



TOURISM COMMUNICATION SOCIOLOGY: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Zulkifli Hi.Saleh

Department of Communication Science, Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara, Indonesia
Email : Email: zulkiflihs.san@gmail.com

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Abstract :

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the tourism industry, shifting it from a linear promotional model to an interactive, participatory, and platform-based communication ecosystem. This article aims to narratively examine the development of theories and concepts in the sociology of tourism communication, with particular emphasis on the dynamics of meaning construction, social interaction, and power relations within digital contexts. This study employs a narrative literature review approach by analyzing recent scholarly works indexed in the Scopus database within the 2019–2024 period. The findings reveal that the sociology of tourism communication has evolved across five major clusters: the construction of meaning and destination representation, symbolic interaction in tourism experiences, digitalization and communication platforms, power relations and hegemony, as well as intercultural communication and identity. Furthermore, the study identifies a paradigm shift from functionalist approaches toward constructivist and critical perspectives, in line with the increasing role of digital technology in shaping the social reality of tourism. Nevertheless, gaps remain in the integration of classical communication sociology theories with contemporary digital phenomena, as well as in the limited attention given to Global South contexts. This article contributes by providing a comprehensive theoretical synthesis while proposing future research agendas in the field of tourism communication sociology.

Keywords : *Sociology of communication; tourism communication; narrative literature review; digital tourism; representation; power; identity.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of the global tourism industry in the digital era has triggered a fundamental transformation in communication practices, which are no longer confined to promotional functions but have evolved into arenas of meaning production, social representation, and symbolic contestation. In this context, tourism communication becomes an integral part of broader social dynamics, where destinations are not merely marketed but are constructed as social realities through various forms of narratives, images, and technologically mediated interactions. Digital media, particularly algorithm-driven platforms such as social media and travel applications, have accelerated the circulation of information and expanded the participation of diverse actors in communication processes, thereby creating a networked, interactive, and decentralized communication ecosystem (Chu et al., 2020; Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Sartika et al., 2025; TT et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2020). From the perspective of communication sociology, this phenomenon signifies a shift from



communication as message transmission toward communication as a social practice that constructs reality and power relations.

A growing body of research highlights that tourism communication plays a central role in shaping tourists' perceptions, experiences, and decision-making processes. Studies on user-generated content (UGC) demonstrate that reviews, photos, and videos produced by tourists significantly influence destination image formation and the social legitimacy of tourist sites (Lalicic et al., 2021; Marine-Roig, 2021). Furthermore, research on smart tourism emphasizes how the integration of technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence has transformed interactions between tourists and destinations into more personalized and adaptive forms (Bekele & Raj, 2025; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kim et al., 2026; Koo et al., 2025). On the other hand, studies in intercultural communication within tourism reveal that interactions between tourists and local communities constitute dynamic processes of identity negotiation, where cultural meanings are not only exchanged but also negotiated and redefined (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021; Richards & Fernandes, 2023). Nevertheless, most existing studies remain oriented toward functionalist and marketing approaches, thereby offering limited attention to critical dimensions such as power relations, ideology, and representation in tourism communication.

The research gap in the sociology of tourism communication lies in the limited integration between classical theories of communication sociology and contemporary digital communication phenomena. Many studies examine tourism communication in isolation from broader theoretical frameworks, resulting in partial and less comprehensive analyses. Additionally, there is a tendency toward the dominance of Global North perspectives in the literature, leading to the underrepresentation of Global South contexts, particularly archipelagic regions such as Southeast Asia, which possess distinctive socio-cultural dynamics (Connell & Taulealo, 2021; Farmaki et al., 2021). Another gap concerns the lack of studies that connect micro-level aspects (symbolic interaction and tourist experiences) with macro-level dimensions (structures of power and the political economy of communication), despite their interrelated role in shaping tourism realities.

In response to these conditions, this study offers novelty through the development of a narrative literature review that integrates multiple approaches within communication sociology to understand the evolution of theories and concepts in tourism studies. This article not only maps the literature descriptively but also constructs a theoretical synthesis that connects meaning construction, social interaction, digitalization, power relations, and cultural dynamics within a comprehensive analytical framework. Accordingly, this study contributes to expanding the perspective of tourism communication sociology from a fragmented approach toward a more holistic and critical one.

The objective of this study is to examine in depth the development of theories and concepts in the sociology of tourism communication through a narrative literature review approach. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following questions: (1) how have communication sociology theories evolved

within tourism studies; (2) what are the main themes and approaches emerging in the literature; and (3) how are the relationships between communication, power, and culture constructed in contemporary tourism contexts. The method employed is a narrative literature analysis of reputable journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science within the 2019–2024 period. The analysis is conducted thematically and interpretively to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature (Paul & Criado, 2020; Snyder, 2019). Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a significant theoretical contribution to the development of tourism communication sociology in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a narrative literature review approach to examine the development of theories and concepts in the sociology of tourism communication. This approach is selected as it enables an in-depth and interpretative exploration of multidisciplinary literature, while providing space to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives within a coherent analytical framework. Unlike systematic literature reviews, which emphasize rigorous selection procedures and replicability, narrative reviews focus more on conceptual synthesis, critical interpretation, and the construction of theoretical arguments (Snyder, 2019). In the context of this study, the narrative approach is utilized to trace the evolution of thought in the sociology of tourism communication, ranging from classical theories to contemporary developments in the digital era. Furthermore, this approach facilitates the identification of relationships among concepts, theoretical debates, and paradigm shifts within the literature (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Data Sources and Literature Search Strategy

This study relies on secondary data obtained from the Dimensions academic database, which provides extensive access to multidisciplinary scholarly publications. The literature search was conducted using the primary keywords “sociology of communication AND tourism” and “tourism communication theory,” employing Boolean operators to enhance the relevance of search results. The search criteria were limited to English-language publications published between 2019 and 2025, and restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles. The selection process was carried out in stages, beginning with title and abstract screening, followed by an in-depth content analysis of relevant articles. This strategy ensures that the selected literature is current, credible, and aligned with the focus of tourism communication sociology.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using a narrative thematic analysis approach to identify patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships within the literature. The process began with a thorough reading of selected articles to understand their core arguments, followed by the identification of key themes such as meaning construction, symbolic interaction, digital communication, power relations, and cultural identity. The literature was then classified into thematic clusters to

facilitate analysis, and subsequently synthesized into a narrative form that connects these themes while highlighting theoretical developments and debates. The final stage involved critical interpretation from a communication sociology perspective to examine the conceptual implications of the findings.

Credibility and Validity

To ensure the quality and reliability of the study, several systematic steps were undertaken, including the use of literature from internationally reputable journals, a focus on recent publications within the last five years, and the application of selection criteria based on theoretical relevance to the research focus. In addition, the analytical process was structured systematically and transparently to maintain consistency and scientific accountability. This approach enables the study to produce a literature synthesis that is not only descriptive but also analytical and reflective of the evolving field of tourism communication sociology (Snyder, 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Meaning Construction and Destination Representation

The literature in the sociology of tourism communication indicates that destinations are no longer understood merely as geographical entities, but rather as social constructions shaped through symbolic communication practices. Destination representations in both conventional and digital media play a crucial role in constructing an “imagined reality” that influences tourists’ perceptions. Studies reveal that destination images are formed through processes of selection and framing that are not neutral, but are influenced by economic, political, and ideological interests (Marine-Roig, 2021). In this context, tourism communication functions as a mechanism of meaning production that represents destinations according to dominant narratives constructed by specific actors.

The social constructionist approach serves as a primary foundation for understanding this phenomenon, wherein tourism reality is viewed as the outcome of symbolic interactions continuously produced and reproduced through communication (Koo et al., 2025). However, most studies remain focused on the production of representation, while investigations into how audiences actively interpret and negotiate these meanings remain relatively limited.

Social Interaction and Tourist Experience

This cluster emphasizes that tourism experience is not an isolated individual phenomenon, but rather the result of complex social interactions. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, tourism experiences are constructed through processes of interpreting symbols, spaces, and interactions with other actors, including local communities and fellow tourists. Research shows that tourists’ expectations are often shaped prior to travel through media exposure, which subsequently influences how they interpret their experiences at destinations (Chu et al., 2020; Jokom et al., 2025; Marine-Roig, 2021).

Moreover, the advancement of digital technology has created hybrid tourism experiences, where direct interaction and digital mediation complement

one another. Tourists experience destinations not only physically but also virtually through documentation and sharing on social media. This reinforces the argument that communication is a central element in the construction of tourism experience. Nevertheless, the literature has not yet fully integrated offline and online dimensions within a comprehensive theoretical framework.

Digitalization and Tourism Communication Platforms

Digital transformation represents one of the dominant themes in the evolution of tourism communication. Social media, travel platforms, and data-driven technologies have transformed how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. User-generated content (UGC) has become a primary source in shaping destination images, replacing the dominance of institutional communication (Marine-Roig, 2021). In addition, platform algorithms play a significant role in determining content visibility, thereby influencing the popularity of certain destinations (Gretzel, 2025; Gretzel et al., 2015, 2020).

From a communication sociology perspective, this phenomenon reflects a shift from linear communication toward networked, participatory communication. However, behind the democratization of content production lies a new structure of power controlled by digital platforms. The literature indicates that algorithms not only regulate the distribution of information but also indirectly shape user preferences and perceptions (Gretzel et al., 2015; Sigala, 2020). Despite this, critical studies on the social implications of platform dominance remain relatively limited.

Power, Hegemony, and the Political Economy of Tourism Communication

This cluster highlights that tourism communication constitutes a complex arena of power relations. Destination narratives are often dominated by states, industries, and global actors who possess the resources to control the production and distribution of information. In this context, hegemony theory becomes relevant in explaining how dominant narratives are accepted as “truth” by the public (Farmaki et al., 2021).

In the digital era, power structures are further transformed with the emergence of global platforms that control communication flows. This phenomenon reflects a new form of communication capitalism, where user data and attention become primary commodities. The literature suggests that inequalities in access and representation remain critical issues, particularly for local communities that often lack control over how their cultures are represented (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). However, research on forms of resistance and counter-narratives from local actors remains highly limited.

Culture, Identity, and Intercultural Communication

Cultural and identity dimensions constitute essential aspects of the sociology of tourism communication. Interactions between tourists and local communities create dynamic spaces for identity negotiation, where values, norms, and cultural symbols are exchanged and reinterpreted. Studies indicate that tourism can function both as a means of cultural preservation and commodification, depending on the context and the actors involved (Campbell & Connell, 2021; Connell & Taulealo, 2021).

In the context of globalization, intercultural communication in tourism involves not only cultural exchange but also processes of adaptation and resistance to global influences. However, the literature still provides limited attention to the long-term impacts of such interactions on the transformation of local identities, particularly in digital contexts. This underscores the need for a more critical approach in examining the relationship between communication, culture, and power in tourism.

Theoretical Synthesis and Conceptual Model

The thematic analysis reveals that the development of the sociology of tourism communication can no longer be adequately understood through a single approach, but instead requires the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives capable of explaining the complex relationships between communication, technology, culture, and power. The theoretical synthesis in this study integrates three main approaches social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and critical theory in communication sociology-to build a comprehensive analytical framework.

First, the social constructionist approach positions communication as the primary mechanism in the production of tourism reality. Destinations are understood as symbolic constructions shaped through media representations and digital narratives. In this context, communication not only conveys information but also shapes tourists' perceptions, expectations, and imaginations of a place (Gretzel et al., 2015, 2020; Koo et al., 2025). Second, symbolic interactionism provides insights at the micro level, where tourism experiences are constructed through social interaction and symbolic interpretation among individuals, spaces, and cultures. This approach emphasizes that the meaning of tourism is not fixed, but continuously negotiated within social practices (Jokom et al., 2025).

Third, critical theory, particularly within the tradition of the political economy of communication, reveals the power dimension in tourism communication. Destination narratives are not produced in neutral spaces, but are shaped by power structures involving states, industries, and global digital platforms. In the digital era, this power becomes increasingly complex with the presence of algorithms that regulate the visibility and distribution of information (Farmaki et al., 2021; Koo et al., 2025). Thus, tourism communication can be understood as an arena of contestation among actors with competing interests.

Based on the integration of these three approaches, this study proposes a conceptual model of tourism communication sociology consisting of four main dimensions: (1) meaning construction, (2) social interaction, (3) digital mediation, and (4) power relations. These dimensions interact dynamically in shaping contemporary tourism realities. The model emphasizes that tourism communication is not merely a promotional tool, but a complex social practice in which meaning, experience, technology, and power are deeply intertwined.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the sociology of tourism communication has undergone significant development, both conceptually and empirically, particularly in the context of digital transformation. The main findings indicate that tourism communication can no longer be narrowly understood as a marketing activity, but rather as a social practice involving meaning construction, symbolic interaction, technological mediation, and power relations. This shift reflects a paradigm transition from functionalist approaches toward constructivist and critical perspectives that are better suited to explain the complexity of contemporary tourism phenomena.

Theoretically, this study contributes by integrating multiple perspectives within communication sociology into a comprehensive analytical framework. The proposed conceptual model expands the understanding of tourism communication by situating it within dynamic and multidimensional social relations. In addition, the study identifies key gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of integration between classical theories and digital phenomena, as well as the limited attention to Global South contexts.

Practically, the findings have implications for the development of more inclusive and socially reflective tourism communication strategies. Tourism stakeholders need to recognize that communication not only serves to attract tourists but also shapes cultural representation and social relations. Therefore, more participatory approaches that are sensitive to local contexts are essential in managing tourism communication.

For future research, further studies are recommended to explore the role of local communities in the production of tourism narratives, as well as longitudinal analyses of the impact of digitalization on cultural identity. Additionally, the development of theoretical models that integrate micro and macro dimensions in tourism communication remains an important agenda for advancing the field.

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