

TikTok Content Strategies in Shaping Tourism Interest in Hidden Gem Destinations: The Case of Curug Walet

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Abstract: The rapid growth of TikTok has created new opportunities for promoting tourist destinations, including hidden gem locations such as Curug Walet in Bogor. This study aims to analyze how TikTok content strategies contribute to the process of forming travel interest through a combination of platform-specific technical elements and psychological approaches to audiences. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with a content creator, an open-trip service provider, and active TikTok users, complemented by content analysis of relevant videos. The analysis is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains how audiences' needs for entertainment, information, and emotional experiences are fulfilled through TikTok content. The findings indicate that algorithm optimization, creative feature utilization, and emotional storytelling, particularly through the use of *Fear of Missing Out* (FoMO), play an important role in shaping audience perceptions and attraction toward the destination. This study highlights that TikTok content strategies function not merely as promotional tools but as a form of experiential communication that shapes audience interest in alternative tourist destinations.

Keywords: Content Strategy, Curug Walet, Hidden Gem Destination, TikTok, Travel Interest

Abstrak: Berkembangnya platform TikTok membuka peluang baru dalam promosi destinasi wisata, termasuk destinasi tersembunyi atau *hidden gem* seperti Curug Walet di Bogor. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana strategi konten TikTok berperan dalam proses pembentukan minat wisata melalui kombinasi elemen teknis platform dan pendekatan psikologis audiens. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap content creator, penyedia jasa *open trip*, dan pengguna aktif TikTok, serta analisis terhadap konten video terkait. Analisis berpijak pada Uses and Gratifications Theory untuk memahami bagaimana kebutuhan audiens terhadap hiburan, informasi, dan pengalaman emosional dipenuhi melalui konten TikTok. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa optimalisasi algoritma, pemanfaatan fitur kreatif, serta narasi emosional yang memanfaatkan konsep *Fear of Missing Out* (FoMO) berperan dalam membentuk persepsi dan ketertarikan audiens terhadap destinasi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa strategi konten TikTok tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana promosi, tetapi sebagai ruang komunikasi pengalaman wisata yang membangun minat audiens terhadap destinasi alternatif.

Kata Kunci: Strategi Konten, Curug Walet, Destinasi Hidden Gem, TikTok, Minat Wisata

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental foundation of human social interaction, as every process of message delivery aims to build shared understanding between communicators and recipients (Hardjana, 2016; Firmansyah & Syamsudin, 2016). The development of digital technology has transformed communication patterns from predominantly face-to-face and one-way interactions into more interactive, massive, and geographically unbounded forms. This transformation has given rise to social media as a new communication space that functions not



only as a medium for information sharing but also as a force shaping culture, public opinion, and the ways in which society interprets social reality (Utami, 2021).

In the context of marketing communication, social media has evolved into a strategic channel for promotion and image formation, where every individual has the potential to act as a communicator and every piece of content carries the opportunity to influence public perception (Trisnawati et al., 2025). This condition is highly relevant to the tourism industry, whose promotional success depends on the strength of visual elements, narratives, and emotional experiences offered to audiences. The tourism industry itself is an important sector of the economy, not only as a means of recreation but also as a driver of local economic development and the formation of social identity (Daulay et al., 2020). Along with the transformation of the communication landscape toward digitalization, social media has become an increasingly dominant and effective channel for tourism promotion (Akasse & Ramansyah, 2023).

One social media platform that has experienced significant growth in tourism promotion is TikTok. Initially recognized as an entertainment medium, TikTok has transformed into a marketing channel capable of reaching broad audiences through short-form video formats, creative features, and interest-based algorithms (Djawa & Rahman, 2023). Data indicating that Indonesia is the country with the second-largest number of TikTok users globally positions this platform as a strategic space for tourism destination promotion. Through the For You Page (FYP) feature, tourism-related content can be widely distributed even to users who do not follow the creator's account, thereby creating substantial opportunities for destinations that were previously less known or considered hidden (Le et al., 2025).

In the practice of digital communication on TikTok, the term *hidden gem* has emerged and is widely used by platform users to refer to tourism destinations that possess high appeal but remain largely unknown to mainstream tourists. This term has developed through conversations and narrative practices on social media, particularly on visually oriented platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Among TikTok users, *hidden gem* functions as a marker of destinations perceived as authentic, exclusive, and not yet subject to excessive commercialization. The use of this term is not merely descriptive but also strategic, as it constructs an impression of uniqueness and scarcity that enhances the psychological appeal of the audience (Abadi & Putra, 2025).

The phenomenon of viral *hidden gem* destinations on TikTok demonstrates how short-form video content featuring compelling visuals and emotional narratives can drive tangible changes in tourism interest. A relevant example is the case of *Rumah Abah Jajang*, which initially functioned as a private residence with no tourism purpose before transforming into a paid tourist attraction after going viral on TikTok. The success of such content generally stems from a combination of technical and psychological aspects. From a technical perspective, camera angles, visual editing, background music, and captions play a role in capturing audience attention. From a psychological perspective, storytelling, emotional engagement, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) encourage audiences to develop interest and a desire to directly experience what is presented (Cahyaningrum & Purnamasari, 2024; Lamb et al., 2019).





Figure 1. *Rumah Abah Jajang*

Source: idntimes.com

Like other media, communication patterns on TikTok can still be analyzed through fundamental communication structures, one of which is Lasswell's model, which conceptualizes communication through the question, "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect." The use of Lasswell's model in this study is not intended to oversimplify the complexity of digital communication but rather to serve as an initial analytical framework for mapping message flows within an algorithm-driven social media ecosystem. Although TikTok represents a new media platform characterized by interactivity and algorithmic processes, research indicates that the core elements of communication, communicator, message, channel, audience, and effect, remain clearly identifiable in digital media, including short-form video-based platforms (Wenxiu, 2015).

In the context of TikTok, creators function as communicators (*who*), video content serves as the message (*says what*), TikTok operates as the channel (*in which channel*), and algorithms determine the audience receiving the message (*to whom*), while audience responses, such as engagement, interaction, and visitation interest, represent the communication effects (*with what effect*) (Djawa & Rahman, 2023; Handayani & Junaidi, 2024). It is at this *effect* stage that audience psychological mechanisms operate; therefore, Lasswell's model in this study is combined with a communication psychology approach to understand how digital messages are processed and interpreted by audiences.

The perspective of communication psychology emphasizes that message reception is influenced by visual factors, emotional narratives, and the digital social context (Maryam & Paryontri, 2020; Schreiner et al., 2019). Within this context, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is positioned not merely as a social phenomenon but as a primary psychological mechanism that bridges content exposure and the formation of tourism interest. When audiences encounter



destinations presented as exclusive, appealing, and widely discussed, FoMO triggers a psychological urge to avoid missing out on the experience. This mechanism increases audiences' tendency to interact with content through likes, comments, and shares, which contribute to content virality and the formation of visitation interest (Cahyaningrum & Purnamasari, 2024; Lamb et al., 2019).

The emergence of *hidden gem* destinations going viral on TikTok represents a phenomenon of significant academic interest. This phenomenon is not solely related to technical aspects, such as algorithms, application features, and content distribution, but also involves how communication messages are constructed and psychologically received by audiences. Recent studies emphasize that video-based social media platforms such as TikTok are capable of shaping tourists' perceptions through a combination of visual appeal, emotional storytelling, and short-form content formats that are easy to process, thereby significantly increasing destination intention (Schreiner et al., 2019).

Effective content strategies do not merely present visual information but also integrate emotional narratives, storytelling, and elements that trigger psychological engagement, such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) effects and emotional engagement. Studies indicate that FoMO on social media plays a significant role in influencing travel interest, particularly when users encounter destinations portrayed as exclusive, relatively unknown, and widely discussed (Harahap et al., 2024). This combination allows audiences to feel personally connected to the content, arousing curiosity and motivating them to seek direct experiences. These findings are consistent with tourism communication literature, which explains that the reception of digital messages is strongly influenced by visual strength, message credibility, and the surrounding social context, enabling content to shape destination perceptions and images in the minds of audiences (Andzani et al., 2024).

This approach is important for understanding how digital promotion can shape tourists' perceptions, interests, and behaviors toward destinations that were previously less known. At the same time, this phenomenon underscores that tourism communication within the new media ecosystem is dynamic, interactive, and highly influenced by evolving content consumption patterns among social media users. One relevant case study in this context is the virality of Curug Walet, a hidden waterfall located in the Pamijahan area of Bogor, at the foothills of Mount Salak, which is characterized by relatively pristine natural conditions and minimal commercial intervention.

Curug Walet offers a multi-tiered waterfall landscape with clear flowing water, a cool atmosphere characteristic of mountainous areas, and natural scenery situated among rock formations, creating an aesthetically appealing visual setting. At certain times, natural lighting that penetrates through gaps between trees and cliffs further enhances the visual attractiveness of this destination. Access to the site is relatively challenging yet still manageable, and the surrounding environment remains uncrowded, giving Curug Walet strong visual and experiential value for social media content creation. These conditions enable the production of TikTok content that highlights visual beauty, a sense of exclusivity, and an authentic nature-based experience.



Prior to gaining wider recognition through TikTok, Curug Walet was relatively unfamiliar to the general tourist population. However, following the emergence of TikTok content featuring cinematic visuals, atmosphere-building background music, and emotional narratives, this destination began to attract increasing public attention and visitation. Such content does not merely provide information but also constructs an initial experience for audiences through emotional attachment and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) mechanisms that encourage intentions to visit the destination directly. These psychological effects lead audiences to feel an urgency to personally experience the featured destination, while emotional engagement fosters a sense of closeness to the narrative being conveyed. This phenomenon indicates a significant shift in the ways people discover and select tourism destinations. Whereas travel decisions previously relied heavily on travel agencies or formal recommendations, destination choices are now increasingly influenced by viral content and social interactions within digital media. This process shapes tourists' perceptions, interests, and behaviors in a more personal and emotional manner, aligning with the characteristics of tourism communication in the social media era.

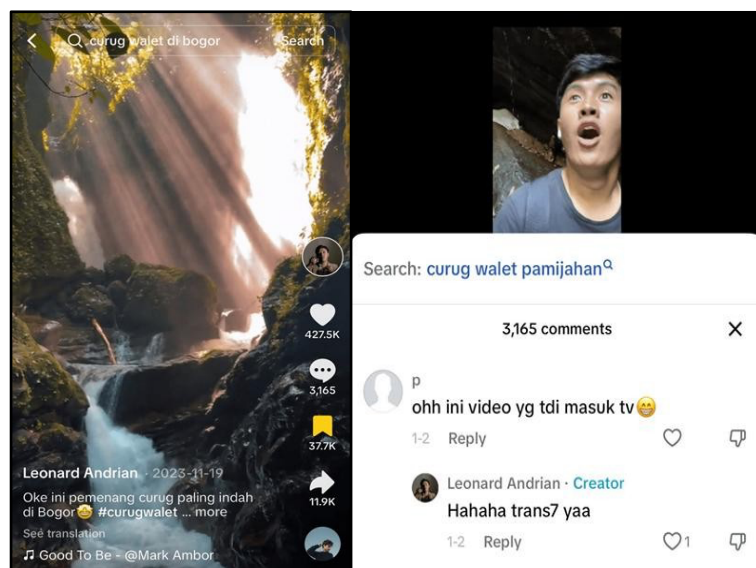


Figure 2. Content Creator dan Respond Audience

Source: TikTok

Videos showcasing the natural scenery of Curug Walet, the cool atmosphere at the foothills of Mount Salak, and the accompanying emotional narratives are able to evoke strong curiosity and emotional attachment among TikTok audiences. Viewers do not merely observe the visuals but also vicariously experience the scenes presented, become emotionally engaged, and are encouraged to visit the destination directly. This demonstrates that in tourism promotion, the strength of a message lies not only in the information conveyed but also in the emotional experiences created through digital media. The viral success of Curug Walet is closely linked to the synergy between technical and psychological aspects embedded in the



content. The technical aspects include the use of cinematic visuals, aesthetically framed camera angles, atmosphere-enhancing background music, and emotionally resonant captions. Meanwhile, the psychological aspects encompass personal narratives, the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) effect, and emotional engagement, which enable audiences to feel emotionally connected to the content. The integration of these two aspects creates a viewing experience that is not only informative but also evocative, ultimately influencing tourists' decisions to visit the destination.

Numerous previous studies have emphasized the role of social media and travel influencers in shaping tourists' perceptions and interests. Kusmiati (2020) highlights that the success of tourism communication largely depends on the integration of internal and external communication involving all relevant stakeholders. In addition, Nurhayati dan Islam, M. (2022) underlines the importance of visual storytelling in building destination images. Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine how the combination of technical and psychological aspects within TikTok content influences tourists' interest in non-mainstream destinations remain limited. This research gap indicates the need for a deeper understanding of the role of creative and emotionally driven narrative content in shaping tourism perceptions and travel decisions toward alternative destinations.

Recent research by Rahjasa et al. (2024) demonstrates that many individuals derive travel inspiration from social media, particularly through content shared by travel influencers. Such content not only showcases the attractiveness of a destination but also provides practical information, including accommodation recommendations, dining options, and travel tips. This approach makes the content appear more tangible, trustworthy, and relevant to audiences, thereby directly influencing their decisions to visit a particular place. In other words, travel influencers function as a bridge that transforms visual and narrative content into digital experiences capable of shaping real-world behavior.

In this context, the study focuses on the role of TikTok content in shaping perceptions and visitation interest through the integration of technical and psychological aspects. From a technical perspective, visual elements, editing techniques, music selection, and algorithmic distribution contribute to presenting destinations in an engaging manner. From a psychological perspective, TikTok content constructs audiences' initial experiences through curiosity, Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), and emotional attachment prior to the actual visit. Based on this focus, the study is formulated around two main research questions: (1) how do TikTok content strategies construct communication messages about the Curug Walet destination? and (2) how do audience psychological mechanisms, particularly FoMO and storytelling, contribute to shaping tourists' visitation interest?

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how TikTok content strategies encourage tourists' interest in visiting hidden gem destinations, using Curug Walet in Pamijahan, Bogor, as a case study. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the dynamics of digital communication



and social interaction within their natural context, ranging from how content is produced by creators, how messages are delivered through the TikTok platform, to how audiences interpret and respond to the content. Within the context of a visual and emotionally driven social media platform such as TikTok, interest in a destination is shaped not only by factual information but also by symbolic experiences, emotions, and narratives constructed through content. Therefore, a qualitative approach is considered the most relevant, as it provides space to understand the subjective meanings of the actors involved (Hendryadi et al., 2019; Moleong, 2018) and enables the exploration of phenomena through real-life stories and experiences in the field.

The research design is descriptive in nature, aiming to present a detailed depiction of the phenomenon under study without requiring the testing of causal relationships as typically found in quantitative approaches (Indriantoro & Supomo, 2013). In this study, the descriptive design is employed to understand how TikTok content is interpreted by users from the perspective of individual experiences, as well as how specific elements within the content contribute to the formation of perceptions and visitation interest. Audience interpretation is not derived from a single user informant alone but is enriched through participatory observation and the analysis of user comments on TikTok content featuring Curug Walet. This approach provides a broader contextual understanding of audience responses within the digital platform.

The units of analysis in this study include TikTok content featuring Curug Walet as well as the actors involved in the processes of message production, distribution, and reception. Specifically, the units of analysis encompass the visual and narrative strategies employed by creators, the mechanisms of content dissemination through TikTok's algorithm, and audience responses as reflected in digital interactions such as comments, likes, and other forms of engagement. The data sources consist of three groups of informants selected using purposive sampling based on the relevance of their experiences and involvement with the research object (Campbell et al., 2020). The first group comprises TikTok content creators who possess technical knowledge of content creation strategies, the use of TikTok features, and efforts to align content with the platform's algorithm. The second group includes open trip service providers for Curug Walet, who have insight into tourist visitation dynamics and changes in visitation interest before and after Curug Walet content became widely circulated on TikTok. The third group consists of active TikTok users who consume tourism-related content and represent audiences potentially motivated to visit the destination.

This study is not oriented toward achieving data saturation but rather adopts the concept of *information power*, in which the adequacy of informants is determined by the relevance of their roles, the depth of their experiences, and the strength of the information provided in explaining the phenomenon under investigation (Nevedal et al., 2025). The limited number of informants is compensated by the use of methodological triangulation, specifically participatory observation and content analysis. Through this approach, audience interpretation does not rely solely on a single user informant but is also reflected in broader patterns of interaction and audience comments on the TikTok platform.



Table 1. List of Informants

No	Name	Description
1	Ogie Evanthe	Content Creator
2	M. Ramdani	Open Trip Service Provider
3	Ageng Aldonanda	Active TikTok User

Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of videos and user comments. The data collection process took place from April to July 2024, with interview durations ranging from 30 to 60 minutes for each informant. Participatory observation was conducted to directly understand how the TikTok ecosystem operates, particularly in terms of the use of music, camera angles, visual flow, and narrative patterns employed by creators to capture audience attention (Hamandia & Ajisaka, 2025). Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore informants' experiences in depth while maintaining flexibility in examining meanings and personal interpretations (Randicha Hamandia & Ajisaka, 2025; Shin & Miller, 2022).

Meanwhile, content analysis was conducted to strengthen the empirical findings by examining the technical and psychological aspects present in TikTok content. This analysis was integrated with Lasswell's communication model and the AIDA concept (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) as analytical frameworks to understand communication flows and audience responses (Wijayanti & Murdapa, 2025). In this context, creators are positioned as communicators (*who*), TikTok content as the message (*says what*), TikTok as the channel (*in which channel*), audiences as message recipients (*to whom*), and visitation interest as the communication effect (*with what effect*). Technical aspects such as visuals, editing, music, and video structure were analyzed at the *attention* and *interest* stages, while psychological mechanisms, including emotional storytelling and the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) phenomenon, were examined at the *desire* and *action* stages as key triggers for the emergence of tourism interest (Rosaliza et al., 2023; Shin & Miller, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, beginning with the transcription of interviews, followed by data reduction, category grouping, and the development of comprehensive narrative findings. The analytical process was inductive in nature, with themes and patterns derived directly from empirical data without imposing a predetermined theoretical framework at the outset (Hendryadi et al., 2019; Moleong, 2018). Manual coding was applied to interview transcripts, observational notes, and TikTok content to identify key themes, including creators' visual strategies, audience emotional engagement mechanisms, and patterns of user responses to promotional content related to Curug Walet.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from content creators, open trip service providers, and TikTok users, and cross-checking these findings with observations and content analysis results (Fikri et al., 2025). In addition, the researcher applied member checking by reconfirming summaries of findings and interpretations with informants to ensure alignment between the analytical results and their lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016). These steps



contribute to ensuring that the research findings are not only academically valid but also ethical and accurate from the informants' perspectives. Although this study is limited by the number of informants and its focus on a single case study, the findings provide contextual insights into how TikTok content strategies operate in shaping perceptions, triggering emotions, and encouraging tourists' interest in hidden gem destinations. These limitations also open opportunities for future research to involve a larger number of informants and more diverse destination contexts in order to extend and deepen the findings of this study.

Results and Discussion

Algorithm Optimization and Attention Strategies

Based on the results of in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and content analysis, the initial success of Curug Walet-related content on TikTok is closely linked to how content creators strategically align their production practices with TikTok's algorithmic distribution patterns. Rather than uploading videos randomly, creators deliberately adjust content formats, pacing, and visual elements to match the characteristics of the For You Page (FYP) as TikTok's primary content distribution space. At this initial stage, the algorithm functions as a gatekeeper that determines whether a video gains early exposure and begins to capture audience attention. By optimizing elements such as short video duration, dynamic visual transitions, and visually striking opening scenes, creators increase the likelihood that their content is distributed more widely through the FYP. This indicates that attention formation on TikTok is not solely driven by content substance, but is strongly influenced by creators' ability to anticipate and adapt to algorithmic preferences.

TikTok operates based on an interest graph rather than a social graph, meaning that content distribution is primarily driven by user interaction patterns rather than inter-account relationships. Several studies indicate that TikTok's algorithm prioritizes early engagement signals, such as likes, comments, and shares, over the number of followers an account possesses (Candra, 2023; Djawa & Rahman, 2023; Milli et al., 2025). However, the findings of this study reveal that creators do not interpret this algorithmic logic purely in technical terms. Instead, it is practiced intuitively through continuous experimentation. Creators learn from the performance of previous content, observe audience responses, and subsequently adjust visual styles, video duration, and narrative structures perceived as more "algorithm-friendly." This adaptive process demonstrates that algorithmic optimization on TikTok is shaped not only by explicit platform knowledge but also by experiential learning derived from repeated interaction with the platform's feedback mechanisms.

Early interactions serve as critical signals interpreted by the algorithm to determine whether a video deserves further promotion to a wider audience. Djawa (2023) emphasizes that higher levels of engagement significantly increase the likelihood of content being continuously amplified by the algorithm. This argument is reinforced by Milli et al. (2025) who contend that algorithmic evaluation is not solely dependent on automated systems but is also shaped by collective user behavior. Consequently, TikTok's algorithm can be understood as a dynamic



mechanism operating through the interaction between platform systems and audience responses.

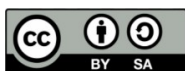
In the context of Curug Walet, creators capitalize on trending rhythms by adapting their content formats to what is currently popular on TikTok. Viral content typically employs short-duration videos, dynamic visual transitions, and popular music with nature- and exploration-themed nuances. Video openings (hooks) frequently feature dramatic camera angles, such as low-angle shots of waterfalls or visuals of sunlight piercing through cliff gaps, accompanied by brief textual cues like “*a hidden gem in Bogor that not many people know about.*” This pattern indicates that audience attention is constructed through a combination of visual speed, aesthetic appeal, and concise narratives aligned with TikTok users’ preferences. Beyond algorithmic considerations, technical factors such as visual and audio quality, as well as the creative features offered by TikTok, play a crucial role in building attention. Elements including smooth transitions, visual effects, and the selection of trending music have been shown to increase watch duration and generate initial emotional stimulation. This finding aligns with a statement from Ageng, an active TikTok user, who noted that well-executed editing and dynamic transitions make content more engaging and encourage viewers to watch videos until completion:

“My interest in visiting the destination increased significantly after watching TikTok content, particularly videos with well-executed transitions and editing, as they are engaging and enjoyable to watch until the end” (Interview, June 17, 2024).

The use of specific hashtags (#curugwalet, #hiddengemBogor), location tagging, and the strategic application of captions and on-screen text further enhanced the reachability of the content. Hashtags function as categorical markers that assist the algorithm in connecting content with users’ specific interests (Dewa & Safitri, 2021), while popular music strengthens emotional resonance among audiences (Valiant & Paramita, 2021). Nurhayati dan Islam (2022) further argues that content employing consistent storytelling is more effective in fostering emotional closeness and increasing user engagement. Accordingly, initial reach as an *effect* within Lasswell’s communication model is shaped by the synergy between technical factors (algorithmic mechanisms, user interaction, and creative features) and psychological factors (visual appeal, music, and storytelling), which operate simultaneously in influencing audience attention and interest.

Emotional Narratives and Destination Uniqueness

After audience attention has been successfully captured, the sustainability of interest in Curug Walet is primarily driven by the strength of emotional narratives and the uniqueness of the destination. At this stage, storytelling becomes a key element. Content creators do not merely present scenic visuals but construct visual narratives that allow audiences to vicariously experience being at the location. This aligns with Winarni’s (2023) argument that storytelling is not only a medium for conveying information, but also a psychological strategy capable of



influencing consumer behavior, as it operates through narrative flow, emotion, and relatable experiences. The use of natural ambient sounds, close-up visuals of flowing water, and narration emphasizing tranquility and fresh air further enhances emotional imagination within the audience. Psychologically, such content creates a *pre-experience*—an initial experiential impression that shapes positive perceptions before the audience physically visits the destination. As explained by Lamb (2019) psychological factors function as processes of recognition, information processing, and action formation. The effectiveness of this visual narrative strategy is reflected in Ageng’s statement, who noted that Curug Walet content made him feel as though he was immersed in the atmosphere of the place:

“It feels like I can directly experience the environment, as if I were actually at the destination. The content feels very nature-oriented, with the sound of flowing water, animals, and other natural ambience” (Interview, June 17, 2024).

These findings indicate that tourism content on TikTok does not merely convey information, but also stimulates the audience’s senses and emotions, thereby creating a pseudo-experience. Aesthetic visuals, atmospheric audio, and emotional narratives help reduce psychological barriers such as hesitation or uncertainty prior to visiting a destination. This aligns with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, which explains that visual and auditory stimuli are perceived by the senses, processed emotionally, and subsequently generate responses in the form of interest and motivation to act (Hardianto, 2019). In the context of tourism promotion, such positive emotions form the basis for the emergence of desire to visit a destination. Emotional and relatable narratives also function as behavioral triggers, as effective communication is capable of transforming audience perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Maryam & Paryontri, 2020). However, the dominance of aesthetic visuals also carries the risk of misrepresenting the reality of the destination. TikTok content tends to highlight only the most appealing aspects, potentially constructing expectations that do not always align with on-site conditions. In the case of hidden gem destinations, this may result in rapid viral exposure that is not necessarily sustainable, where an initial surge in visits is followed by declining interest due to experiential mismatches. Therefore, emotional narratives should be understood not only as promotional strategies, but also as constructions of reality that shape long-term perceptions of a destination.

FoMO as a Psychological Trigger and Conversion Mechanism

The subsequent stage involves the transition from desire to concrete action. This study finds that the most decisive psychological factor at this phase is Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). content portraying Curug Walet as a “hidden destination not yet widely known” generates a sense of urgency among TikTok users. FoMO functions as a psychological drive that makes audiences fear being left behind emerging trends. This finding aligns with Baker et al. (2016) who explain that FoMO arises from the psychological need for relatedness, prompting individuals to quickly participate in activities undertaken by others to avoid feelings of social exclusion.



These findings are consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Neha et al. (2025) which conceptualizes FoMO as a psychological mechanism explained through the integration of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Comparison Theory. From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, FoMO emerges when audiences use social media to fulfill needs for social affiliation, identity formation, and self-actualization, making the consumption of travel content a means of maintaining social relevance and connectedness. Meanwhile, through Social Comparison Theory, FoMO is triggered by social comparison processes, in which users evaluate their own experiences against the curated experiences of others on social media, subsequently motivating them to visit trending destinations. The integration of these perspectives underscores that FoMO is not merely a spontaneous emotional reaction, but a systematic psychological mechanism that shapes and accelerates tourism consumption behavior on social media. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among Generation Z, who exhibit high levels of digital media consumption (Fitri et al., 2024). This mechanism is further supported by the statement of Ogie Evanthe, who emphasized the significant impact of TikTok on travel decision-making:

“TikTok has an extraordinary influence on people’s decisions to visit certain places, largely because of FoMO, like, ‘Oh, there’s a new place!’ People might want to create content there or simply go to enjoy the experience” (Interview, 18 June 2024).

FoMO thus provides a compelling psychological explanation for why increased interest rapidly transforms into actual visitation behavior. Theoretically, this phenomenon corresponds with Dolan et al. (2016) in social media experiential engagement, which highlights that visual content can generate positive emotional experiences and stimulate user engagement, both passive consumption and active participation such as liking and sharing. Such positive engagement reinforces FoMO-driven motivation, thereby accelerating the transition from interest to action. Beyond psychological motivation, action conversion is further strengthened by TikTok’s interactive features. Comments, direct messages, stitching, and other forms of two-way interaction enable audiences to communicate directly with content creators and tourism service providers, fostering a sense of closeness and trust. This aligns with Onofrei (2022), who found that social interaction in digital media significantly enhances source credibility and homophily, two critical factors mediating action decisions and purchase intentions. In other words, the more intensive the interaction between audiences and creators, the smoother the process of converting interest into action. This dynamic is illustrated by Ramdani, an open-trip provider, who noted that many booking requests originate directly from TikTok interactions:

“Many people comment, ‘This looks amazing—where is it?!’ ... and from there, we often receive direct messages asking to book a trip” (Interview, 17 June 2024).

Thus, TikTok functions not only as a promotional platform but also as an integrated space for information seeking and immediate decision-making. The combination of emotionally



engaging content, two-way interaction, and FoMO-driven urgency enables the AIDA flow (attention–interest–desire–action) to operate more rapidly. Comments, direct messages, and creator responses help build intimacy and trust, making audiences feel more confident to act. Because all stages, from exposure and curiosity to inquiry and decision-making, occur within a single application, interest can seamlessly transform into action with minimal friction.

Initial Impacts on Tourism Activities and Local Infrastructure

From the perspective of the open-trip service provider, the virality of Curug Walet has begun to indicate tangible changes in tourism activities and infrastructural needs surrounding the destination. The surge in visitor numbers has generated increasing demand for improvements in basic infrastructure and safety facilities, such as the construction of evacuation routes. Ramdani explained:

“The increase in visitors is very noticeable. Even in terms of facilities, construction has started, such as building bridges for evacuation... because the location is literally flanked by cliffs” (Interview, 17 June 2024).

These infrastructural developments illustrate how social media functions as a catalyst for structural change, in which heightened demand leads to local adaptation. This finding reflects the effect dimension within Lasswell’s communication model, where communication messages do not merely stop at psychological responses but begin to trigger behavioral changes and social adaptations at the local level. However, since this finding is derived from a limited set of perspectives, these impacts should be interpreted as preliminary indications rather than generalized conclusions.

Ethical and Sustainability Challenges as an Analytical Dimension

The findings further reveal that persuasive communication in digital tourism promotion carries an ambivalent dimension. On one hand, viral content can significantly enhance destination visibility and stimulate local economic activity; on the other hand, the same persuasive power may encourage tourism behaviors that are not always aligned with sustainability principles. Risks such as overtourism, environmental degradation, and the loss of authenticity associated with hidden-gem destinations emerge as critical consequences requiring careful analysis. Therefore, ethical and sustainability considerations should not be positioned merely as implications but rather as integral components of digital tourism communication analysis. Future content strategies need to integrate narratives of natural beauty with educational messages related to safety, conservation, and destination carrying capacity. This approach aligns with communication psychology principles, which emphasize that messages shape not only short-term behavior but also long-term audience awareness and attitudes.



Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that TikTok's effectiveness in promoting hidden-gem destinations such as Curug Walet cannot be understood merely as a technological outcome of the platform itself, but rather as the result of interaction between technical media mechanisms and audience psychological processes. The FYP algorithm, editing features, music selection, hashtags, and location tagging function as initial stimuli that ensure message reachability, while emotional narratives, visual quality, destination uniqueness, and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) operate at the cognitive and affective levels to shape attraction, desire, and visiting intention. In other words, the virality of tourism content on TikTok is formed through a non-linear communication process, involving interconnected stages of attention, emotional meaning-making, and social engagement.

These findings indicate that digital tourism promotion no longer operates as one-way information delivery, but as a process of constructing a pre-experience that influences audience perceptions and expectations of a destination. Social interactions through comments and live features strengthen the participatory dimension of communication, positioning audiences not only as message receivers but also as active contributors to meaning-making and destination popularity. In this context, TikTok functions as a strategic communication space that bridges digital representation and real-world action, while accelerating the transition from interest to visitation decisions. Nevertheless, this study also highlights that the persuasive power of emotion-driven and viral communication carries consequences that must be critically examined. Aesthetic visual representations and emotional narratives may generate expectations that do not always align with on-site conditions, potentially affecting the long-term sustainability of hidden-gem destinations. Therefore, these findings emphasize the importance of promotional approaches that are not only communicatively effective but also socially and ecologically responsible.

Practically, this study offers implications for destination managers and content creators to design more reflective promotional strategies by balancing visual appeal, emotional storytelling, and contextual information about destination conditions. Academically, this research contributes to the field of digital tourism communication by demonstrating that virality is not merely an algorithmic phenomenon, but the outcome of a communication process involving technical stimuli, psychological processing, and audience social interaction. Future research is encouraged to explore variations of these mechanisms across different types of destinations and to examine the long-term impacts of virality on tourist experiences and environmental sustainability.

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