediate tourism experiences, social media has evolved from a simple communication channel into a powerful arena where destination meanings and tourist experiences are actively constructed, negotiated, and circulated. While earlier tourism research largely viewed social media as a promotional tool that influences

destination awareness and travel decision-making (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2017), more recent scholarship argues that digital platforms function as socio-cultural spaces in which tourists become active producers of meanings rather than passive consumers of information (Hadinejad et al., 2026; Fricano., 2025; Christou, E., 2025). This shift has generated an important theoretical debate. On the one hand, social media enables more authentic and spontaneous representations of travel experiences through user-generated content (UGC) (Sujatmiko, et al., 2025). On the other hand, scholars have questioned whether digital narratives genuinely reflect lived experiences or whether they are increasingly shaped by performative self-presentation, algorithmic visibility, and platform-specific norms (Bakiner., 2025; Georgakopoulou., 2022). Consequently, tourist experience can no longer be understood solely as an individual encounter with a destination but must also be viewed as a socially mediated and digitally co-constructed phenomenon.

This debate is particularly relevant for emerging destinations such as Gorontalo, where digital visibility often plays a crucial role in destination recognition and tourism development. Unlike established destinations that benefit from strong institutional branding and extensive market exposure, emerging destinations frequently rely on tourists' narratives and user-generated content to communicate their attractiveness and distinctiveness. In this context, social media narratives function not merely as promotional artefacts but as experiential archives through which perceptions, emotions, and meanings are continuously created and shared (Marine-Roig, 2019; Yang, 2026; Page, 2018). Understanding how these narratives are produced and interpreted is therefore essential for advancing both tourism theory and destination management practice.

Despite this growing relevance, the nature of tourist experience in emerging destinations like Gorontalo remains underexplored, particularly from a social media perspective. Existing tourism studies have largely focused on well-established destinations, often overlooking less prominent regions that possess unique cultural and natural attractions (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Bui et al., 2024). Moreover, many studies conceptualise tourist experience using traditional survey-based approaches, which may fail to capture the spontaneity and richness of real-time digital expressions (Mkono & Tribe, 2017; Bastidas-Manzano et al., 2023; Költringer & Dickinger, 2024). In the case of Gorontalo, while the destination offers distinctive marine tourism, cultural heritage, and local traditions, there is limited empirical understanding of how tourists experience and narrate these attributes through social media. Recent studies have emphasised that user-generated content and digital storytelling provide valuable insights into tourists' lived experiences, emotional responses, and destination meanings that are often inaccessible through conventional methods (Wengel et al., 2023; Sigala, 2024). This raises a critical research problem: how are tourist experiences in Gorontalo constructed, represented, and shared within digital environments, and what meanings emerge from these narratives?

In response to this problem, this study aims to explore and interpret tourist experiences in Gorontalo through social media data using a netnographic approach. Specifically, the research seeks to (1) identify dominant themes in tourists' narratives, (2) analyse the emotional and experiential dimensions reflected in user-generated content, and (3) understand

how tourists construct meanings and perceptions of Gorontalo as a destination. By focusing on naturally occurring data from social media, this study moves beyond traditional methods and captures authentic, experience-based insights. The adoption of netnography enables a deeper exploration of the cultural and symbolic aspects of tourist experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of how these experiences are communicated and shared in digital contexts (Kozinets, 2020).

Although the literature on tourist experience and social media has expanded significantly in recent years, several research gaps remain. First, much of the existing research emphasises quantitative metrics such as ratings, sentiment scores, or behavioural intentions, with limited attention to the qualitative and narrative dimensions of tourist experience (Marine-Roig, 2019). Second, studies employing netnography in tourism are still relatively scarce and often concentrated in Western or highly developed destinations, leaving emerging destinations underrepresented (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Third, there is a lack of context-specific studies that examine how local cultural, environmental, and social characteristics shape tourist experiences in regions like Gorontalo. These gaps highlight the need for a more interpretive and context-sensitive approach to understanding tourist experience in the digital age.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a novel contribution that integrates social media data with netnographic analysis to explore tourist experience in an under-researched destination. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Gorontalo as a case study, providing new empirical insights into how tourist experiences are constructed in emerging tourism contexts. Furthermore, by adopting a netnographic approach, the study emphasises the importance of narrative, meaning, and cultural interpretation, moving beyond purely quantitative analyses. This approach not only enriches the theoretical understanding of tourist experience but also provides practical value for destination managers seeking to develop more authentic and experience-driven tourism strategies. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital tourism by demonstrating how social media can be utilised as a powerful lens for understanding the evolving nature of tourist experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in netnography to explore how tourist experiences in Gorontalo are constructed and communicated through social media narratives. Netnography, as an adaptation of ethnography to online environments, is particularly suitable for examining naturally occurring digital interactions and user-generated content (UGC) shared across social media platforms (Kozinets, 2020). The study follows an interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand how tourists assign meaning to their experiences rather than testing predefined hypotheses.

To enhance methodological transparency, the research was conducted through several sequential stages. First, relevant social media content was identified using tourism-related keywords and hashtags, including #Gorontalo, #VisitGorontalo, #GorontaloTrip, #ExploreGorontalo, and other contextually relevant terms. Content was collected from

Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X), as these platforms represent major spaces where tourists share experiences and interact with tourism-related content.

Second, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select information-rich posts that directly reflected tourism experiences in Gorontalo. Posts were included if they contained personal travel narratives, destination evaluations, emotional expressions, descriptions of attractions, cultural encounters, or reflections on tourism facilities and accessibility. Commercial advertisements, duplicated posts, unrelated content, and purely promotional materials were excluded from the dataset. Following this screening process, approximately 750 publicly available posts published between 2022 and 2025 were retained for analysis.

Third, the selected data underwent a systematic coding procedure. The analysis began with open coding, where captions, comments, hashtags, and contextual visual descriptions were examined line by line to identify recurring concepts and experiential expressions. Similar codes were subsequently grouped through axial coding into broader thematic categories. Through iterative comparison and constant refinement, four overarching themes emerged: natural immersion, cultural encounter, emotional resonance, and infrastructural negotiation. These themes were then interpreted using a netnographic lens to uncover the deeper meanings, values, and symbolic representations embedded within tourists' narratives.

To ensure analytical rigour, coding was conducted iteratively, with repeated comparison between data sources, emerging themes, and theoretical concepts. Detailed coding notes and analytical memos were maintained throughout the research process to enhance transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness of interpretation.

Research Setting and Platform Selection

The study focuses on social media platforms that are widely used for sharing tourism experiences, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X). These platforms were selected not only because of their popularity among travelers but also because they represent distinct communication cultures and affordances that shape how tourism experiences are expressed and interpreted. Instagram primarily facilitates visual storytelling through curated images, captions, and destination aesthetics, making it particularly relevant for examining destination image formation. TikTok emphasizes short-form video content and experiential performance, enabling users to communicate authenticity, emotions, and immersive travel experiences through dynamic audiovisual narratives. In contrast, Twitter (X) supports more text-oriented and conversational interactions, allowing users to express opinions, evaluations, and real-time reflections on tourism experiences.

Recognizing these differences is important because platform-specific affordances influence both the content and form of user-generated narratives. Consequently, the study does not treat social media data as a homogeneous dataset but considers how different platforms contribute distinct dimensions of tourist experience representation. During the analytical process, attention was given to the dominant communicative characteristics of each platform to ensure that interpretations remained sensitive to the contexts in which narratives were produced and shared.

Gorontalo, as an emerging tourism destination, is increasingly represented through

hashtags such as #Gorontalo, #VisitGorontalo, and #GorontaloTrip, which serve as entry points for identifying relevant online communities and content streams. The research setting is therefore conceptualized as a digital field site, where interactions among tourists, content creators, and audiences collectively contribute to the construction of destination meanings and tourism experiences.

Table 1. Platform Characteristics and Analytical Relevance

Platform	Dominant Content Form	Main Communication Characteristic	Analytical Relevance
Instagram	Images and captions	Visual storytelling and destination aesthetics	Destination image representation
TikTok	Short-form videos	Experiential performance and emotional engagement	Experience narration and authenticity
Twitter (X)	Text-based posts	Opinion sharing and public discourse	Evaluation and real-time reflections

Source: Developed by the authors based on platform affordance literature.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection follows the principles of non-participant netnography, where the researcher observes and collects publicly available data without actively engaging with users. The dataset consists of textual captions, comments, hashtags, and selected visual content (images and short videos) associated with tourism-related posts about Gorontalo. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure that the data reflects rich and relevant tourist experiences.

The data collection process involves several steps. First, relevant keywords and hashtags are identified to locate content streams. Second, posts are selected based on criteria such as relevance to tourism experience, level of engagement (likes, comments, shares), and richness of narrative content. Third, a time-bounded sampling frame (e.g., posts from the last three years) is applied to capture contemporary tourism dynamics. Approximately 500–1,000 posts are collected to ensure sufficient depth and diversity of data. All data are archived systematically, including metadata such as posting date, engagement metrics, and platform source, to support subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis: Netnographic Coding and Interpretation

The analysis follows Kozinets' (2020) netnographic framework, which involves data immersion, coding, categorisation, and interpretation. The process begins with repeated reading and familiarisation with the dataset to identify recurring patterns and themes. This is followed by open coding, where textual and visual data are segmented into meaningful units representing aspects of tourist experience (e.g., "natural beauty", "local interaction", "accessibility issues", "emotional responses").

Subsequently, axial coding is conducted to group these initial codes into broader thematic categories, such as cognitive (e.g., attractions, facilities), affective (e.g., emotions, satisfaction), and experiential (e.g., activities, interactions) dimensions of tourist experience. Visual content is analysed in conjunction with textual narratives to capture multimodal

meanings, recognising that images and videos play a crucial role in expressing and shaping tourist experiences.

Finally, interpretive analysis is applied to uncover deeper cultural meanings, symbolic representations, and narrative structures. This includes examining how tourists frame their experiences, how authenticity is constructed, and how Gorontalo is positioned within broader tourism imaginaries. The analysis is iterative and reflexive, allowing themes to evolve as new insights emerge.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applies several qualitative validation strategies. First, data triangulation is achieved by analysing content from multiple social media platforms, allowing for comparison and validation of emerging themes. Second, thick description is used to provide detailed contextualisation of narratives, enhancing the transferability of findings. Third, reflexivity is maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher critically reflecting on interpretive decisions and potential biases. Additionally, an audit trail of coding procedures and analytical steps is documented to ensure transparency and dependability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to the netnographic approach adopted in this study. The research relies exclusively on publicly accessible data, ensuring that no private or restricted content is used. User anonymity is strictly maintained by removing or anonymising identifiable information such as usernames, profile images, and specific personal details. The study also adheres to platform-specific terms of service and ethical guidelines for internet research (Kozinets, 2020).

Furthermore, the researcher remains sensitive to issues of representation and consent, recognising that although social media content is publicly available, it is still embedded within personal and cultural contexts. Care is taken to avoid misinterpretation or decontextualisation of users' narratives, and findings are presented in a way that respects the integrity of the original content. This ethical rigor ensures that the study aligns with international standards for qualitative and digital research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Netnographic Dataset

The netnographic analysis draws on approximately 750 publicly available social media posts (Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X) related to tourism experiences in Gorontalo. The dataset comprises captions, comment threads, hashtags, and selected visual content posted between 2022 and 2025. Through iterative coding and thematic interpretation, the analysis identifies four overarching experiential dimensions: (1) *natural immersion*, (2) *cultural encounter*, (3) *emotional resonance*, and (4) *infrastructural negotiation*. These dimensions reflect how tourists construct, interpret, and communicate their experiences within digital environments.

Theme 1: Natural Immersion and Marine Aesthetics



Figure 1: Natural Immersion and Marine Aesthetics

Sources: getlost, pariwisatagorontalo, superlive, goersapp, dewikandri, 2025

The most dominant theme emerging from the data is the experience of natural immersion, particularly related to Gorontalo's marine biodiversity and coastal landscapes. Tourists frequently describe encounters with whale sharks, coral reefs, and pristine beaches as "unreal", "untouched", and "hidden paradise". These narratives emphasise sensory engagement visual clarity of water, proximity to marine life, and the tranquillity of less crowded environments. Representative narrative excerpts include:

"Swimming with whale sharks here feels surreal... like a secret the world hasn't fully discovered yet."

"The water is so clear, you can see everything without even diving deep. Pure magic."

From a coding perspective, this theme aligns strongly with the cognitive dimension of tourist experience (attractions, natural assets), while also triggering affective responses such as awe and excitement. The repeated framing of Gorontalo as "hidden" suggests that exclusivity and discovery are key elements of its experiential appeal.

Theme 2: Cultural Encounter and Local Authenticity



Figure 1: Natural Immersion and Marine Aesthetics
Sources: WonderfulIndonesia, omarniode, analisadaily, 2025

A second prominent theme relates to cultural encounters and local authenticity, where tourists highlight interactions with local communities, traditional practices, and culinary experiences. Unlike highly commercialised destinations, Gorontalo is often described as “genuine”, “simple”, and “welcoming”, reflecting a perceived authenticity that enhances the overall experience.

Narrative excerpts illustrate this dimension:

“The locals are incredibly warm. They don’t just serve you—they talk, share stories, and make you feel part of their life.”

“Trying local food here is an experience itself. It’s not fancy, but it feels real.”

This theme reflects the experiential and relational dimension of tourism, where meaning is constructed through social interaction and cultural exchange. Authenticity is not framed as staged performance but as everyday lived experience, reinforcing Gorontalo’s identity as a culturally grounded destination.

Theme 3: Emotional Resonance and Personal Reflection

Beyond physical and cultural attributes, the data reveal a strong emphasis on emotional resonance, where tourists articulate feelings of peace, escape, and personal transformation. Many posts frame Gorontalo as a place for “disconnecting” from urban life and “reconnecting” with oneself. Representative narratives include:

“No crowds, no noise just nature and silence. This is the kind of place that resets your mind.”

“Gorontalo wasn’t just a trip, it felt like therapy.”

This theme corresponds to the affective dimension of tourist experience, highlighting how destinations evoke emotional and psychological responses. Interestingly, these narratives often extend beyond immediate experience to include reflective and introspective meanings, suggesting that Gorontalo functions as a space of emotional recovery and mindfulness.

Theme 4: Infrastructural Negotiation and Accessibility Challenges

Despite predominantly positive narratives, a contrasting theme emerges infrastructural negotiation, where tourists discuss challenges related to accessibility, transportation, and

limited facilities. These narratives do not necessarily negate the overall experience but introduce a layer of realism and critical reflection.

Illustrative excerpts include:

“Getting here is not easy, but that’s probably why it’s still so beautiful.”
“The place is amazing, but infrastructure needs improvement—roads and facilities are still limited.”

This theme highlights the conative and evaluative dimension of tourist experience, where visitors assess trade-offs between accessibility and authenticity. Rather than purely negative, these narratives often frame challenges as part of the adventure, reinforcing the idea of Gorontalo as an “off-the-beaten-path” destination.

Thematic Synthesis

Table 1. Summary of Netnographic Coding Themes

Theme	Dimension	Key Meanings	Narrative Tone
Natural Immersion	Cognitive + Affective	Marine beauty, exclusivity, discovery	Highly positive
Cultural Encounter	Experiential	Authenticity, local interaction	Positive
Emotional Resonance	Affective	Peace, escape, self-reflection	Highly positive
Infrastructural Negotiation	Conative	Accessibility, limitations, trade-offs	Mixed

Source: Authors, 2025

Interpretation: Constructing Tourist Experience in Gorontalo

The findings demonstrate that tourist experience in Gorontalo is multi-dimensional and narratively constructed, combining sensory, emotional, cultural, and evaluative elements. Unlike mass tourism destinations, Gorontalo’s experience is characterised by authenticity, intimacy, and discovery, which are repeatedly emphasised across narratives. At the same time, the presence of infrastructural concerns indicates that tourist experience is not purely idealised but shaped by practical realities.

Importantly, these findings confirm that social media functions as a space where tourist experience is not only shared but also interpreted and co-constructed, with users framing their journeys through storytelling, emotion, and symbolic meaning. The combination of positive experiential narratives and critical reflections suggests that Gorontalo’s image is emerging as a balanced and evolving representation, rather than a purely commodified or idealised one.

Rather than representing isolated categories, these four experiential dimensions are closely interconnected in shaping tourists’ overall perceptions of Gorontalo. Natural immersion often provides the initial attraction that motivates visitation, while cultural encounters enrich the experiential value of the destination through interactions with local traditions and communities. Emotional resonance emerges from the personal meanings and affective responses generated through these experiences, whereas infrastructural negotiation reflects tourists’ evaluations of the practical conditions that facilitate or constrain their journeys.

Together, these dimensions illustrate that tourist experiences are multidimensional and socially constructed, combining environmental, cultural, emotional, and functional aspects that are subsequently communicated and reinforced through social media narratives.

Discussion

The identification of four interconnected experiential dimensions suggests that tourist experiences in Gorontalo are not shaped by a single dominant factor but emerge through the interaction of environmental attractions, cultural engagement, emotional responses, and infrastructural conditions. This finding reinforces the multidimensional nature of tourist experience construction within digital tourism environments.

The findings of this study reveal that tourist experiences in Gorontalo are constructed through a complex interplay of sensory engagement, emotional resonance, cultural interaction, and infrastructural negotiation. This multi-dimensional structure aligns closely with the experience economy framework proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999), and further developed in tourism contexts, where experiences are understood as staged yet personally interpreted events encompassing entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics (Oh et al., 2007). In the case of Gorontalo, the dominance of natural immersion and marine aesthetics reflects the aesthetic and escapist realms, while cultural encounters correspond to the educational dimension, where tourists actively engage with local traditions and communities. However, unlike highly commodified destinations, these experiences appear less staged and more organically embedded in everyday life, suggesting a form of “emergent authenticity” rather than constructed authenticity.

The strong presence of emotional resonance in tourists’ narratives further reinforces the importance of affective experience in shaping overall destination perception. This finding supports Hosany and Gilbert (2010), who argue that emotions play a central role in tourism experiences, influencing satisfaction, memory formation, and behavioural intentions. In Gorontalo, expressions such as “peace”, “healing”, and “escape” indicate that the destination functions as a space of psychological restoration, aligning with the concept of transformative tourism experiences (Neuhofer et al., 2014). Importantly, these emotional responses are not isolated individual reactions but are collectively shared and reinforced through social media, suggesting that affective meanings are socially constructed and amplified within digital communities.

At the same time, the findings extend existing literature by highlighting the role of authenticity as a relational and negotiated construct. Unlike traditional notions of authenticity rooted in objective or staged attributes, the narratives analysed in this study suggest that authenticity in Gorontalo emerges through interpersonal interactions, everyday practices, and perceived sincerity of local communities. This aligns with the concept of existential authenticity, where authenticity is experienced subjectively through personal engagement and self-reflection (Wang, 1999; further developed in contemporary tourism studies such as Rickly-Boyd, 2012). The repeated emphasis on “simplicity” and “genuine hospitality” indicates that tourists value experiences that contrast with the hyper-commercialisation of mainstream destinations, positioning Gorontalo as an alternative tourism space.

However, the presence of infrastructural negotiation introduces an important nuance to the discussion. While previous studies often portray positive experiences as the primary drivers of destination attractiveness, this study shows that perceived challenges can coexist with positive evaluations. Tourists frequently frame limited infrastructure not as a deterrent but as part of the destination's charm, reinforcing its "off-the-beaten-path" identity. This finding resonates with the concept of serious leisure and adventure tourism, where effort and difficulty enhance the perceived value of the experience (Tsaur et al., 2013). At the same time, it highlights a critical tension: while limited development supports authenticity, it may also constrain accessibility and scalability of tourism.

From a digital perspective, the findings confirm that social media serves as a key platform for the co-construction of tourist experience narratives, extending beyond simple documentation to include interpretation and meaning-making. This supports recent work by Munar and Jacobsen (2014), who argue that social media enables tourists to become storytellers and influencers in shaping destination perception. In the context of Gorontalo, the emphasis on "hidden paradise" and "undiscovered destination" illustrates how tourists collectively construct a narrative of exclusivity and discovery, which in turn influences future visitation patterns. This process reflects a form of bottom-up destination branding, where image formation is driven by tourists rather than institutional actors.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the tourism literature in three significant ways. First, it advances the understanding of tourist experience by demonstrating how cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions are intertwined and co-constructed through digital narratives. While previous studies have often treated these dimensions separately, this research shows that they operate simultaneously within social media discourse. Second, the study introduces the idea of "experiential authenticity in emerging destinations", highlighting how authenticity is shaped by limited commodification, local interaction, and perceived remoteness. Third, it extends netnographic research by illustrating how digital storytelling functions as both a reflective and performative practice, where tourists not only describe their experiences but also actively shape their meaning and value.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer important implications for tourism development in Gorontalo and similar emerging destinations. The strong appeal of natural immersion and authenticity suggests that development strategies should prioritise sustainable and experience-based tourism rather than mass tourism expansion. At the same time, the presence of infrastructural challenges indicates the need for balanced development, where improvements in accessibility and facilities do not compromise the destination's core experiential value. Furthermore, the role of social media narratives highlights the importance of engaging with digital communities and leveraging user-generated content as a strategic resource for destination branding.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that tourist experience in Gorontalo is not only shaped by physical attributes but also by emotional, social, and digital processes. By linking empirical findings with theoretical perspectives, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how experiences are constructed, shared, and valued in the context of emerging tourism destinations.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that tourist experiences in Gorontalo are multi-dimensional, interpretive, and socially constructed through digital narratives shared on social media. By applying a netnographic approach, the findings reveal four dominant experiential dimensions: natural immersion, cultural encounter, emotional resonance, and infrastructural negotiation, which collectively shape how tourists perceive and evaluate the destination. Unlike mass tourism destinations characterised by commodified experiences, Gorontalo is consistently framed as an authentic, emerging, and experiential destination, where value is derived from simplicity, local interaction, and environmental richness.

Importantly, the study highlights that tourist experience is not merely an individual phenomenon but is co-constructed through digital storytelling practices. Social media platforms function as spaces where tourists narrate, interpret, and validate their experiences, thereby contributing to a shared and evolving understanding of the destination. The coexistence of highly positive narratives (e.g., emotional fulfilment, natural beauty) and critical reflections (e.g., infrastructural limitations) indicates that tourist experience in Gorontalo is both aspirational and grounded in reality, resulting in a nuanced and credible destination image.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to tourism theory in several key ways. First, it advances the conceptualisation of tourist experience by demonstrating that cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions are deeply interconnected and co-produced within digital environments. Rather than operating as discrete constructs, these dimensions are simultaneously expressed and negotiated through social media narratives.

Second, the study extends the discourse on authenticity by introducing the notion of “experiential authenticity in emerging destinations”, where authenticity is not staged but emerges from everyday interactions, perceived remoteness, and limited commodification. This perspective challenges dominant frameworks that associate authenticity with either objective attributes or staged performances, offering a more context-sensitive understanding.

Third, the research contributes methodologically by showcasing the value of netnography as a robust approach for capturing lived experiences in digital contexts. By focusing on naturally occurring data, the study provides richer and more spontaneous insights compared to traditional self-reported methods, thereby strengthening the empirical depth of tourist experience research.

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer several strategic insights for tourism stakeholders in Gorontalo and similar emerging destinations. First, the strong emphasis on natural immersion and authenticity suggests that tourism development should prioritise experience-based and sustainable tourism models, rather than pursuing mass tourism expansion. Preserving environmental integrity and cultural authenticity is essential to maintaining the destination’s unique appeal.

Second, the presence of infrastructural challenges highlights the need for balanced and context-sensitive development. While improvements in accessibility, transportation, and basic facilities are necessary, they should be implemented in a way that does not undermine the destination's experiential value or lead to over-commercialisation.

Third, the study underscores the importance of leveraging social media as a strategic tool for destination branding. Rather than relying solely on top-down promotional campaigns, destination managers should engage with user-generated content, encourage authentic storytelling, and monitor digital discourse to better understand tourist perceptions and expectations. Finally, the findings suggest that policymakers should adopt a participatory and adaptive governance approach, where insights from social media analytics are integrated into tourism planning and decision-making processes.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the research relies exclusively on publicly available social media data, which may not fully represent all tourist segments, particularly those who are less active in digital platforms. This introduces a potential bias towards younger and more digitally engaged users.

Second, the study focuses primarily on textual and interpretive analysis, with limited incorporation of advanced visual analytics. Given the highly visual nature of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, future research could benefit from integrating multimodal analysis, including image recognition and video content analysis, to capture a more comprehensive understanding of tourist experience.

Third, the study is context-specific to Gorontalo, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future studies could adopt a comparative approach across multiple emerging destinations to examine how different cultural, environmental, and developmental contexts influence tourist experience.

Fourth, the research adopts a cross-sectional design, analysing data within a specific time frame. Considering the dynamic nature of social media and tourism trends, future research should explore longitudinal approaches to understand how tourist experiences and destination perceptions evolve over time.

Overall, this study highlights that in the digital era, tourist experience is no longer confined to physical encounters but is continuously shaped, shared, and reinterpreted through online narratives. Understanding this transformation is crucial for developing more authentic, sustainable, and experience-driven tourism strategies, particularly in emerging destinations such as Gorontalo.

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