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Marketing Communications Mix in Sabang Tourism Promotion: Interaction of Political and Multicultural Communication

Rangga Saptya Mohamad Permana¹, Sri Seti Indriani², Lilis Puspitasari³,
Tito Quiling, Jnr.⁴

^{1,2,3} Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia

⁴ Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Corresponding Author Email: rangga.saptya@unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Sabang City as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and part of the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh) has abundant tourism potential but faces challenges in optimal development and promotion. Sabang possesses significant tourism potential that requires effective communication strategies to attract both domestic and international visitors. This research examines the implementation of the marketing communication mix in promoting Sabang's tourism and explores its political and multicultural dimensions. Using a descriptive-qualitative method, data were collected through interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings show that Sabang's tourism promotion utilizes various communication mix components, including advertising (outdoor media and digital platforms), events such as Sail Sabang, direct marketing through websites, word-of-mouth testimonials, and personal selling by local tourism agents. Beyond marketing functions, these practices also operate as political communication, projecting the government's image of stability, openness, and development, while simultaneously facilitating multicultural interaction between Acehnese hosts and diverse visitors. The use of digital media further supports cultural hybridity by integrating local values with global tourism narratives. The research concludes that tourism promotion in Sabang represents not only strategic marketing but also a communicative process of image-building, intercultural understanding, and soft power representation. It is hoped that the resulting strategic recommendations can serve as a reference for local governments and tourism industry players in formulating more effective and impactful promotional policies.

Keywords: Marketing communication mix, tourism promotion, political communication, multicultural communication, Sabang

ABSTRAK

Kota Sabang sebagai Kawasan Ekonomi Khusus (KEK) dan bagian dari Provinsi Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh) memiliki potensi pariwisata yang melimpah namun menghadapi tantangan dalam pengembangan dan promosi yang optimal. Sabang memiliki potensi pariwisata yang besar yang memerlukan strategi komunikasi efektif untuk menarik wisatawan domestik maupun mancanegara. Penelitian ini mengkaji penerapan bauran komunikasi pemasaran dalam promosi pariwisata Sabang serta menelusuri dimensi politik dan multikultural di dalamnya. Dengan metode deskriptif-kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan telaah dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa promosi pariwisata Sabang memanfaatkan berbagai elemen bauran komunikasi, seperti periklanan (media luar ruang dan digital), kegiatan seperti Sail Sabang, pemasaran langsung melalui situs web, pemasaran dari mulut ke mulut, serta penjualan

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pribadi oleh agen wisata lokal. Lebih dari sekadar kegiatan pemasaran, praktik ini juga berfungsi sebagai komunikasi politik yang membangun citra pemerintah daerah sebagai wilayah yang stabil, terbuka, dan progresif, sekaligus menciptakan interaksi multikultural antara masyarakat Aceh dan wisatawan beragam budaya. Pemanfaatan media digital turut memperkuat hibriditas budaya melalui integrasi nilai lokal dan narasi pariwisata global. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa promosi pariwisata Sabang tidak hanya merupakan strategi pemasaran, tetapi juga proses komunikasi yang mencerminkan pembangunan citra, pemahaman antarbudaya, dan representasi soft power. Rekomendasi strategis yang dihasilkan diharapkan dapat menjadi acuan bagi pemerintah daerah dan pelaku industri pariwisata dalam merumuskan kebijakan promosi yang lebih efektif dan berdampak luas.

Kata Kunci: Bauran komunikasi pemasaran, promosi pariwisata, komunikasi politik, komunikasi multikultural, Sabang

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic sectors in Indonesia's regional development, serving not only as an economic driver but also as a symbolic medium through which identity, culture, and power are communicated. In this context, communication plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and promoting destinations to both domestic and international audiences. The marketing communication mix, consisting of advertising, events, direct marketing, word-of-mouth, and personal selling, represents a strategic framework that integrates persuasive techniques with cultural narratives. In regions like Sabang—known as the westernmost gate of Indonesia—tourism promotion is not merely a marketing endeavor but also a political and multicultural practice, reflecting the interplay between governmental image-building, cultural negotiation, and global visibility.

The city of Sabang is the westernmost region in the Republic of Indonesia. Sabang is bordered to the north and east by the Malacca Strait, the south by the Bengal Strait and the west by the Indonesian Ocean. Geopolitically, Sabang City is very strategic because it is directly adjacent to other countries such as India, Malaysia, and Thailand. It is an international shipping lane for ships that will enter and leave Indonesian territory from the west. The city of Sabang consists of five islands, namely Weh Island, Klah Island, Rubiah Island, Seulako Island and Rondo Island, plus a group of stone islands in North Pantee. Weh Island is the largest island and is the only island used as a settlement, while Rondo Island is one of the outer islands + 15.6 km from Weh Island. Administratively, Sabang City is divided into two sub-districts, namely Sukajaya District and Sukakarya District, divided into 18 Gampong (villages) (Pemerintah Kota Sabang, 2021).

Sabang, Indonesia's outermost island, located at the western tip of the country, has enormous tourism potential. As a priority destination for national tourism development,

Sabang was designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) through Government Regulation Number 45 of 2021 concerning the Sabang Free Trade Zone and Free Port. This geographical distinction and SEZ status give Sabang a strategic position on the national and international tourism map.

However, Sabang's tourism potential has not been fully utilized. According to data from the Sabang City Tourism and Culture Office (2025), the number of tourist visits to Sabang remains far below its potential. In 2025, the number of domestic tourists to Sabang reached only 262,892, while international tourists reached only around 8,079. This figure is relatively small compared to other tourism destinations in Indonesia with similar potential. One of the main factors contributing to the low number of tourist visits to Sabang is the ineffectiveness of promotional strategies. Tourism promotion is a crucial element in developing a tourist destination, especially in a region like Sabang, which has unique geographical and socio-cultural characteristics. In the context of Sabang, promotional strategies cannot be separated from the local political dimension and the multicultural aspects of Acehnese society, which possesses strong social values and norms.

No matter how beautiful Sabang and its natural attractions are, of course, it will not attract the public's attention to visit if a good marketing communication strategy does not balance it. One can be done through an information dissemination program with a public relations approach, one of whose functions is to disseminate information, focusing on tourism communication (Setyanto & Winduwati, 2017). Communication with potential tourists aims to inform the "products" offered. Creating attractive tours and travel products at affordable prices will not be enough. Potential tourists must be informed and motivated so that they become interested in travelling. Marketing tools are an ongoing process that needs to monitor new trends and respond flexibly to changes (Kotler et al., 2002). As a result, tourism is proving to be a significant growth determinant for various regions and countries.

Tourism promotion in Sabang has so far been dominated by natural attractions and digital media strategies. Yet, the case of East Sumba demonstrates that cultural capital embedded in traditional villages and artisanal practices, such as *ikat* weaving, can serve as equally powerful tools for tourism communication (Lestari et al., 2023). Their study revealed that cultural promotion strategies included welcoming tourists with traditional ceremonies, restructuring village environments to accommodate visitors, and engaging local artisans in collaborative events. These practices not only preserve cultural identity but also provide authentic tourism experiences that resonate strongly with visitors seeking more than recreational value. For Sabang, integrating similar culture-based communication strategies—such as highlighting Acehnese traditions, local crafts, and community-led events—could

complement digital promotions and create a more holistic tourism appeal that combines nature, culture, and community participation.

Another important aspect of tourism promotion relates to how cultural events and destination branding shape tourists' decision-making processes. A study on the Borobudur Marathon revealed that tourism attractions and cultural values significantly enhance brand image, which in turn strongly influences visitors' purchase decisions and participation in the event (Chandra et al., 2025). Interestingly, the study also found that cultural appeal alone was insufficient to drive participation unless mediated by a strong and credible brand image. This demonstrates that beyond communication strategies, building and maintaining a positive destination brand is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of tourism promotion. For Sabang, the implication is clear: while its natural beauty and cultural richness offer strong attractions, these must be strategically positioned within a cohesive brand narrative that resonates with potential visitors. By linking cultural heritage, local experiences, and event-based promotions under a unified brand identity, Sabang can enhance its competitiveness in both domestic and international tourism markets, ensuring that communication efforts translate not only into awareness but also into concrete travel decisions.

In Indonesia, tourism plays a fundamental role and contributes to the nation's economic, social, and cultural life. Employment opportunities for skilled people in this field are increasing in number, state revenues from the tax and foreign exchange sector are increasing, the social conditions of the people involved in this sector are getting better, and the nation's culture is getting more appreciation (Tunggala & Saadjad, 2019). Eysteinnsson and Gudlaugsson (2012) stated that tourism could be an important economic sector, crucial for the nation. It is a sector of the economy that is closely intertwined with many other sectors. A study conducted by Amnar (2017) also proves this, where the economic growth of Sabang City also has a positive effect on the number of foreign tourists, the number of domestic tourists, the number of tourist sites and the number of hotel rooms/room occupancy rates. The higher the number of these four factors, the better the economic growth of Sabang City.

Wall and Mathieson define *tourism* as a relationship of several phenomena caused by human activities who travel to a place and stay in that place outside the environment of their permanent residence for less than a year in a row for leisure, business and other purposes. Three dimensions can be explained in the definition: the geographical dimension, the time dimension, and the dimensions of intent and purpose (Utama, 2012). Meanwhile, Mittal and Baker (2002) suggest the need for three keys to the success of a marketing communication strategy: creating identity or branding, positioning the branding that is formed, and creating demand. Furthermore, they emphasized that detailed information or information

about the services offered were needed to create consumer trust. Consumers could use that information to make claims if there was a problem in their consumption.

In today's digital era, the provision of online information and communication can be easily accessed through websites, electronic mail, web advertisements, blogs, social networks, and mobile applications. Furthermore, various traditional sources of information and communication (newspapers, books, magazines, radio, and television) are currently starting to collaborate and innovate towards online-based communication media (Novianti & Wulung, 2020). Therefore, internet-based online communication is undoubtedly one of the essential supporting tools to carry out the marketing communication mix, which is also one of the critical concepts in marketing communication strategies. Marketing communication includes eight communication models, which are (Kotler & Keller, 2012): (1) Advertising; (2) Sales Promotion; (3) Events and Experiences; (4) Public Relations and Publicity; (5) Direct Marketing; (6) Interactive Marketing; (7) Word of Mouth Marketing; and (8) Personal Selling.

Beyond promotional strategies, tourism cannot be separated from the political context in which the destination is located. The political dimension of tourism encompasses various aspects such as government policies, regulations, power structures, and the relationship between the central and regional governments (Burns & Novelli, 2006). In the Indonesian context, particularly in Aceh, the political dimension has a very significant influence on tourism development. Aceh has special autonomy status as stipulated in Law Number 11 of 2006 concerning the Governance of Aceh. This status grants the Aceh Government broader authority in managing various aspects of governance, including tourism development (Suharno, 2022). However, the implementation of this special autonomy also creates complexities in policy coordination between the central and regional governments. Tourism policies at the national level are often not fully aligned with policies at the regional level, particularly in the context of Aceh, which has strong socio-cultural norms and values. This misalignment can create obstacles to the implementation of effective tourism promotion programs (Bianchi, 2018).

Beyond the restrictive and directive political framework, an equally crucial factor lies: the cultural diversity that exists within the Sabang community, which contributes to shaping the imagery represented in every promotional campaign. Sabang, as part of Aceh Province, possesses unique multicultural characteristics. Acehnese people generally uphold Islamic values in their daily lives, yet are also open to the influence of other cultures due to their long history of interaction with the outside world through trade routes (Hurgronje, 2024). This diversity creates a complex socio-cultural context for tourism development. According to Smith & Robinson (2006), tourism in a multicultural context requires a sensitive approach

to differences in values, norms, and beliefs. Tourism promotion that fails to consider multicultural aspects can generate resistance from local communities or even create social conflict. In the Acehese context, the implementation of Islamic law is a fundamental aspect that must be considered in tourism development. Tourist destinations, the activities offered, and promotional methods must align with the Islamic values embraced by the majority of the community (Umuri et al., 2022). However, Aceh also has the potential for historical and cultural tourism that can attract international tourists, so a balance is needed between preserving local values and openness to visitors from outside.

Building upon these perspectives, this research aims to examine how the marketing communication mix is applied in promoting tourism in Sabang while identifying its underlying political and multicultural dimensions. Specifically, the research seeks to explore how communication strategies employed by the local government and tourism actors serve not only to attract visitors but also to represent regional identity, express political legitimacy, and facilitate intercultural understanding. Through this approach, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of tourism communication as both a strategic marketing process and a symbolic arena of political representation and cultural interaction. Moreover, this research has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of communication science, particularly in the context of tourism marketing communications, which considers political and multicultural dimensions. Practically, the results are expected to provide useful recommendations for local governments, tourism industry players, and relevant stakeholders in formulating more effective tourism promotion strategies in Sabang.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how the marketing communication mix is applied in promoting tourism in Sabang, along with its political and multicultural dimensions. The descriptive–qualitative design was chosen to provide a factual and contextual understanding of communication practices without testing hypotheses (Bungin, 2013; Rakhmat, 2012). This research was conducted in Sabang, Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province. Sabang was chosen as the research location because it is an area with significant tourism potential but faces challenges in effective promotion, particularly in the context of local politics and multiculturalism.

This research used two types of data sources: primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Secondary data was obtained from relevant documents such as tourism office reports, government policies, journal

articles, and other sources related to the research topic. The main informant was a local tourism agent, Rafli, who has extensive experience as a driver and tour guide for domestic and international visitors. The interview used a semi-structured interview guide, allowing researchers to explore information in depth while remaining focused on the research topic. The interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was recorded with the informant's consent. In-depth and unstructured interviews with Rafli was conducted to explore their communication strategies, cultural adaptations, and perceptions of government-led promotion. Observations focused on persuasive and intercultural communication practices at key tourism sites, from Balohan Port to various attractions. Researchers conducted direct observations at key tourist locations in Sabang, such as Iboih Beach, Gapang Beach, Lake Aneuk Laot, and the Sabang City area. Observations were conducted to understand the actual context of tourism promotion implementation and stakeholder interactions.

Researchers reviewed relevant documents such as the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPARDA) of Sabang City, tourist visit reports, national and regional tourism policies, and documents related to tourism promotion that had been carried out. Document analysis was used to examine tourism campaigns, promotional media, and literature related to marketing communication, political communication, and multicultural communication. This combination of methods enabled a comprehensive interpretation of how Sabang's tourism communication simultaneously serves marketing objectives, reinforces political image-building, and facilitates intercultural understanding.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis process includes the following steps: (1) Data transcription: All interview results and observation notes were transcribed into written data; (2) Data familiarization: Researchers repeatedly read the transcribed data to deeply understand the content and context of the data; (3) Initial coding: Researchers identified sections of the data that were interesting and relevant to the research questions, then assigned codes to those sections; (4) Theme search: Researchers grouped similar codes to identify potential themes that emerged from the data; (5) Theme review: Researchers re-examined the identified themes to ensure they were aligned with the data and research questions; (6) Theme definition and naming: Researchers provided clear definitions and appropriate names for each identified theme; and (7) Reporting findings: Researchers presented research findings in narrative form supported by quotations from the original data.

To clarify how the political and multicultural dimensions are analytically identified within the Marketing Communication Mix, this research develops an operationalization framework that connects each promotional component with specific thematic indicators. These indicators

guided the coding process during thematic analysis and ensured consistency between theoretical concepts and empirical findings.

Table 1. Operationalization of Marketing Communication Mix in Political and Multicultural Dimensions

Marketing Communication Component	Data Source	Political Communication Indicators	Multicultural Communication Indicators	Unit of Analysis	Analytical Technique
Advertising (Digital Media: Website, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok)	Document analysis (official websites, social media content), observation	- Nation branding narrative (“Westernmost Gate of Indonesia”) - Government image-building and legitimacy framing - Representation of Sabang in alignment with national identity and maritime sovereignty - Promotion of government-led events (e.g., <i>Sail Sabang</i>) as symbolic diplomacy	- Representation of Acehnese culture for global audiences - Use of inclusive and culturally adaptive language in digital content - Interaction between local community and diverse online audiences (UGC, comments, reposts)	Promotional texts, captions, images, videos, hashtags, event narratives	Thematic analysis (coding of symbolic representation, legitimacy discourse, intercultural framing)
Public Relations (Government & Institutional Promotion, Collaborative Networks)	RIPPARDA documents, policy documents, tourism reports, interviews	- Strategic framing of Sabang within national development agenda - Soft power projection through tourism policy - Alignment between local and central government narratives	- Stakeholder collaboration across diverse institutional and cultural backgrounds - Participatory communication involving community actors	Policy narratives, institutional statements, partnership communication	Thematic analysis (coding of governance discourse and participatory communication patterns)

Events and Experiences (Sail Sabang, City Anniversary, Tourism Festivals)	Observation, digital documentation, interviews	- Symbolic representation of national unity and maritime identity - Political symbolism embedded in public events - Legitimization of state presence in peripheral region	- Cultural performance as intercultural encounter - Negotiation between religious norms and tourist expectations - Direct intercultural interaction during events	Event narratives, speeches, visual symbols, participant interactions	Thematic analysis (identification of symbolic governance and intercultural negotiation themes)
Personal Selling (Tour Guides & Tourism Agents)	In-depth interviews (Rafli), participant observation	- Internalization of regional identity (“Guests are kings” as moral narrative linked to Aceh values) - Reinforcement of trust toward local governance and safety	- Intercultural adaptation strategies (language adjustment, empathy, behavioral adaptation) - Negotiation of cultural norms (dress, etiquette, religious sensitivity) - Rational and emotional persuasion techniques	Verbal persuasion strategies, negotiation practices, behavioral interaction patterns	Thematic analysis (coding of persuasion type, intercultural competence, symbolic identity)
Word of Mouth (WoM) & User-Generated Content	Social media observation, blogger documentation	- Co-construction of destination image supporting official branding - Informal reinforcement of political image through positive testimonials	- Cross-cultural experience sharing - Online intercultural dialogue through comments and reposts	Blog posts, reviews, social media interactions	Thematic analysis (coding of image reinforcement and intercultural exchange patterns)

Source: Research data (2025)

FINDINGS

Digital-Based Tourism Promotion Practices

The findings show that tourism promotion in Sabang is predominantly conducted through digital platforms, although the level of utilization varies across media. The Sabang City Tourism and Culture Office initially relied on the official government website (sabangkota.go.id) to disseminate tourism information. However, due to budget limitations and competing priority programs, the website has not been consistently updated and has not been optimized as a promotional platform. Similarly, the official tourism website (dispar.sabangkota.go.id) provides information on destinations and events but shows limited content development and irregular updates.

Social media platforms are more actively used than official websites. Facebook remains the most utilized platform, including the “Info Sabang” page managed by the Tourism Office and the “Sabang Tourism” page managed by a non-profit community. These platforms publish weather updates, tourism narratives, and documentation of local events. Instagram is used but with limited content and minimal interaction. YouTube contains only a small number of promotional videos, while TikTok is almost entirely unused.

Beyond government-managed accounts, private tourism actors also promote Sabang digitally. Websites such as wisatasabang.com, discoversabang.com, and islandwehresort.com provide tour package information, accommodation details, diving services, and historical and cultural descriptions of Sabang. These platforms operate independently without visible centralized coordination. Tourism industry players also rely on TripAdvisor and Google Maps to register destinations and services. However, the use of these platforms appears fragmented, with no integrated strategy across stakeholders.

In addition to institutional promotion, local residents actively contribute to tourism visibility through user-generated content. During major events such as the anniversary of Sabang City and Sail Sabang, residents upload photos, videos, and narratives on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. These posts generate comments, reposts, and engagement that indirectly expand promotional reach.

Bloggers, YouTubers, television presenters, and public figures who have visited Sabang also share travel experiences through blogs and social media. For example, travel bloggers have documented budget travel experiences and visits to iconic destinations such as Kilometer Zero and Pulau Weh. These independently produced narratives contribute to broader national and international exposure. Overall, digital promotion in Sabang is present across multiple platforms but remains inconsistent, partially optimized, and largely decentralized.

Event-Based Promotion and Government-Led Tourism Activities

The findings indicate that events function as important promotional instruments in Sabang. Government-supported events such as Sail Sabang and the anniversary of Sabang City are regularly organized and documented through digital platforms. These events attract domestic visitors and generate online publicity through both official channels and personal social media accounts. Visual documentation of maritime activities, cultural performances, and public celebrations is widely circulated online.

Through these events, Sabang is frequently presented as “the Westernmost Gate of Indonesia” and as a maritime tourism destination. Event promotion emphasizes iconic locations such as Titik Nol (Point Zero of Indonesia), Rubiah Island, Iboih Beach, and other coastal attractions. Although events generate visibility and symbolic representation of Sabang, their promotion remains dependent on digital reposting and community participation rather than on an integrated long-term campaign strategy.

Personal Selling and Direct Tourist Interaction

Personal selling constitutes a prominent element of Sabang’s tourism promotion. Direct interaction between tourism agents and visitors begins at Balohan Port, where agents approach arriving passengers and offer tour services. Agents actively identify potential tourists, introduce popular destinations, distribute leaflets containing tour packages and prices, and initiate direct negotiation. Common persuasion techniques include mentioning iconic attractions such as “Point Zero” and “Snorkeling in Rubiah,” emphasizing affordability, and offering flexible packages based on the duration of stay. Negotiation practices are highly competitive, with multiple agents simultaneously approaching tourists. Some agents persist in offering services even after tourists have chosen other providers.

Interview data with Rafli, a local tour guide, reveals that hospitality practices are closely connected to local cultural values. Rafli emphasized the principle that “guests are kings,” reflecting a moral obligation to treat visitors respectfully and honestly. According to him, deceiving guests would contradict religious and cultural values and would bring negative consequences. Tour guides also adjust communication styles depending on tourists’ needs and expectations. They provide detailed explanations about destinations, offer certificates for visitors who reach Titik Nol, and suggest activity packages such as diving and snorkeling at Rubiah Island. These direct interactions play a significant role in shaping tourists’ experiences. Satisfied visitors often share their experiences through word-of-mouth and social media postings after returning home.

Community Participation and Informal Promotion

Tourism promotion in Sabang is not limited to government initiatives and commercial actors. Community participation is evident in the way residents share event documentation, scenic photographs, and travel experiences online. Such informal promotion expands visibility beyond official narratives. However, there is no structured coordination between community-generated content and government communication strategies. The findings suggest that tourism promotion in Sabang operates through a combination of government initiatives, private sector efforts, personal selling practices, and community-based digital participation.

The four empirical findings presented above indicate that tourism promotion in Sabang does not operate through isolated communication practices. Instead, digital promotion, event-based activities, personal selling, and community participation form an interconnected communication ecosystem. To clarify how these elements interact within broader political and multicultural dimensions, this research proposes a conceptual model illustrating the flow of Sabang's marketing communication practices. The model is derived inductively from field findings and visualizes how promotional activities converge into political image-building processes and intercultural communication dynamics.

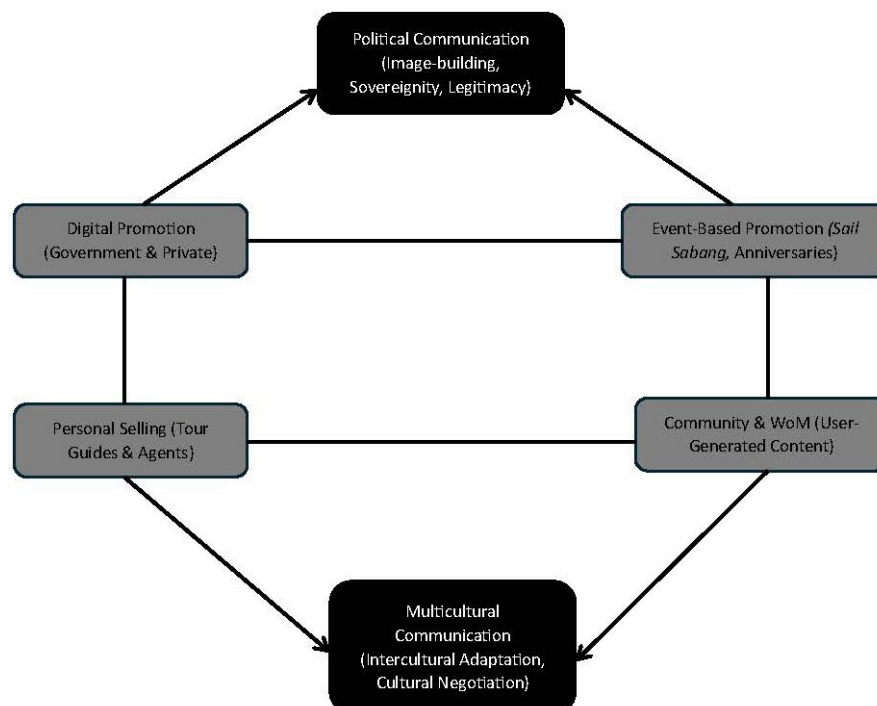


Image 1. Model of Sabang Marketing Communication Flow in Political and Multicultural Context

Source: Reseach Result (2025)

As illustrated above, Sabang's marketing communication flow operates through four primary channels: digital promotion, event-based promotion, personal selling, and community-generated word of mouth. These channels are interconnected and mutually reinforcing rather than functioning independently.

Digital and event-based promotions primarily construct macro-level narratives about Sabang, including its positioning as "the Westernmost Gate of Indonesia" and its identity as a maritime tourism destination. These activities contribute to broader processes of image-building and public representation. Meanwhile, personal selling and direct interactions between tourism agents and visitors operate at the micro level, shaping tourists' immediate experiences through negotiation, hospitality practices, and adaptive communication strategies. Community participation and user-generated content further extend these interactions into digital spaces, amplifying visibility and shaping destination perception.

The convergence of these four channels generates two overarching communicative dimensions. First, tourism promotion functions as political communication by projecting identity, reinforcing legitimacy, and strengthening symbolic territorial representation. Second, it operates as multicultural communication through intercultural adaptation, negotiation of values, and interaction between local actors and culturally diverse visitors. The model thus demonstrates that Sabang's tourism promotion is not merely a marketing mechanism but a multidimensional communicative process embedded within governance and cross-cultural dynamics.

The findings of this research not only illustrate how the marketing communication mix operates in the promotion of Sabang's tourism but also reveal deeper communicative dimensions that extend beyond marketing practice. Tourism promotion in Sabang simultaneously functions as a medium of symbolic representation—shaping public perception, constructing cultural narratives, and negotiating values between local actors and global audiences. These communicative dynamics suggest that tourism cannot be separated from broader contexts such as political communication, where image-building and legitimacy are embedded within public policy, and multicultural communication, where interaction among culturally diverse participants demands sensitivity and adaptability. Therefore, the marketing communication strategies identified in this research—spanning from digital media promotion to persuasive personal selling—can be interpreted as both political and intercultural processes, reflecting how tourism serves as a multidimensional arena of communication that bridges governance, identity, and culture.

DISCUSSION

The Use of Marketing Communication Mix Strategy on Tourism Promotion in Sabang

Digital media is one tool that is now very often used in marketing communication mix activities. The internet and social media included in digital media are very effective and efficient tools in disseminating information about tourist places in Sabang. In this digital era, social media is one of the most influential media in marketing communication. One source of perception that tourists receive indirectly can be obtained through information and communication media (Rachmiatie et al., 2020) through social media. Social media is a medium on the internet that allows users to represent themselves and interact, collaborate, share, communicate with other users, and form virtual social bonds (Nasrullah, 2015). The selection of social media as a tourism promotion tool aligns with the characteristics of social media itself. There are at least two characteristics of social media that make this new media used for many things: content that users can determine (user-generated content/UGC) and as a medium to disseminate information/content quickly and easily (share/sharing).

The Sabang City Tourism and Culture Office initially marketed tourism destinations digitally by focusing more on the Sabang City government website, www.sabangkota.go.id. However, the self-help management was stopped considering the tight budget and several priority programs (Sianipar & Liyushiana, 2019). Therefore, Sabang promotional activities cannot be separated from various social media platforms, whether it be through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, and other social media platforms. An example is the Facebook account page of the Sabang Culture and Tourism Office (<https://www.facebook.com/infoSabang/>). This page updates weather forecasts and narratives about tourism spots in Sabang. Likewise, the Sabang Tourism dot Info Facebook account page (<https://www.facebook.com/SabangTourism/>), a non-profit organization that actively documents and reposts reviews about various tourism destinations in Sabang. Various contents regarding tourism events carried out by the government or the private sector are also published regularly on the website www.bpks.go.id.

In addition to the role of the local government of Sabang in promoting Sabang through social media and their website, the private sector also plays a significant role in launching promotions through digital media. Some of them are www.wisatasabang.com which also uses Facebook to create groups for their tour packages. There are also www.discoversabang.com and www.islandwehresort.com, each of which has different characteristics. Discover Sabang, for example, contains contents containing comprehensive information about Sabang, starting from the history, culture, geographical location, and of course, the mainstay tourist attractions in Sabang. Meanwhile, Pulau Weh Resort is a site

that offers lodging accommodations and complete diving packages, accompanied by detailed instructions on how to reach the resort.

The use of social media as a promotional tool for Sabang is also carried out by Sabang residents themselves, both from officials, industry, tourism workers and the general public. Every time significant events are held in Sabang, for example, the anniversary of the city of Sabang and Sail Sabang, Sabang residents often upload event contents (text, photos, and videos) to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and others. Texts, photos, and videos about events in Sabang published via social media often invite responses in the form of comments, “reposts”, “retweets”, or simply “likes”/”love” from friends of social media users. The results did have a positive impact on efforts to instil awareness for potential tourists to visit Sabang and build direct relationships with the tourism industry in Sabang.

The findings of this study indicate that various digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Google+ have been widely used to promote Sabang tourism. However, recent research on consumer behavior further illustrates that digital platforms are not only distribution channels but also persuasive arenas where advertising strategies and celebrity endorsements can significantly shape audience perceptions and stimulate buying interest (Widiastuti et al., 2022). This highlights that Instagram, for instance, has become more than just a visual sharing platform; it functions as an interactive marketing tool that combines aesthetic appeal, trust-building through influencers, and personalized targeting. For Sabang, integrating similar approaches—such as collaborating with tourism influencers or leveraging targeted Instagram ads—would strengthen the visibility of local attractions, expand audience reach beyond conventional tourists, and enhance the persuasive impact of its marketing communication mix.

It does not stop there, Bloggers, YouTubers, presenters, to famous artists who have visited Sabang also share their experiences through digital media. An example is Marischka Prudence, who regularly writes about her travel experiences on her blog (www.marischkaprudence.blogspot.com). She wrote two things about Sabang: (1) a Budget of 2.7 million a week on Pulau Weh, and (2) Tame Pigs at Kilometer Zero. The presenter of one of the national private television stations also reviewed his experience exploring several tourist attractions in Sabang and provided price comparisons with other destinations in the eastern region. Methods like these have helped jump-start Sabang tourism promotion activities to be national and international markets.

The rapid growth of digital media platforms has diversified the ways in which destinations can reach and engage potential tourists. Beyond Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, the rise of TikTok demonstrates how short-form, creative, and highly shareable video content

can construct positive destination images and sustain tourism promotion during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Widyaswara et al., 2023). Their study of Pangandaran showed that TikTok enabled continuous audience engagement, user interaction, and social construction of place identity, even when physical visits were restricted. This suggests that new media platforms can fill the gap left by traditional promotions and expand the reach of tourism campaigns to younger, digitally native audiences. For Sabang, adopting innovative formats like TikTok not only broadens exposure but also aligns with global digital consumption trends, ensuring that its promotional efforts remain relevant, resilient, and competitive in the digital era.

Digital transformation has brought changes in the way tourism promotion is carried out in Sabang. The results of the study indicate that the use of digital media in tourism promotion in Sabang is still in its early stages and faces various challenges. Based on the results of the study, the digital media platforms currently used for tourism promotion in Sabang include: (1) Official website: The Sabang City Tourism and Culture Office has an official website (www.dispar.sabangkota.go.id) which contains information about tourist destinations, events, and tourism-related news. However, this website is rarely updated and has not been optimized for promotional purposes; (2) Social media: Social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram have been used for tourism promotion in Sabang. However, their management is still sporadic and inconsistent; and (3) Other digital platforms: Several digital platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google Maps have been used by tourism industry players to promote their businesses, but there is no integrated coordination in their use. The table below shows the level of utilization of digital media platforms in tourism promotion in Sabang:

Table 2. Level of Utilization of Digital Media Platforms in Tourism Promotion in Sabang

Digital Media Platform	Utilization Rate	Information
Official Website	Moderate	Rarely updated, not optimized yet
Facebook	Moderate	Inconsistent in management
Instagram	Low	Limited content, minimal interaction
YouTube	Low	Limited promotional video
TikTok	Very Low	Almost unused
TripAdvisor	Moderate	Utilized by business actors, but not yet coordinated
Google Maps	Moderate	Some destinations are already registered

Source: Results of Research Data Analysis (2025)

However, various digital media platforms used by local governments, the private sector, Sabang residents, and tourists who share their experiences are very effective marketing communication tools to promote Sabang and increase tourist visits to tourist attractions in Sabang. For example, advertising, Event and Experiences, Direct Marketing, and Word of Mouth Marketing/WoM can use digital media to liaison between Sabang tourism and tourists/potential tourists. In addition to various social media platforms and digital media, persuasion skills in personal selling of tour guides and tourism business actors also play an essential role in promoting and inviting tourists to recognize and enjoy tourism objects in Sabang. The term persuasion comes from the Latin word *persuasion*, which means to invite, persuade, or seduce. Persuasion can be done rationally and emotionally. Rationally, the cognitive component of a person can be influenced. Aspects influenced are in the form of ideas or concepts.

Meanwhile, emotional persuasion usually touches on the affective aspect, namely matters relating to a person's emotional life. Through emotional means, a person's sympathetic and empathetic aspects can be moved; in other words, persuasion is a communication process that aims to influence a person's attitudes, opinions, and behaviour, both verbally and nonverbally (Soemirat et al., 2000). Persuasion can also be interpreted as the use of symbols (sometimes accompanied by pictures) by one social actor to change or defend the opinion or behaviour of other social actors (Dillard, 2015). While digital tools and persuasive personal selling remain central to Sabang's tourism promotion, community participation is equally critical in ensuring sustainable tourism development. Research on Ketapang Aquaculture Ecotourism underlines that participatory communication is a fundamental mechanism for balancing power relations, ensuring equitable access, and strengthening solidarity among stakeholders in tourism management (Anam et al., 2025). The study shows that although physical infrastructure was successfully developed, the absence of structured community programs and limited environmental awareness hindered long-term sustainability, a gap that participatory communication helped address by involving diverse voices and building inclusive decision-making. These findings imply that tourism in Sabang should not only be promoted through persuasive messages but also designed through participatory frameworks that actively involve local communities. By doing so, Sabang can enhance both the legitimacy of its promotional activities and the sustainability of its tourism industry.

The study of tourism communication has a physical closeness to communication and tourism, especially its contribution to persuasive communication theories. Here, the tourism element contributes to tourism marketing studies, destinations, accessibility to destinations, human resources, and tourism institutions (Nugraha et al., 2017). In the context of tourism, the ability of persuasion must be owned by the activists. *Persuasion* is a fundamental skill

that can be continuously honed, either through formal training or through experience. Without proper persuasion techniques, tourism workers, (especially an agent) will not be able to promote the tourism products they offer—be it products in the form of goods or services—to their potential customers. Direct interaction, which is the hallmark of personal selling, makes the ability to persuasion one of the absolute requirements that must be possessed by tourism agents, including in promoting tourist attractions in Sabang.

Personal selling activities to promote Sabang tour and travel services have started at the airport. Based on the author's experience, tourism agents in Sabang have "surrounded" their potential customers since the exit of Balohan Port. These agents actively approach the people they value as tourists while offering Sabang's iconic tourist spots to visit. They are competing to attract the attention of tourists accompanied by high determination; in other words, they do not give up easily in persuading tourists to be persuaded to use their services. If there are interested tourists, these agents start making price deals, depending on the agreement on which tourist attractions tourists want to visit. They also usually ask how long tourists will be on vacation in Sabang and offer some vacation "packages" based on the length of time tourists are in Sabang. These agents also compete in terms of their vehicles to take tourists to tourist attractions in Sabang. Several agents are not infrequently still "insist" on offering their services even though tourists have agreed to travel in Sabang with other agents.

There are several ways of persuasion used by tourism agents in Sabang. First, most of them initiate persuasion in the cognitive realm; in other words, they use rational persuasion. Second, some directly approach tourists and persuade tourists by mentioning tourist objects in Sabang (for example, "Point Zero, Sir?" or "Snorkeling in Rubiah Sir, it is cheap, it is cheap!"). Third, some agents persuade tourists by first distributing their tour and travel company leaflets to people who have just left Balohan Harbor. It contains information about tour packages along with prices and contacts who can be contacted. However, most agents in Sabang use the first method to offer their services to tourists directly and directly negotiate the fees to be paid.

While in Sabang, researchers found a good travel agent. The agent was named Rafli, and he also served as a driver during the writer's visit to Sabang. Rafli treated researchers well, disciplined, and responsive. Rafli's attitude turned out to be derived from the customs and culture adopted by the Acehnese people; the culture is passed down from generation to generation. This condition is one of the characteristics of culture, namely that culture can be transmitted from person to person, from group to group, or from generation to generation (Permana et al., 2021). As stated in the following interview excerpt:

In Aceh, guests are kings. Unlike agents at a tourist spot in Sumatra, who only care about money. Therefore, we Acehnese always try to make our guests happy, no matter what our

circumstances. *Insyah Allah*, we will not trouble guests, let alone dare to deceive guests. If there is an intention to deceive, it is clear that our efforts will not be blessed and will forever be in vain. We will always try to satisfy guests who come and accommodate the wishes of our guests and are based on a sense of honesty.

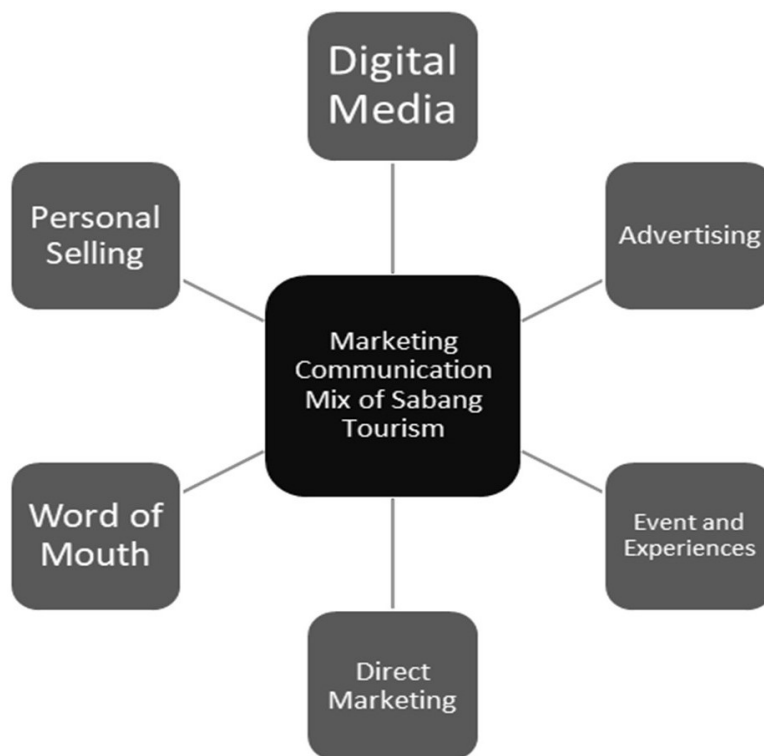


Image 2. Marketing Communication Mix Model of Sabang Tourism
Source: Reseach Result (2025)

The skills of persuasion in personal selling Sabang tourism by tourism agents are carried out in each of their promotional activities. This persuasion skill is honed through experience. In addition, tour guides must have skills in carrying out their functions as guides, so good communication on a trip is necessary. This way is also related to providing services, such as comprehensive information and being friendly and interactive to tourists (Aini et al., 2020). Although there are not as many tourists who visit Sabang as in other tourist attractions in Indonesia, the skills of these Sabang tourism agents are trained because of their determination and ability to read opportunities and non-verbal movements of tourists. Therefore, they successfully managed to persuade the tourists. In the end, if these tourists are satisfied, they will automatically promote tourism objects in Sabang through Word of Mouth and publish experiences of visiting tourist attractions in Sabang through postings on their social media.

Several tourist objects are a mainstay in Sabang, incredibly natural tourism. Beautiful beaches combined with a clean sea are a mainstay for Sabang to attract tourists to visit while spending time on vacation there. In addition, there are still many tourism selling points in Sabang, such as Indonesia's zero point area, the underwater world, and culinary tourism (Sulaeman & Afaza, 2019). Domestic and foreign tourists often choose Sabang as their destination. Based on the interview with Rafli, most tourists come to Sabang on weekends or during holidays. As stated in the following interview:

Most tourists come to Sabang on weekends or during long holidays. Everyone must ask to be taken to *Titik Nol* (Point Zero) of Indonesia because that place is one of the most iconic tourist attractions in Sabang. We also usually offer certificates for tourists who have visited Point Zero of Indonesia as authentic proof that they have visited here. After Point Zero, many also visit Rubiah Island for diving and snorkelling.

The effectiveness of tourism promotion does not merely depend on the use of digital media and persuasive communication by individual actors but also on the establishment of strong collaborative networks among diverse stakeholders. Research conducted in Malang Raya shows that collaborative digital communication networks involving local governments, universities, tourism associations, media, SMEs, and international travel agencies are essential for improving tourism quality and competitiveness (Nirwana et al., 2024). The study further emphasizes that such networks enable the integration of destination information, the digitalization of tourism services, and the facilitation of tourist mobility through partnerships with online transportation and telecommunication providers. These findings highlight that tourism destinations cannot rely solely on promotion via social media platforms but must also develop systematic digital collaborations to ensure long-term sustainability and international visibility. In the context of Sabang, this suggests that tourism promotion efforts would benefit from similar collaborative digital networks, which can support not only the dissemination of persuasive messages but also the provision of integrated services that enhance tourists' experiences from pre-arrival to post-visit stages.

Tourism Promotion as Political and Multicultural Communication

Tourism promotion operates not only as an economic and marketing activity but also as a form of symbolic communication that reflects political, cultural, and social meanings. In the case of Sabang, promotional strategies carried out by the local government and tourism actors embody dimensions of both political communication and multicultural communication, illustrating how the tourism sector contributes to image-building, identity negotiation, and intercultural understanding.

From a political communication perspective, tourism functions as an instrument of *soft power*—a non-coercive means of shaping perceptions through attraction and credibility (Demir & Demir, 2025b). The findings suggest that Sabang’s tourism promotion extends beyond economic objectives and functions as a component of soft power communication. According to Nye’s conceptualization, soft power is the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion, leveraging culture, values, and reputation to influence audiences’ perceptions and behaviors (Li, 2023). By promoting Sabang as “the Westernmost Gate of Indonesia,” the government engages in a form of *nation branding* that communicates stability, progress, and openness. Such narratives project regional pride and national unity, while events like *Sail Sabang* serve as both economic drivers and symbolic representations of Indonesia’s maritime identity. Official event documentation and online messaging during major celebrations (e.g., *Sail Sabang*, city anniversaries) position the city as integral to Indonesia’s maritime axis, thereby reinforcing state narratives about sovereignty and strategic geography. This practice mirrors broader forms of geo-cultural governance where tourism becomes a tool for territorial legitimation and political communication (Sutono et al., 2025). As Demir and Demir (2025a) argue, tourism communication plays a crucial role in building the reputation of places, reinforcing legitimacy, and aligning local initiatives with national diplomacy goals. Hence, the persuasive messages used in tourism promotion mirror political efforts to construct positive images and strengthen public trust toward governmental institutions.

While tourism is often analyzed within economic and cultural frameworks, its political dimensions warrant explicit attention. Recent studies highlight that tourism, by virtue of its symbolic and communicative qualities, intersects with governance and public policy formation (Uzar & Yılmaz, 2025). The Sabang findings align with this perspective: local government promotional practices do not solely inform prospective visitors but rearticulate Sabang’s political significance within national spatial imaginaries. Beyond its symbolic dimension, tourism promotion in Sabang also reflects a subtle negotiation of power between central and local authorities. While the narrative of Sabang as “the Westernmost Gate of Indonesia” aligns with national geopolitical imagination, it simultaneously provides the local government with strategic leverage to position Sabang within broader development agendas. In this regard, tourism communication becomes a mediating arena where local aspirations intersect with national interests. The framing of Sabang as a frontier of Indonesia not only reinforces territorial identity but also implicitly communicates sovereignty, security, and inclusivity to both domestic and international audiences. Consequently, tourism discourse operates as a strategic articulation of place-based identity that legitimises infrastructural investment, policy support, and state presence in peripheral regions.

The use of digital media such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube reflects an ongoing negotiation between local authenticity and global visibility, where local identities are continuously reshaped through their interaction with global communication flows (Yolanda et al., 2025). Thus, the marketing communication mix used in Sabang—spanning digital promotion, personal selling, and event-based engagement—illustrates how tourism operates as a communicative nexus linking government representation, cultural exchange, and identity construction. Government-managed websites and social media coexist with private tour operators' content and user-generated posts, collectively amplifying Sabang's image. This blended flow of content reflects contemporary digital soft power strategies emphasizing participation and co-creation of narratives across actors (Wondal & Angelin, 2026).

At the same time, tourism promotion in Sabang also represents a space for multicultural communication, where local agents interact with visitors of diverse cultural backgrounds. This interaction requires sensitivity to differences in language, norms, and expectations. The persuasive communication employed by Sabang's tour guides and service providers demonstrates intercultural competence, which involves empathy, adaptation, and respect in cross-cultural encounters (Pinna Pintor & Premazzi, 2024; Vaishnav, 2024; Zhang & Noels, 2024). These communicative acts go beyond mere marketing—they facilitate mutual understanding between the Acehese community, known for its strong religious values, and tourists with varying cultural orientations.

Furthermore, the multicultural dimension of tourism communication in Sabang reveals a dynamic process of cultural translation rather than mere cultural display. Local actors do not simply "present" Acehese culture; they selectively frame and adapt it to ensure comprehensibility and acceptability for diverse visitors. This process involves balancing religious norms—such as dress codes and social etiquette—with the expectations of tourists who may not share the same cultural framework. Multicultural interaction in Sabang's tourism context is evident in practitioners' communicative comportment toward diverse visitors, as seen in personal selling encounters at Balohan Port. Tour guides adapt their explanations, negotiation styles, and hospitality norms to match tourists' expectations—suggesting intercultural sensitivity rather than unreflective replication of local norms. This dynamic reflects theoretical work on cultural hybridity, which posits that cross-cultural interactions produce negotiated identities and communication practices that are neither purely local nor entirely external (Vasist & Krishnan, 2024). Such communicative adjustments illustrate what can be understood as pragmatic multiculturalism, where dialogue and accommodation occur without erasing local values. The findings suggest that successful tourism promotion in

Sabang depends not only on persuasive messaging but also on the community's capacity to maintain cultural integrity while engaging in intercultural openness.

In this sense, tourism communication in Sabang can be understood as both political and multicultural: political because it reinforces image and legitimacy through persuasive governance narratives, and multicultural because it bridges diverse cultural worlds through interaction, empathy, and symbolic exchange. This multidimensional perspective highlights that tourism is not merely about economic promotion but about how communication itself becomes a medium of diplomacy, cultural understanding, and social cohesion.

Finally, the integration of digital platforms intensifies this political–multicultural interplay by expanding the scale of audience engagement. Through algorithm-driven visibility and user-generated content, Sabang's image is no longer exclusively shaped by governmental narratives but also co-constructed by tourists, influencers, and online communities. This participatory communication environment enhances credibility and relatability, yet it also introduces the risk of image fragmentation when diverse representations circulate simultaneously. Therefore, tourism promotion in Sabang demonstrates how contemporary destination branding is embedded within a hybrid communication ecology—where state-driven narratives, market-oriented strategies, and intercultural interactions converge. This expanded understanding deepens the conclusion that tourism communication functions as a complex arena of symbolic governance and cross-cultural negotiation rather than a purely economic promotional activity.

CONCLUSION

This research examines tourism promotion strategies in Sabang by placing marketing communications within a political and multicultural context. The results show that the marketing communications mix in Sabang has been implemented through various forms, such as outdoor media advertising (posters and leaflets), events and experiences (e.g., *Sail Sabang*), direct marketing through websites, word-of-mouth in the form of verbal, written, and video testimonials from tourists, and personal selling through direct interactions between travel agents and visitors. Furthermore, digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Google+ are utilized by the local government, the private sector, the community, and tourists to promote Sabang's unique attractions.

However, the implementation of these marketing communications strategies remains conventional and fragmented. Limited budget, infrastructure, and human resources are major obstacles to developing more integrated and innovative promotions. Promotional materials

also do not fully highlight Sabang's competitive advantages strategically. The use of digital media is still in its infancy, with various challenges such as inconsistent management and the suboptimal use of potential platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Beyond its economic function, Sabang tourism promotion also has a strong symbolic dimension. From a political communication perspective, this promotion serves to strengthen Sabang's image as the "western gateway to Indonesia," while reflecting the government's efforts to project stability, progress, and openness. Thus, tourism promotion becomes part of a nation branding strategy and a soft power instrument that strengthens national legitimacy and identity.

At the same time, tourism promotion in Sabang also represents a multicultural communication practice. Interactions between the Acehese people, who hold strong Islamic values, and domestic and international tourists require empathy, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. The main challenge lies in balancing the preservation of local values with openness to the cultural diversity of tourists. Sabang's cultural diversity itself holds great potential as a tourist attraction, but has not been fully explored strategically.

Based on these findings, the development of Sabang tourism promotion needs to be carried out through a holistic and integrated approach. An integrated marketing communication strategy, policy synergy between the central and regional governments, strengthening tourism based on local values, and optimizing digital media are strategic steps that can be taken. Training programs organized by the local government and the private sector are also crucial for improving the marketing competency and cross-cultural communication skills of tourism practitioners.

Overall, Sabang tourism promotion should be understood not merely as an effort to boost the economy, but as a strategic and symbolic endeavor that strengthens regional and national identity while fostering intercultural understanding. This research still has limitations due to its geographic scope being limited to Sabang City. Therefore, future research could expand the study to other regions in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province or conduct comparative studies with regions with similar characteristics, as well as develop a quantitative approach to measure the effectiveness of implemented promotional strategies.

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