



## THE USE OF INSTAGRAM SOCIAL MEDIA IN REGIONAL TOURISM BRANDING: A STUDY OF THE @visit.langkat ACCOUNT

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to analyze how Instagram social media is utilized as a regional tourism branding instrument through the @visit.langkat account using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) perspective. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to explain the digital tourism communication process more specifically, namely how the visual content and narrative of the regional account not only function as promotional media, but are also processed by the audience to shape perceptions and responses to the destination image. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with observation techniques on account posts, in-depth interviews with five informants who have seen or interacted with @visit.langkat content, and documentation. The results show that photos and videos of natural tourism, adventure activities, and tourist experiences act as effective stimuli in attracting audience attention. These stimuli are processed into positive perceptions of Langkat tourism as a natural, attractive, and diverse destination, then generate responses in the form of curiosity, interest in visiting, and actions to seek further information. Academically, this finding confirms the relevance of the SOR theory in the study of social media-based digital tourism branding. Practically, branding effectiveness will be stronger if visual content is supported by more complete, consistent, and contextual information regarding access, ticket prices, and destination facilities.*

**Keywords:** Instagram, tourism branding, SOR, audience perception, interest in visiting.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has transformed the way local governments, tourism actors, and the public produce and distribute tourism destination information. In the Indonesian context, this change is even more significant as internet penetration and social media usage continue to increase. Recent data indicates that Indonesia will have approximately 230 million internet users by the end of 2025, with a penetration rate of 80.5%, and 180 million social media user identities during the same period. These figures emphasize that the digital space is no longer a promotional complement, but rather a primary arena for shaping public attention, perception, and preference for a destination. In such a situation,

regional tourism branding cannot simply rely on conventional promotions; it requires a planned, persuasive, and sustainable digital communication strategy to enable destinations to stand out amidst the intense competition for information (APJII, 2024; DataReportal, 2026).

In the tourism sector, the urgency of strengthening digital branding is also increasingly apparent as tourist mobility and competition between destinations continues to increase. The Central Statistics Agency of North Sumatra Province recorded that the number of foreign tourists from January to June 2024 reached 115,966 visits, a 22.51% increase compared to the same period the previous year. This increase indicates that North Sumatra's tourism landscape is dynamic and requires more competitive destination image management. Langkat Regency, known for its natural and ecotourism attractions such as Bukit Lawang and Tangkahan, rivers, tropical forests, and adventure activities, has significant potential to be positioned as a distinctive destination. However, this potential will not automatically translate into a strong destination image if it is not consistently communicated through media that resonates with today's digital audience (BPS North Sumatra, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Among various digital platforms, Instagram holds a key position due to its focus on visual power, concise narratives, and direct interaction, enabling tourist destinations to be perceived not only as locations but also as symbolic experiences. DataReportal data indicates that Instagram will have a reach of approximately 108 million users in Indonesia by the end of 2025, making this platform highly potential for use in image-based tourism communications. Conceptually, previous research confirms that Instagram is effective in building brand awareness, strengthening destination image, and influencing travel intentions through photos, videos, captions, and audience engagement (Mantiri et al., 2024; Nurhasna & Azhar, 2025; Tanjung et al., 2024). Thus, Instagram functions not only as a visual showcase but also as a communication space that shapes audience meanings, expectations, and affections toward a tourist destination.

However, previous studies generally still position Instagram primarily as a promotional medium, digital public relations tool, or a means of increasing brand awareness and travel intentions. These studies have provided important foundations, but they have not fully explained the communicative mechanisms of how tourism content functions as a stimulus, how that stimulus is processed by the audience, and how this process results in perceptions and responses to the destination image. In other words, most studies still focus on media functions and their outcomes, while the psychological-communicative process dimensions between messages, interpretations, and audience responses remain under-explored, particularly in the context of regional tourism accounts like @visit.langkat (Rachman, 2024; Wandari & Pebriana, 2026; Mantiri et al., 2024).

Based on this gap, this study utilizes the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory as an analytical framework for a more nuanced understanding of digital tourism branding. Within this framework, visual and narrative content on Instagram accounts is understood as a stimulus, then processed within the cognitive and affective domains of the audience as an organism, before ultimately eliciting a response in the form of interest, positive perceptions, curiosity, and even a desire to seek further information or a desire to visit. The novelty of this research lies in its focus, which goes beyond simply assessing the effectiveness of Instagram as a promotional medium, but also explains how digital communication mechanisms operate within regional tourism accounts specifically. Thus,

this study seeks to broaden the reading of tourism branding from the original descriptive-promotional to a more analytical and audience-based meaning-making process (Rachman, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2025; Nurhasna & Azhar, 2025).

In this context, the Instagram account @visit.langkat is important to study because it displays a variety of content about nature tourism, adventure, and tourist experiences that have the potential to shape the tourism image of Langkat Regency in the digital space. However, the intensity of posts and visual appeal alone are not enough to prove that branding has worked effectively; this effectiveness needs to be seen in how the audience actually interprets the content and responds to it. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the use of Instagram as an instrument for regional tourism branding through the @visit.langkat account by explaining the relationship between content stimuli, audience perception processes, and the resulting responses. Academically, this study is expected to strengthen the relevance of SOR theory in the study of digital tourism communication, while practically, this research can serve as a basis for evaluation for account managers so that they not only display attractive visuals but also present complete, consistent, and contextual information regarding access, ticket prices, and destination facilities.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand how the @visit.langkat Instagram account is utilized as a regional tourism branding instrument, specifically through a communication process involving content stimuli, audience interpretation, and responses following exposure to digital messages. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study is not oriented toward statistical measurement, but rather toward exploring the meaning, experiences, and interpretations of audiences regarding tourism content displayed on social media. The object of this study is posts on the @visit.langkat Instagram account, which include photos, videos, captions, and other supporting elements such as hashtags as a form of communication stimulus. The research subjects were five informants, selected purposively based on the following criteria: having previously viewed @visit.langkat content, having an interest in tourism information, being able to explain their perceptions of the posts observed, and being willing to be interviewed in depth. These characteristics make the informants relevant to explaining how Instagram content is processed as digital tourism branding messages (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on identifying the characteristics of content uploaded by the @visit.langkat account, particularly those related to the visual appearance of destinations, narrative captions, tourist activities, and representations of tourist experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with five informants to explore how they received, interpreted, and responded to this content within the context of their perceptions of the tourism image of Langkat Regency. Meanwhile, documentation was used to collect visual archives in the form of screenshots of posts, captions, and forms of digital interaction relevant to the research focus. To maintain data validity, this study employed technical triangulation by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documentation, as well as source triangulation by examining the consistency of

responses between informants regarding the observed content. This step was taken to ensure that research interpretations were not based solely on a single type of data, but rather on the interconnectedness between sources and data collection techniques (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Miles et al., 2014).

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. In this study, the analysis was also designed thematically based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework to align with the research focus. The stimulus element was operationalized as all forms of messages displayed on Instagram accounts, such as the visual quality of photos and videos, the tourism theme, caption style, and informative elements accompanying the posts. The organism element was understood as the audience's internal process when receiving a stimulus, which was evident in attention, understanding, interpretation, emotional impressions, and the formation of perceptions of Langkat tourism. The response element was identified through the audience's subsequent responses, such as the emergence of interest, curiosity, interest in visiting, and actions to seek additional information regarding access, ticket prices, and destination facilities. With this framework, the study not only describes Instagram content as a promotional medium but also explains the mechanisms by which digital tourism messages are processed and generate responses in shaping the image of a regional destination (Miles et al., 2014).

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This research was conducted through observations of Langkat Regency tourism Instagram content and interviews with several informants who had viewed and interacted with the content. Based on the observations, the content presented was dominated by visuals of natural attractions such as waterfalls, rivers, tropical forests, as well as tourist activities such as rafting, trekking, cave exploration, and interactions with animals like orangutans and elephants. The content displayed not only focused on visual beauty but also showed direct tourism experiences, such as water activities, family gatherings, and adventure activities. This was reinforced by the use of persuasive and informative captions, as well as the use of hashtags that support the content's reach to a wider audience.

Table 2.  
Informant Summary

Fadli	22	Sibolga	I want to visit because of the comfortable villas perfect for family vacations.	No	Content drives family vacation plans.
Pujianti	26	Cirebon	I'm interested in visiting because of the many exciting and unexplored natural attractions.	No	Content excites them to explore the destination.
Putri	21	Medan	I'm attracted by the pristine natural beauty of Langkat, perfect for a relaxing getaway.	Yes	Content inspires a sense of wonder and changes perceptions about Langkat.
Hanum	27	Kabanjahe	I'm interested in trying extreme adventure tourism like cave exploration.	No	Content encourages interest in adventure

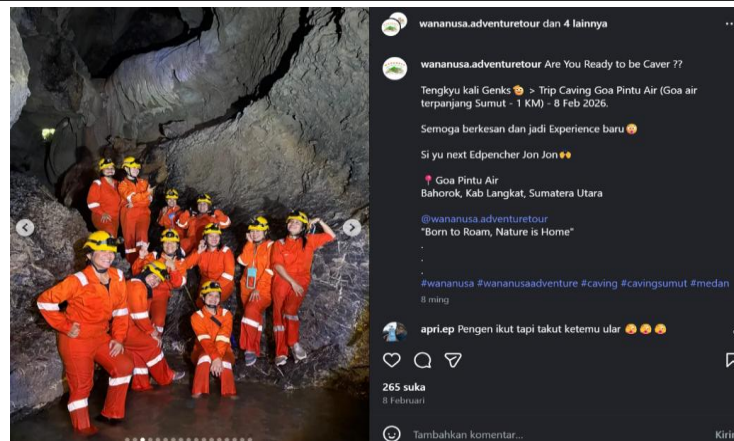
					tourism.
Amanda	25	Solo	I want to visit to experience direct interaction with elephants in the wild.	Yes	Content sparks curiosity and a desire to visit.

Based on the interviews, informants stated that the content they viewed was "interesting natural tourism exploration content" and featured "exciting outdoor tourism promotions." Furthermore, informants highlighted that the visuals presented a natural and calming feel, thereby capturing the audience's attention. In terms of perception, most informants stated that the content presented a positive image of tourism in Langkat Regency. One informant stated that the content evoked a sense of "amazement" and demonstrated that "it turns out there are many beautiful tourist attractions in Langkat." Another informant stated that the content gave the impression of being "comfortable, calm, and suitable for family vacations."

Furthermore, the interviews also indicated that the content presented was considered quite realistic and not exaggerated. Informants stated that the content "seemed real" because it depicted tourists' firsthand experiences, thus increasing trust in the information conveyed. In terms of response, most informants expressed interest in visiting after viewing the content. This was evident in informants' statements that the content "made me want to explore the place myself" and encouraged them to plan a vacation. Furthermore, informants revealed that they were encouraged to seek further information, such as ticket prices, location access, and available facilities. However, several shortcomings were identified, including a lack of detailed information in content such as road access, ticket prices, and supporting facilities. This forced audiences to seek additional information from other sources before deciding to visit.



Figure 1.1 Instagram Content Observation



**Figure 1.2 Content That Most Attracted the Attention of the Resource Person**

## Discussion

Research findings indicate that the @visit.langkat Instagram account functions as a tourism branding medium, relying on the power of visual stimuli. The predominance of content featuring waterfalls, rivers, tropical forests, rafting, trekking, cave exploration, and interactions with animals demonstrates that the account's primary message is Langkat's image as an authentic, diverse, and exploratory natural tourism destination. From a SOR perspective, the visuals, captions, and packaging of these tourism experiences serve as stimuli, the first communication stimulus received by the audience before forming further judgments. This demonstrates that digital tourism branding is determined not only by the presence of a social media account, but also by the account's ability to consistently select symbols, atmospheres, and experiences to communicate to the public. These findings align with the view that tourism social media plays a crucial role in shaping a destination's image through a combination of visuals, narratives, and user engagement (Pratiwi et al., 2025; Media et al., n.d.).

In terms of stimulus quality, the research findings indicate that the primary appeal of the @visit.langkat account lies in its ability to create a natural, serene, and engaging impression through strong visuals. Informants interpreted the content as "interesting natural tourism exploration content," "exciting outdoor tourism promotion," and even a sense of "awe" because it showcased many beautiful locations they had previously unknown. This finding is important because it demonstrates that visual stimuli go beyond informative functions to also produce affective effects. In the context of tourism communication, aesthetic and representative visuals can evoke imaginations about travel experiences, creating an initial emotional connection with the destination they see. This supports studies that suggest Instagram is effective in building brand awareness and destination appeal through consistent and resonant visual presentations with target audiences (Mantiri et al., 2024; Made et al., 2023).

At the organismal level, the findings demonstrate that audiences do not passively receive content but process it through perception, emotional evaluation, and symbolic experience. Audiences interpret Langkat not simply as an administrative region but as a tourist destination that is "comfortable, tranquil, and suitable for family vacations," while also appealing to adventure seekers. This process demonstrates that the same stimulus can be processed into a rich construction of meaning, as each audience brings their own

unique set of experiences, needs, and preferences when interpreting messages. Thus, the organism in SOR theory is evident in how audiences connect digital content to their personal expectations about vacations, comfort, exploration, and nature experiences. This finding expands on previous studies that generally position Instagram as a promotional tool, as it confirms that branding success depends heavily on the audience's internal meaning-making process, not just on the frequency of posts or aesthetic quality (Wandari & Pebriana, 2026; Nurhasna & Azhar, 2025).

Further findings confirm that positive audience perceptions are shaped not only by visual beauty but also by the perceived authenticity of the experience. Several informants considered the content on the @visit.langkat account to appear "real" because it showcases tourists' lived experiences, rather than simply overly promotional images. In digital communication studies, this element of authenticity is crucial because it enhances the credibility of the message and strengthens trust in the destination brand. This means that effective stimuli are not only visually appealing but also perceived as honest, realistic, and close to the experiences tourists might actually experience. This finding also demonstrates that in digital tourism branding, visual credibility serves as symbolic capital that influences the formation of a destination's image. This aligns with literature emphasizing that powerful social media messages are not only attention-grabbing but also those that convey the destination's identity convincingly and non-artificially (Purba, 2022; Nurhasna & Azhar, 2025).

In the response stage, this study found that audience responses emerged in stages. The initial response was affective, including awe, curiosity, interest, and a desire to explore the displayed location. This response then developed into behavioral tendencies, such as the desire to plan a vacation, try adventure tourism, or seek further information about tickets, access, and facilities. These findings demonstrate that responses within the SOR framework do not always take the form of an actual visit, but can involve changes in attitude orientation and behavioral intentions that lead to travel decisions. In other words, Instagram, in this study, proved effective in moving audiences from the attention stage to interest, and then to information seeking. This pattern corroborates previous research showing that social media can be a powerful stimulus for the emergence of visit intention through a visually and emotionally constructed perceptual process (Rachman, 2024; Made et al., 2023).

However, the research findings also indicate that the effectiveness of branding through Instagram is not fully optimal due to weaknesses in the information aspect. Several informants expressed high interest after viewing the content, but they still had to seek additional information from other sources regarding road access, ticket prices, and supporting facilities. From a SOR perspective, this situation indicates a strong emotional stimulus, but an insufficient cognitive one. While audiences are motivated to engage, this motivation doesn't immediately translate into informed decisions because the necessary practical information isn't readily available. This finding is important because it emphasizes that digital tourism branding shouldn't stop at visual aesthetics; it must be supported by informative narratives that help audiences move from interest to decision. This aligns with the notion that captions, storytelling, and comprehensive information are integral elements of a digital content strategy that determine the success of image building and audience engagement (Tanjung et al., 2024; Wandari & Pebriana, 2026).

Compared with previous studies, this research's results reinforce the view that Instagram is effective as a promotional medium for destination image building, but also expand on previous findings by detailing how this influence operates. Mantiri et al.'s (2024) study emphasized Instagram's role in building brand awareness, while Tanjung et al.'s (2024) study focused on managing Instagram as a promotional medium for tourist destinations. This research goes further by demonstrating that this effectiveness operates through the relationship between visual stimuli, the audience's interpretation process, and the subsequent behavioral responses. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this research lies in affirming that the success of digital tourism branding must be understood as a holistic communication process, not merely as a promotional output. From this perspective, SOR theory proves relevant in explaining how digital content can change the way audiences perceive and respond to regional tourist destinations.

This discussion confirms that the @visit.langkat account has been quite successful in building a positive image of Langkat Regency as an attractive, natural, diverse, and worthwhile natural tourist destination. This success is primarily supported by strong visuals, authentic representations of experiences, and the content's ability to evoke emotions and imagination in audiences. However, to achieve more mature branding, account managers need to strengthen the balance between visual appeal and comprehensive information, so that the account becomes not only a space for creating impressions but also a reference source that aids travel decision-making. Thus, the findings of this research emphasize that effective digital tourism branding must combine three elements: an engaging stimulus, a strong meaning-making process, and an audience response that is driven towards action. This kind of framework makes Instagram not just a promotional medium, but a strategic instrument in regional tourism communication based on experience and public perception.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the use of Instagram through the @visit.langkat account plays an effective role in building the tourism branding of Langkat Regency through a communication mechanism aligned with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework. Visual content showcasing natural beauty, adventure activities, and tourist experiences has been proven to function as a stimulus that attracts the audience's attention, which is then processed into a positive perception of Langkat as a natural, attractive, and diverse destination, and generates responses in the form of curiosity, interest in visiting, and the urge to seek further information. These findings confirm that Instagram functions not only as a visual promotional medium, but also as a strategic instrument in shaping the image of a regional destination. Practically, branding effectiveness will be more optimal if visual appeal is supported by more complete, consistent, and contextual information regarding access, ticket prices, and facilities. However, this study has limitations because it only focuses on one Instagram account, involves a limited number of informants, and uses a qualitative approach, thus not measuring quantitative influences on visiting decisions. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the object of study, increase the variety of informants, and use a quantitative or mixed methods approach to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of social media in regional tourism branding.

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