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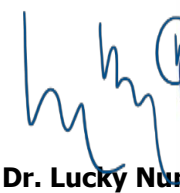
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A New Decade for Social Changes



The Potential of Foreign Influencers As Brand Ambassadors in Tourism Diplomacy: An Analysis of Indonesia's Image Representation On Global Social Media

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Abstract. This study examines the potential role of foreign influencers as brand ambassadors in Indonesia's tourism diplomacy through global social media exposure. The growing influence of digital platforms has created new opportunities for shaping international perceptions of destinations. Therefore, this research aims to explore how Indonesia's image is represented through content produced by foreign influencers and how their role can be interpreted within the framework of tourism diplomacy. A qualitative approach was employed using thematic analysis of responses from ten non-Indonesian audiences who viewed travel content created by iShowSpeed and Wildcarlos during their visits to Indonesia. The findings indicate that Indonesia's image is largely constructed through influencers' spontaneous narratives that highlight the warmth of local communities, cultural uniqueness, and the vibrancy of urban and tourist destinations. The study suggests that foreign influencers possess significant potential to function as informal brand ambassadors who can strengthen the global reach of Indonesia's tourism diplomacy.

Keywords. influencer, brand ambassador, soft power, tourism marketing, nation branding

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, tourism promotion is no longer exclusively conducted by formal state actors such as ministries, tourism boards, or diplomatic representatives. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has enabled non-state actors to influence international perceptions of destinations through visual narratives and personal storytelling. In the tourism sector, foreign influencers have emerged as prominent actors who can shape destination images by sharing travel experiences with global audiences. Their content often reaches millions of viewers, making them influential intermediaries in shaping how countries are perceived internationally. This development reflects a broader transformation in tourism communication where informal digital actors contribute to the construction of destination branding and international image formation (Abidin, 2020; Yang et al., 2024).

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context. Through the national branding campaign *Wonderful Indonesia*, the government primarily through the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy has consistently promoted Indonesia's tourism potential on the global stage. Nevertheless, statistical data indicate that international tourist arrivals remain highly concentrated in a limited number of destinations. In 2024, Bali accounted for approximately 37.99% of total foreign tourist visits, significantly surpassing other destinations across the archipelago (BPS, 2024). Such concentration suggests that Indonesia's global tourism image continues to be strongly associated with Bali, while many other culturally and geographically diverse destinations such as Yogyakarta, Medan, and Labuan Bajo remain underrepresented in international tourism narratives. If Indonesia's international image continues to be narrowly framed through a single destination, the broader potential of the country's cultural diversity and tourism assets may remain underutilized.

Within this evolving communication landscape, foreign influencers have begun to play an increasingly visible role in shaping narratives about Indonesia. Their social media content frequently portrays everyday interactions with local communities, cultural experiences, and visits to various destinations across the country. For example, the German content creator WildCarlos, who resides in Indonesia, regularly shares videos depicting daily life, local interactions, and cultural experiences in cities such as Medan. These videos often attract millions of views and generate extensive engagement from global audiences, illustrating how influencer-generated content can contribute to shaping perceptions of Indonesian society and culture. In several instances, such influencers have even attracted attention from government officials. A notable example is the interaction between WildCarlos and Indonesia's Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga Uno, during an Instagram Live session discussing tourism promotion. This interaction demonstrates the growing recognition of foreign influencers as potential partners in promoting Indonesia's tourism image internationally.

At the same time, other influencers present different forms of representation. The visit of IShowSpeed, a widely followed streamer from the United States, illustrates how entertainment-oriented content can also generate global attention toward Indonesia. His livestream activities during visits to several Indonesian destinations attracted significant online engagement and introduced Indonesia to new global audiences. However, the spontaneous and entertainment-driven nature of such content may also lead to simplified or partial representations of the country. Some audiences may perceive Indonesia primarily as lively and entertaining while overlooking its deeper cultural heritage and historical values. This illustrates both the opportunities and risks associated with influencer-driven narratives in shaping national images.

From a theoretical perspective, these developments intersect with discussions on soft power, nation branding, and digital public diplomacy. Soft power emphasizes the ability of a country to shape international preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2023). Within this framework, tourism promotion can serve as a powerful instrument for communicating cultural identity and national image. Similarly, the concept of nation branding highlights how countries strategically construct and communicate their identities to global audiences in order to enhance competitiveness and international reputation (Budiwaspada & Fadilah, 2021). Meanwhile, recent studies in tourism marketing highlight the increasing role of influencers in shaping travel decisions and destination perceptions through digital engagement (Niloy et al., 2023; Omeish et al., 2024). Despite these growing discussions, existing literature tends to examine these issues separately. Research on public diplomacy and nation branding largely focuses on state-led communication strategies, such as those conducted by governments,

embassies, or official tourism institutions (Ingenhoff et al., 2021). Conversely, studies on influencer marketing in tourism mainly emphasize commercial marketing outcomes, including consumer engagement and purchase intention, rather than examining their broader implications for national representation and diplomacy. Consequently, the role of foreign influencers as non-state actors within tourism diplomacy remains relatively underexplored in academic literature.

This study addresses this gap by examining how foreign influencers contribute to the representation of Indonesia in the digital sphere and how their activities can be interpreted within the framework of tourism diplomacy. Unlike prior studies that primarily analyze state-driven promotional strategies, this research investigates how influencer-generated content shapes international perceptions of Indonesia and how such actors may function as informal brand ambassadors in global tourism communication. Accordingly, this study aims to answer two primary research questions: 1) How is Indonesia's image represented through social media content produced by foreign influencers?; 2) How can foreign influencers be interpreted as potential brand ambassadors within the context of Indonesia's tourism diplomacy?.

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the expanding discourse on digital public diplomacy and nation branding by highlighting the strategic role of non-state digital actors in shaping international tourism narratives. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical insights into the intersection of influencer culture and diplomacy, as well as practical implications for developing collaborative strategies between governments and digital influencers in strengthening Indonesia's global tourism competitiveness. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the research methodology used in this study. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of findings regarding the representation of Indonesia in influencer-generated content and its implications for tourism diplomacy. The final section presents the study's conclusions and recommendations.

Research Method

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy using a qualitative approach to understand how Indonesia's image is constructed and interpreted through digital narratives produced by foreign influencers. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meanings, perceptions, and interpretations embedded within social and cultural contexts, particularly in the analysis of media representation and tourism narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study applies a descriptive qualitative case study design to explore how influencer-generated content contributes to the representation of Indonesia in the global digital sphere and how such representations may relate to tourism diplomacy.

The research focuses on digital content produced by foreign influencers who independently share their experiences in Indonesia through social media platforms. Two cases were selected as the primary focus of analysis. The first case involves WildCarlos, a German content creator who frequently publishes YouTube videos portraying everyday interactions with local communities and cultural experiences in Indonesian cities such as Medan and Bukittinggi. The second case involves IShowSpeed, a well-known American streamer whose visit to Indonesia generated highly viral and entertainment-oriented content that reached millions of international viewers. These two influencers were selected because their content represents different narrative styles, one emphasizing cultural immersion and daily life experiences, and the other highlighting spontaneous entertainment-based engagement with global audiences.

Participants in this study consisted of 13 non-Indonesian audience members who had previously watched social media content produced by both influencers during their visits to

Indonesia. Respondents were purposively selected to capture diverse international perspectives, with participants originating from Europe, the United States, Asia, and Oceania. Purposive sampling was applied because it enables the selection of participants who possess relevant knowledge or experience related to the research topic (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria for respondents were as follows: (1) not an Indonesian citizen, (2) having watched social media content about Indonesia created by WildCarlos and IShowSpeed, (3) actively using social media platforms to consume tourism-related content, and (4) willingness to participate in an interview conducted in English. Initial respondents were contacted through international digital communities, and additional participants were recruited through referral recommendations from previous respondents.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews combined with digital content observation. In the interview process, respondents were first shown selected social media content produced by the influencers. After viewing the material, participants were asked to share their perceptions regarding how Indonesia was represented in the content and how these representations influenced their impressions of the country. A total of 14 main interview questions were prepared based on two major analytical themes: (1) the representation of Indonesia's image through influencer-generated social media content, and (2) the interpretation of foreign influencers as potential brand ambassadors within the context of tourism diplomacy. Although a structured list of guiding questions was used, respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their answers freely. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify responses or explore emerging insights. This flexible interview format allowed participants to express their perceptions naturally while maintaining alignment with the study's research objectives.

In addition to interview data, the study also utilized secondary data sources to strengthen contextual understanding and support data triangulation. These sources included observations of social media content from platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as relevant news articles, tourism promotion documents, official press releases, and user-generated comments reflecting international audience reactions. The integration of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to capture both the narrative construction of Indonesia's image by influencers and the responses generated among global audiences.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which is widely applied in qualitative research to identify patterns of meaning within textual and narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The analysis process followed six systematic stages: (1) familiarizing with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and digital content observations, (2) generating initial codes related to representations of Indonesia's image, (3) searching for broader themes that reflect recurring narratives, (4) reviewing and refining these themes to ensure coherence, (5) defining and naming the final themes, and (6) producing an analytical interpretation linking empirical findings to theoretical frameworks. In this study, thematic interpretation was also informed by tourism communication perspectives that emphasize how narratives, cultural values, and audience perceptions interact in shaping tourism discourse (Walters, 2016).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study applied several validation strategies. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing insights obtained from interviews, digital content observation, and supporting documents. Additionally, coding and theme development were carefully reviewed to ensure consistency between the empirical data and the resulting analytical interpretation. Ethical considerations were also carefully addressed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study

and voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews. To protect participant confidentiality, respondents' identities were anonymized using general identifiers such as "Respondent 1" or "Participant from Europe." All collected data were used solely for academic purposes and presented in a way that prevents identification of individual participants.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings of this study are presented based on thematic patterns derived from interview responses and digital content observations. The analysis identifies two overarching themes that correspond directly to the research questions: (1) the representation of Indonesia's image through foreign influencers' social media content, and (2) the role of foreign influencers as potential brand ambassadors within the context of tourism diplomacy. These themes emerged from systematic coding and thematic categorization of interview responses and observational data, following the procedures of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

The first theme highlights how Indonesia's image is constructed and perceived through the narratives created by foreign influencers on social media platforms. Audience responses consistently emphasize the attractiveness of Indonesian culture, the friendliness of local communities, and the authenticity of everyday life portrayed in the influencers' content. Many respondents expressed surprise at the warmth of Indonesian society and the simplicity of local lifestyles, which were often interpreted as positive cultural values. In addition, respondents noted that such representations evoke emotional engagement, leading them to imagine experiencing similar cultural encounters in Indonesia. These findings illustrate how influencer-generated narratives can function as forms of soft power by attracting international audiences through cultural appeal and relatable storytelling (Nye, 2023).

Another aspect emerging from this theme concerns the construction of Indonesia's national image through destination representation. Several respondents highlighted that the influencers' content broadened their understanding of Indonesia beyond Bali. Destinations such as Yogyakarta, North Sumatra, and other regions were perceived as culturally rich and visually appealing. This indicates that influencer-generated narratives can contribute to diversifying Indonesia's destination image and strengthening broader nation branding narratives (Budiwaspada & Fadilah, 2021). The thematic structure of these findings, including sub-themes and representative audience responses, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Structure of Research Findings

Main Theme	Sub-Theory / Sub-Theme	Initial Codes (Audience Responses)
Main Theme 1: Representation of Indonesia's Image through Foreign Influencers' Social Media Content (Soft Power & Nation Branding)		
Soft Power	Cultural attraction and community warmth	<i>"Indonesians are so kind", "I love their food and lifestyle", "So different from what I expected", "People are so welcoming", "They look so happy even with a simple life", "Carlos shows how locals really live", "Community vibes feel strong"</i>
	Emotional attraction and	<i>"I want to try a warung kopi too", "Carlos lives like locals, inspiring", "Speed's reaction makes</i>

Main Theme	Sub-Theory / Sub-Theme	Initial Codes (Audience Responses)
	lifestyle inspiration	<i>me want to visit", "It feels authentic, not touristy", "I want to experience local street food", "This makes me want to stay longer in Indonesia", "Carlos makes me imagine myself living there"</i>
Nation Branding	Diverse destination image	<i>"Indonesia is more than Bali", "Medan looks interesting", "Borobudur is breathtaking", "North Sumatra is underrated", "So many islands I never knew", "This shows the real Indonesia", "I didn't expect Yogyakarta to look like this"</i>
	National symbolic narratives and	<i>"Carlos shows authentic culture", "This content changes how I see Indonesia", "The traditions are beautiful", "Speed brings global eyes to Indonesia", "Their videos make Indonesia feel unique", "This shows national pride in a good way"</i>
Main Theme 2: The Role of Foreign Influencers as Potential Brand Ambassadors in Indonesia's Tourism Diplomacy (Digital Public Diplomacy & Influencer Marketing in Tourism)		
Digital Public Diplomacy	Non-state actors as cultural diplomats	<i>"Carlos is like an unofficial ambassador", "Speed puts Indonesia on the map", "He shows Indonesia better than ads", "This feels like real cultural diplomacy", "Foreign influencers represent Indonesia naturally", "They are bridging cultures", "Carlos is like a cultural translator"</i>
	Cross-national interaction through social media	<i>"I think global fans are now curious about Indonesia", "Foreigners commenting they want to visit", "So many people asking questions about culture", "The comment section feels like a global discussion", "This sparks curiosity among international viewers", "Foreign audiences learn through fun videos", "Fans are now Googling about Indonesia"</i>
Influencer Marketing in Tourism	Influencer credibility and authenticity	<i>"Carlos is trusted because he lives in Indonesia", "Speed's reactions feel raw and entertaining", "I believe them more than ads", "Carlos is not faking it", "Speed shows real emotions", "They don't sugarcoat it, that's why it feels real", "Authentic voice matters in tourism"</i>
	Effectiveness of destination	<i>"Better than government ads", "Viral content makes Indonesia famous", "Why not make them"</i>

Main Theme	Sub-Theory / Sub-Theme	Initial Codes (Audience Responses)
	promotion through influencers	<i>official ambassadors?", "Millions of views equal free promotion", "One viral video brings more attention than paid campaigns", "This is cheaper and more effective for Indonesia", "Their content reaches global youth directly"</i>

The second theme relates to the perceived role of foreign influencers as potential brand ambassadors within Indonesia's tourism diplomacy. Audience responses indicate that influencers are often perceived as informal cultural representatives who introduce Indonesia to global audiences through authentic storytelling. Several respondents described influencers such as WildCarlos as "unofficial ambassadors," suggesting that their presence and narratives can function as bridges between cultures. This perception reflects the growing importance of non-state actors in digital public diplomacy, where cultural communication increasingly occurs through decentralized digital networks rather than through formal diplomatic channels (Ingenhoff et al., 2021).

Another notable pattern concerns the influence of social media interaction in shaping international curiosity toward Indonesia. Respondents observed that comment sections on influencer content often evolve into spaces for cross-national discussion, where international viewers exchange information, ask questions about Indonesian culture, and express interest in visiting the country. Such interactions demonstrate how digital platforms facilitate transnational engagement and informal cultural exchange among global audiences.

The findings also reveal the importance of credibility and authenticity in influencer-driven tourism promotion. Respondents indicated that influencers who present spontaneous and genuine reactions are often perceived as more trustworthy than conventional promotional campaigns. In particular, the everyday lifestyle narratives presented by WildCarlos and the highly engaging entertainment style of IShowSpeed were interpreted as authentic experiences rather than scripted tourism advertisements. As a result, audiences felt that such content offered a more believable portrayal of Indonesia.

Finally, several respondents suggested that influencer-generated content may be highly effective in promoting tourism destinations due to its viral potential and extensive global reach. Viral videos that attract millions of views were frequently perceived as providing broader exposure than conventional government advertisements. These responses highlight how influencer marketing can operate as a complementary mechanism in tourism promotion strategies, particularly in reaching younger global audiences who consume travel content primarily through digital platforms (Omeish et al., 2024).

Overall, the results demonstrate clear patterns linking influencer-generated content, audience perceptions, and the representation of Indonesia in the global digital sphere. The thematic findings reveal that foreign influencers contribute not only to the formation of destination images but also to broader narratives of cultural attraction, national identity, and tourism diplomacy in the contemporary digital environment.

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section reveal important patterns regarding how Indonesia is represented and interpreted through foreign influencers' digital content. In the contemporary digital media landscape, social media has become a powerful arena where

narratives about destinations are constructed, circulated, and interpreted by global audiences. The presence of foreign influencers in this environment introduces new dynamics in tourism communication, as their content not only showcases destinations but also shapes international perceptions of culture, society, and national identity.

Based on the thematic findings, the discussion is organized into two main analytical dimensions. The first examines how Indonesia's image is represented through the visual and narrative content produced by foreign influencers on social media platforms. The second explores how these influencers may function as potential brand ambassadors within the broader framework of Indonesia's tourism diplomacy. Together, these perspectives provide a deeper understanding of how digital narratives created by non-state actors contribute to the construction of destination image and the expansion of Indonesia's tourism promotion in the global digital sphere.

Representation Of Indonesia's Image Is Shaped Through Social Media Content Produced By Foreign Influencers

The findings indicate that social media content produced by foreign influencers plays a significant role in shaping the representation of Indonesia's image. This is evident from audience responses that emphasize the cultural, emotional, and visual experiences they derive from the content. For example, one respondent from India (R1) stated: *"Indonesians are so kind, it feels like I already know them."* This reflects Nye's dimension of soft power, namely non-coercive attraction through a welcoming culture and society. The emotional dimension also emerges from audience reactions that express a desire to emulate the local lifestyle. A respondent from Germany (R3) noted: *"I want to try warung kopi too, it looks simple but meaningful."* This aligns with Nye's argument that soft power can operate through the imitation of lifestyles and cultural values considered attractive. Content produced by foreign influencers not only showcases destinations but also constructs a relatable Indonesian way of life.

In addition, visual appeal plays an important role. A respondent from the United States (R2) remarked: *"Borobudur is breathtaking, I didn't expect Yogyakarta to look like this."* This illustrates how nation branding works through diverse destination images. Indonesia is perceived not only as Bali but also as a country rich in cultural diversity and lesser-known destinations. The interviews also reveal how content contributes to symbolic national narratives. A respondent from China (R4) expressed: *"#WonderfulIndonesia works! It feels like a strong brand."* This demonstrates how national symbols, such as official government slogans, are reinforced by the way foreign influencers incorporate them into their narratives. This finding aligns with the concept of nation branding, which emphasizes the importance of consistent symbols in strengthening a country's image globally.

Triangulation with content observation shows that the visualization of Indonesians' everyday lives presented by foreign influencers is more effective in fostering emotional closeness. R5 from the United Kingdom stated: *"Carlos shows how locals really live, not just tourist spots."* This supports the finding that influencer practices succeed in building audience trust through a sense of authenticity. Audience emotional responses also appear in the form of personal connection. R6 from India remarked: *"Carlos makes me imagine myself living there, not just visiting."* This illustrates how Indonesia's image extends beyond being merely a tourist destination to becoming a space of life that allows for long-term emotional engagement. This strengthens the dimension of soft power, as the nation's image is formed through deeper and more enduring attraction.

From the perspective of destination diversification, respondents also highlighted regions of Indonesia that were previously unfamiliar. R7 from the Philippines stated: *"North Sumatra is underrated, I never thought it looks this beautiful."* This demonstrates how foreign influencers' content expands the representation of Indonesia beyond mainstream destinations. This finding supports the view Budiwaspadana & Fadilah (2021) that nation branding must showcase diversity. Symbolic representation also emerges when audiences interpret the content as part of national pride. R8 from the United States commented: *"This content changes how I see Indonesia, it's full of pride but not in a pushy way."* This indicates that branding strategies through influencers carry a subtler nuance compared to direct government promotions. This aligns with the findings of diplomacy theory, where representation through non-state actors is considered more natural and persuasive (Lestari et al., 2024). The interview findings also reveal that Indonesia's appeal arises not only from its visual aspects but also from community interactions. R9 from Malaysia stated: *"They look so happy even with simple life, that inspires me"* This representation reaffirms the concept of soft power, where culture and everyday societal values serve as the main attractions that construct a positive image.

The authenticity of foreign influencers' content has proven to be more easily accepted by global audiences compared to formal government content. R10 from France emphasized: *"This feels authentic, not touristy."* This highlights the gap between formal promotion (which tends to be commercial) and the organic content produced by foreign influencers. This aligns with Femenia-Serra & Gretzel (2020), which highlights the role of influencers in creating trust based on an authentic voice. The audience narratives also reveal that the representation of Indonesia constructed by foreign influencers is transformative. R11 from Japan stated: *"This makes me want to stay longer in Indonesia, not just for a vacation"*. This means that influencer content is able to transform Indonesia's image from merely a tourist destination into a space of lived experience. This reinforces the idea of soft power as a form of attraction capable of shifting the perspectives of international audiences. In addition, the presence of symbolic engagement in influencer narratives demonstrates the role of effective branding. R12 from Australia commented: *"The traditions are beautiful, it makes Indonesia unique compared to other Asian countries"*. This indicates that digital content highlighting cultural uniqueness holds significant potential in shaping Indonesia's differentiated image in the eyes of global audiences.

These findings also show that the representation of Indonesia's image through influencer content operates not only at a descriptive level but also at a normative one. R13 from Canada stated *"This shows national pride in a good way"*. Here it becomes clear that audiences perceive Indonesia not only as a tourist destination but also as a country with a cultural identity worthy of appreciation. Thus, foreign influencer content can be understood as a simultaneous practice of soft power and nation branding. From the perspective of soft power, this content emphasizes the cultural appeal, local communities, and lifestyles that evoke empathy and attract audiences.

From the perspective of nation branding, this content helps broaden Indonesia's image into one that is more diverse, authentic, and consistent with existing national symbols. Overall, the triangulation of interviews, content observation, and literature shows that the representation of Indonesia's image shaped through foreign influencer content is multidimensional. It combines visual, emotional, cultural, and symbolic aspects in building a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of global audiences. This illustrates that foreign influencers hold a strategic role in tourism diplomacy while simultaneously enriching the narrative about Indonesia in the international digital sphere.

The Role of Foreign Influencers as Potential Brand Ambassadors in the Context of Indonesia's Tourism Diplomacy

The study's findings indicate that foreign influencers play a significant role as informal brand ambassadors in introducing Indonesia to the world. This is evident from audience perceptions, which view their content not merely as entertainment but also as a representation of cultural diplomacy. R1 from the United States stated: *"Carlos is like an unofficial ambassador, I trust his perspective more than ads"*. This supports the understanding of public diplomacy, where non-state actors can effectively carry out diplomatic functions (Ingenhoff et al., 2021). Their influence is even considered stronger than official government promotions. R2 from Germany stated: *"This is better than government ads, because it feels natural"*. This illustrates how influencer marketing in tourism operates through an authentic voice, which cannot be replicated by formal advertising (Afren, 2024).

Cross-border interactions through social media also serve as a key feature of digital public diplomacy. R3 from the Philippines stated: *"Foreigners commenting they want to visit Indonesia shows how global the impact is"*. Social media comment sections become arenas for cross-cultural discussion, supporting the concept of public diplomacy, which is now transforming into an interactive network rather than merely one-way communication (Sari, 2020). The presence of foreign influencers is also perceived by audiences as a form of cultural bridge. R4 from the United Kingdom emphasized: *"They are bridging cultures, Carlos explains Indonesian habits in a way foreigners can understand"*. This aligns with the concept of cultural translation, in which individuals act as cultural interpreters for a global audience.

Triangulation with content observation shows that authenticity is a key factor in the effectiveness of digital diplomacy. This is because IShowSpeed and WildCarlos display their own distinctive traits without appearing "staged" and remain "in character," consistent with their established personas. This is further supported by R5 from Canada, who stated: *"Speed's reactions feel raw and entertaining, it doesn't look staged"*. This aligns with findings Abidin (2020), about relatable authenticity in influencer marketing (Laurance et al., 2023) where spontaneity actually strengthens the credibility of the message. The effectiveness of destination promotion through influencers is also evident from the impact of virality. R6 from India stated: *"One viral video brings more attention than paid campaigns"*. With millions of global viewers, foreign influencer content is able to reach audience segments that may not be accessible through official promotions. This reinforces the idea that influencers can serve as a more cost-effective promotional medium with wide-reaching impact (Abid et al., 2025).

Respondents also emphasized that the credibility of foreign influencers stems from how they immerse themselves in local life. R7 from Australia stated: *"Carlos is trusted because he lives in Indonesia, it makes his content more convincing"*. This indicates that the physical presence of influencers in Indonesia provides legitimacy that strengthens the public diplomacy message. The audience interaction aspect also indicates a process of social learning. R8 from Japan stated: *"So many people asking questions about culture, it becomes like a global classroom"*. This phenomenon shows that digital public diplomacy through influencers not only builds an image but also facilitates cross-border knowledge exchange.

In addition to raising awareness, influencer content also encourages concrete actions, such as interest in visiting. R9 from Malaysia emphasized: *"These videos make me want to book a ticket to Indonesia"*. This statement indicates that promotion carried out by foreign influencers has direct potential to boost tourism, in line with the concept of tourism diplomacy. This phenomenon also reveals an economic dimension of public diplomacy. R10 from France offered the following insight: *"Millions of views equal free promotion for Indonesia"*. Thus,

the role of influencers is not only cultural but also strategic in providing a high return on investment for Indonesia's tourism promotion.

From a branding perspective, audiences view foreign influencers as a representation channel that is more trusted than official figures. R11 from Thailand stated: *"They don't sugarcoat things, that's why it feels real"*. This reinforces the view that public diplomacy through influencers is more effective because it is not trapped in formal narratives that tend to glorify. Theoretical triangulation shows that digital public diplomacy through influencers occupies a unique position: on one hand, they are not state representatives, yet on the other, they are able to perform diplomatic functions more effectively. This is reflected in the comment of R12 from Singapore: *"It feels like real cultural diplomacy, even though it's not official"*.

The interview results also reveal a demand from audiences for the Indonesian government to formally recognize the role of foreign influencers. R13 from South Korea stated: *"Why not make them official ambassador? They are already promoting Indonesia for free"*. This statement opens a discussion about the potential for institutional collaboration between the government and influencers. The credibility and effectiveness demonstrated by foreign influencers in shaping Indonesia's image in the eyes of a global audience indicate that they have functioned as soft power agents. They not only introduce Indonesia but also build emotional connections between the global audience and the country. Thus, it can be concluded that foreign influencers play a strategic role in digital public diplomacy and the promotion of Indonesian tourism. Through their authenticity, global interactions, and wide reach, they are able to serve as effective brand ambassadors despite lacking formal legitimacy. This role positions them as non-state actors who make a significant contribution to Indonesia's nation branding on the global stage.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of Indonesia's image on global social media can be significantly shaped by content produced by foreign influencers. Through authentic visual storytelling and everyday cultural narratives, influencers such as WildCarlos and IShowSpeed introduce international audiences to diverse aspects of Indonesian society, culture, and tourism destinations beyond the commonly recognized image of Bali. These representations contribute to the formation of positive perceptions and emotional connections among global viewers, highlighting the capacity of influencer-generated content to function as an informal channel of tourism promotion.

The study also advances the discussion on tourism diplomacy by emphasizing the emerging role of non-state digital actors in shaping destination image and international cultural communication. Practically, the findings suggest that collaboration between tourism authorities and foreign influencers may offer a complementary strategy for expanding Indonesia's tourism promotion in the digital era. While this research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of influencer-driven narratives, further studies involving a wider range of influencers, digital platforms, and methodological approaches are needed to better understand the long-term implications of social media-based tourism communication for sustainable destination promotion and global tourism engagement.

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