

## ***SAILING STORIES: Strategic Public Relations for Maritime Cultural Tourism in Coastal Area***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study aims to explore the public relations (PR) practices employed to push forward maritime cultural tourism along the coast of East Kalimantan, specifically Berau Regency and the Derawan Islands. Given the modern digital age, there is the need to infuse local stories to support strategic public relations practices toward building destination identities and maximizing visitor's enjoyment. This study applies the qualitative case study method using thorough interviews, participant observation, and analysis of promotional documents circulated by tourism authorities, businesses, and local residents. The findings highlight the use of public relations practices focusing on maritime stories -spread through social media portals, documentary screening, and community programs- having significantly promoted both destination exposure and attractiveness. However, there are challenges related to narrative consistency, meaningful local outreach engagement, and enhancing stakeholder collaboration.

**Keywords:** cultural narrative; maritime tourism; strategic public relations; Berau; Derawan Islands

## ***CERITA BAHARI: Strategi Public Relations untuk Pariwisata Budaya Maritim di Wilayah Pesisir***

### **ABSTRAK**

Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi public relations (PR) yang diterapkan dalam mempromosikan pariwisata budaya maritim di wilayah pesisir Kalimantan Timur, khususnya di Kabupaten Berau dan Kepulauan Derawan. Dalam konteks transformasi komunikasi di era digital, narasi budaya lokal dan praktik kehumasan strategis memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk citra destinasi serta meningkatkan keterlibatan wisatawan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus dan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, serta analisis konten materi promosi yang diterbitkan oleh dinas pariwisata, pelaku usaha wisata, dan komunitas lokal. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi kehumasan yang berbasis storytelling maritim -melalui media sosial, video dokumenter, dan kampanye berbasis komunitas- berhasil meningkatkan visibilitas dan daya tarik destinasi, tetapi masih menghadapi tantangan dalam hal konsistensi narasi, keterlibatan warga lokal, dan sinergi antar pemangku kepentingan.

**Kata-Kata kunci:** PR strategis; narasi budaya; pariwisata maritim; Berau; Pulau Derawan

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Cultural tourism is becoming one of the most integral components for tourism development around the world, providing not only economic but also sustainable value for heritage conservation and revitalization. Among the most effective strategies for destination branding is narrative communication, which features the very essence of each destination through stories to invoke emotional response (Molas & Whittaker, 2022; Rowley & Hanna, 2020). Public relations have become strategic and transformed from their traditional functions concerning press releases to becoming instrumental for digital storytelling and experience-related information development (Bucior, 2020; Chronis & Timothy, 2017; Lund et al., 2018, 2020). There is thus a need to delve into further insights for exploration concerning how or where storytelling platforms meet tourism development for underrepresented destinations.

This paper looks at strategic PR use for involving marine and coastal areas of East Kalimantan Province in general, and Berau Regency and Derawan Islands in particular, for marine culture tourism promotion. Unlike Bali or Yogyakarta resorts in Indonesia, for example, very few studies have analyzed or assessed marine or coastal areas of East Kalimantan Province to date. The Derawan Islands have also been largely ignored by world tourism development initiatives or even written studies by academics, though they have been part of the “10 New Balis” program initiated by the Indonesian government for tourism development (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2016). Most written texts to date have also developed or featured Western culture tourism (Botschen et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2024; Smith, 2015).

Narrative destination branding through myths, cultures, and ecologies is very effective as a communication method. In today’s pictorial and emotionally designed digital setting, narrative techniques have already been tested to create deeper attachment and travel choice for tourists (Bucior, 2020; Molas & Whittaker, 2022; Rowley & Hanna, 2020). Nevertheless, the conundrum continues to exist: How do marginalized seafaring communities employ narrative without undermining their cultural authenticity? This is especially important in areas where digital literacy and connectivity are poor and stories around tourism are designed and promoted by experts or government agencies. This may have dangers of communities being treated as passive signifiers instead of active storytellers for themselves (Đurkin et al., 2017; Jugmohan et al., 2016).

This paper addresses two basic research questions: (1) How do strategic public relations tools promote maritime cultural narrative telling for East Kalimantan? (2) What are the key challenges associated while ensuring alignment of digital communication strategies with local stories and sustainable tourism goals? By answering these questions, this study contributes to theoretical discourses and management strategies in tourism communication studies and is focused specifically on island and coastal areas within the Global South. It utilized Grunig and Hunt’s Excellence Theory for its role as an operational conceptual framework for exploring how inclusive and ethics-oriented two-way communication is enacted vis-à-vis PR events for tourism-related activities. The use of the Excellence Theory is most prevalent for high-resource settings within the Global North, while use for low-resource settings and decentralized areas such as Indonesia’s marine periphery is non-existent to very rare.

A case study setting such as Berau Regency, which is home to the Derawan Islands, Maratua Islands, Kakaban Islands, and Sangalaki Islands, is also very conducive to examining digital storytelling and its interplay between tourism branding and community engagement. The region is full of natural attributes such as turtles, corals, jellies, and many stories of local oral histories handed down through many generations of local fishermen and residents (Hidayah & Singh, 2021). Nevertheless, without overall effective PR strategies to integrate local culture and community stakeholders, destination stories may lack dimensions of coherence and believability because few of these stories are co-created by local stakeholders themselves but instead by tourism or media professionals.

Public relations provide enormous transformative power for sustainable tourism if it is driven by participation and cultural integrity. This is achieved if one focuses on moving away from symbolic to significant participation -where local perspectives determine not only whose stories are being told but also how and which platforms will tell these stories. These presence of top-down communication is one of the greatest impediments to effective communication in the Indonesian setting. Strategic PR acts as a dialogical approach to tourism communication to facilitate building relationships and objectives among stakeholders.

This project brings together three conceptual foundations: (1) Excellence Theory as communication approach focusing on ethics-oriented two-way and symmetrical communication processes (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021; Kenny, 2016); (2) narrative branding as approach to place identity building (Balmer & Burghausen, 2019; Camprubí & Coromina, 2016); and (3) web-based promotion strategies adjusted to contexts within the Global South where requirements for infrastructural development and participation differ (Cassel & De Bernardi, 2021; Rasel et al., 2025).

The following section provides empirical insights based on a case study approach developed through interviews, observations, and document analysis techniques conducted among the participants of Berau and Derawan Islands. The insights are further analyzed based on the conceptual framework presented above. Based on the framework structure presented below, insights will emerge containing crucial observations on communication breakdowns, narrative fractures, and participation deficits. Importantly, it also provides insights into the development of an inclusive PR communication approach for similar contexts of the maritime areas.

**Table 1.** Summary of Key Research Contributions and Implications

<b>Contributions</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>PR model for island tourism</b>	Offers practical framework for destinations with similar socio-ecological contexts
<b>Community-digital nexus</b>	Highlights participation gaps in digital storytelling initiatives
<b>Narrative consistency</b>	Provides case evidence on fragmented branding in developing destinations

Source: Processed by authors (2025)

This research is significant at both the theoretical and application levels. At the theoretical level, this paper offers insights into narrative for PR as a strategy for tourism development in underrepresented destinations. At the application level, this study is

invaluable for policymakers and developers seeking to adopt strategies for tourism development at destinations where ecologic fragility meets cultural sensitivity. By integrating narrative theory and PR best practices for digital strategy development, this paper provides insights for effective tourism development strategies at destinations in maritime southeast Asia.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study method to examine how strategic public relations (PR) methods were applied to advertise maritime cultural tourism for Berau Regency, located within East Kalimantan, Indonesia. A qualitative case study was an appropriate choice for this study because it can accommodate contextual richness, narrative complexity, and stakeholder views, which are essential for understanding how local stories are embedded in tourism communication efforts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lewis, 2015). This study was conducted over six months, from March to August 2023, combining document analysis and field research. The Derawan, Maratua, Kakaban, and Sangalaki island in Berau Regency were chosen specifically for this study because of their special status in Indonesia's "10 New Balis" tourism development plan and their particular maritime-cultural identity, which is still underrepresented in the academic literature related to tourism.

Purposive sampling was utilized to select a sample of 25 stakeholders involved in communication for tourism. They comprised 10 owners of local businesses within the tourism industry who were involved in communication, 5 public officials from government tourist establishments, 5 leaders of cultural departments, and 5 digital media practitioners. This constituted a composition from all three sectors: public, private, and community. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews to allow for open-ended responses within a thematic structure; participant observation, such as at festivals and within community gatherings; and document study, including government tourist policies, brochures, online marketing materials (including social media like Instagram and YouTube), and reports from non-governmental organizations.

This study was done within an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, an understanding of reality being negotiated and built through human relations and constructions of narrative (Flick, 2022; Iphofen, R., & Tolich, 2018). It is both exploratory and descriptive research, seeking to find patterns and processes of meaning-making and not to test formulated hypotheses. All interviews were transcribed word for word and were then coded manually with NVivo 12 Plus. Data were subjected to manual coding with open, axial, and selective coding methods, which allowed for the coding of emerging concepts aligned with the conceptual framework: strategic public relations practice, digital narrative construction, community building, and organizational collaboration. A thematic analysis were conducted to identify intersections among the themes within and across stakeholder groups and communication channels.

To ensure validity and reliability of the study, triangulation was utilized on three different sources of data. Additionally, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary results with a sample of participation for them to validate, along with peer debriefing to reduce researcher bias. A thorough audit trail was scrupulously maintained to

clearly record the research process. The researcher adopted a reflexive strategy, which ensured an outside perspective for the field study while intentionally considering how this specific positionality could impact access to data, interpretation, and interaction with respondents. Institutional approval was secured from an established reviewing body and consent was sought from respondents prior to commencing data collection. The strict research framework set forth provides a solid foundation for analyzing how public relations strategies and cultural storytelling intersect within marketing maritime tourism.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

In a thematic analysis framework drawn from the open-axial-selective coding model (Flick, 2022; Iphofen, R., & Tolich, 2018), qualitative data obtained from interviewing, observation, and document selection were analyzed. This analytic framework allowed for systematic extraction and interpretation of abundant, contextual data to transform it into meaningful analytical themes. Through open coding at the beginning stage, preliminary codes were generated from interview and field notes data and gave rise to a wide variety of ideas like “local ritual promotion,” “divided messaging,” and “social media access obstacles.” In axial coding, these ideas were grouped into higher-order themes like “symbolic heritage messaging,” “digital engagement disparities,” and “narrative coordination difficulties.” These, ultimately, were synthesized into three main themes that were replicated within various sources of data and stakeholder groups:

- (1) Purposeful deployment of maritime narratives within public relations communication
- (2) Digital storytelling and community involvement, and
- (3) Narrative coherence and intersectoral collaboration.

Selected themes were determined on the basis of their prevalence, applicability to study questions, and extensiveness of their theoretical bases. Each theme is expressed in two separate sections: the first presents empirical data from and directly from field research, such as representative quotations, accounts of events, and document excerpts; the second offers an interpretative breakdown by which results are assessed against the theoretical foundations of the study. Organizational format for this article is informed by the Excellence Theory for public relations, place narrative study approaches (Sharma et al., 2024; Vasavada & Kour, 2016), and participatory communication theory (Đurkin et al., 2017; Jugmohan et al., 2016). This two-part framework not only allows for flow of narrative but also increases analytical strength and interpretative acuity of study by clearly distinguishing stakeholder experiences from theoretical discourse.

### **Strategic Use of Maritime Narratives in Public Relations**

Empirical evidence from within the domain indicates stakeholders within the tourist industry of Berau Regency and the Derawan Islands -such as government tourist organizations, small entrepreneurs, and local representatives- increasingly utilize cultural narratives as an instrumental public relations tool for enhancing an improved maritime identity for the destination. Such narratives commonly make reference to local legends, such as Derawan Island creation myth, indigenous fishing traditions, and mystical sea rituals, each rich with

emotional content and deeply rooted within local oral tradition. Activities like #CeritaDerawan, coordinated by local tourist offices, actively propagate these tales through social media engagement on Instagram, short videos on YouTube, and printed materials handed out at tourist fares. Moreover, the Berau Bahari Festival has become an arena for expressing local myth through narrative and performative expression. These efforts seek to entertain while also locating differentiation for the destination by crafting a place identity rich on authenticity. As explained by a tourist officer, *"We use local legends to connect emotionally with visitors. Stories are more memorable than facts."* (Tourism Officer, interview #3). This observation indicates an intentional shift from fact-style promotion to narrative-style emotional connection supported by developing research on how storytelling is an effective means for destination branding (Bucior, 2020, 2020; Chronis & Timothy, 2017; Lund et al., 2018, 2020).

In spite of these efforts exemplifying strategic deployment of narrative within destination branding, it has been established these efforts largely follow a paradigm of persuasion, instead of adopting the two-way symmetrical approach espoused by Grunig and Grunig in their Excellence Theory (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021; Kenny, 2016). Communication is largely controlled by local stakeholders from the business and government sectors, who share pre-articulated messages with local populations instead of reciprocating engagement. Involvement of resident locals, which would allow them to actively engage in and share these narratives, is also largely curtailed; at times, participation reduces them to mere onlookers at festivals or to unengaging roles within video presentations. Thus, even if these narrative public relations efforts have been effective in projecting a coherent identity for Derawan Island as a maritime culture destination, these efforts shy away from creating meaningful dialogic engagement necessary for sustainable and inclusive communication. This observation confirms available academic literature which states destination storytelling is largely an image-building activity instead of being a means for developing a shared identity (Đurkin et al., 2017; Jugmohan et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2024; Vasavada & Kour, 2016). Thus, despite positive potentialities surrounding local maritime storytelling and local branding capabilities, its long-term effect may be limited without stronger structural support to make collaborative efforts and feedback mechanisms easier.

### **Digital Storytelling and Community Involvement**

The application of digital storytelling in the context of the Derawan Island in Berau Regency reflects a complex relationship between technological advancement and deeply rooted social inequalities. Activities like the #Derawan campaign and the Berau Bahari Festival represent great efforts toward using digital media -namely Instagram and YouTube- to serve the goal of promoting the visibility of indigenous marine culture through narratively rich storytelling. Such stories are often centred upon local folklore, aquatic ceremonies, and the lives of elder fishermen and are powerful tools for destination branding (*"We use local legends to connect emotionally with visitors. Stories are more memorable than statistics."* [Tourism Officer, Interview #3]). Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that such stories are largely developed by media experts or tourism officials, with very little role for community members. Therefore, despite the veneer of inclusivity, many digital storytelling initiatives risk the propagation of hierarchical representations, where local residents are defined as subjects rather than as co-creators.

The above context indicates a strong imbalance between the participatory values of Excellence Theory, promoting two-way symmetrical communication and empowering stakeholders (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2021; Kenny, 2016), and the existing reality of one-way communication structures. In East Kalimantan, community participation in the development of digital tourism is superficial and governed by limitations in digital literacy, digital access, and media production skills. These are supported by recent studies investigating the digital communication environment in the region, which indicate significant infrastructural and learning barriers hindering broader civic participation on digital channels (Juwita et al., 2025). Comparative studies in Vietnam (Dai Quang et al., 2025; Duester, 2021) and Fiji (Scheyvens et al., 2020; Scheyvens & Russell, 2017) also confirm that co-creation in tourism is successful only with targeted community-capacity-building directed at eliminating technology divides and developing genuine local voice. In the East Kalimantan setting, the long-term sustainability of narrative-based public relations depends on the shift from representational symbolism to genuine participatory design, empowering the local people to become active agents in crafting their cultural representation.

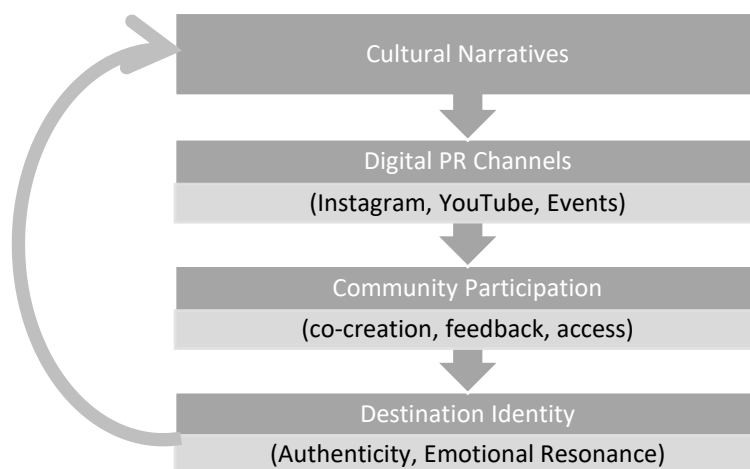
### **Narrative Consistency and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration**

Empirical data show that there is a significant disjunction in communication among different stakeholders involved in tourism in Berau Regency and the Derawan Islands. Government, private sector, and local community organizations' tourism officials often try to market the same destination's brand identity. Government-generated narratives emphasize predominant environmental sustainability and officially recognized cultural heritages, while those produced by the private sector emphasize more commercial elements like diving sites, accommodations, and experiential representations. The narratives presented by local residents, however, emphasize indigenous maritime culture, cultural practices, and assertions of local identity. Despite this, there is a lack of formalized mechanisms or platforms to combine these messaging efforts. This then creates redundancy, thematic ambiguity, and a diluted brand identity. A visual content analysis of the common messaging themes shows significant variations in tone, target audience, and values expressed. This disorganization testifies to a fragmented communication environment, where each actor works independently, without organized narrative frameworks or strategic collaborative planning.

The fragmentation of stories has profound implications for collaborative place branding, underlining the importance of alignment, conversation, and participative storytelling amongst all stakeholders engaged in this endeavour (Botschen et al., 2017; Cassinger & Eksell, 2017). The absence of an integrated narrative strategy not only serves to undermine emotional attachment to the brand but also brings about confusion amongst potential tourists, especially in digital spaces where varied fragmented stories coexist without integration. Most importantly, in the absence of an overarching communication architecture, the voice of local communities is suppressed, and institutional actors take over the production of narratives. This serves to clearly highlight principles of collaborative destination branding, where inclusive storytelling forms the key to the co-creation of meaningful and enduring place identities (Acharya & Rahman, 2016; Hereźniak, 2017; Jernsand et al., 2017; Shahabadi et al., 2019). The findings thus point towards an urgent need for a collaborative storytelling site -a space where local communities, businesses, and policymakers sit together and develop an integrated narrative strategy through constant convergence, mutual values, and equal representation.

Such an approach is especially important in peripheral maritime areas, where cultural heritage exists as both an invaluable asset and a fragile resource that requires careful management of stories.

The second theme, Digital Storytelling and Community Involvement, highlights the imbalances in digital engagement among diverse stakeholders. Even though social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube provide immense visibility, community engagement is often restricted by bottlenecks such as digital literacy and a lack of access to training resources. This observation is in line with (Jugmohan et al., 2016)'s criticism of the superficial representation culture in community-based tourism projects. A comparative study from Vietnam demonstrates that developing digital media skills can greatly enhance local stakeholders' representational capacities (Bassano et al., 2019; Da Milano et al., 2023). The third theme, Narrative Consistency and Collaboration, at the same time unveils the breakdown of communication channels in Derawan Islands. Without a unified planning framework, the different sectors -involving the government, private companies, and community representatives- transmit variant messages, thus threatening the homogeneity of branding efforts for the destination. This situation is parallel to that in Fiji, where external branding approaches often overpower local narratives (Hughes et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2021). These comparative observations not only validate the study's findings but also strengthen the argument in favor of an inclusive, co-managed storytelling approach that accepts diversity in stakeholder vision and strengthens the authenticity of the destination's identity.



**Diagram 1.** Narrative PR Communication Flow Model

Sources: Processed by authors (2025)

Hence, the empirical findings of this study shed light on the complex dynamics that underlie narrative-based public relations (PR) in the context of maritime cultural tourism in Berau Regency and the Derawan Islands. While stakeholders from various spheres - governmental bodies, private tourism businesses, and civil society groups- participate actively in marketing efforts, such activities are often plagued by a lack of adequate strategic coordination. The key messages defined by different participants demonstrate considerable contradictions, leading to a disjointed representation of the destination brand. Local narratives, which are strongly rooted in maritime heritage, e.g., marine rituals and fisherfolk folklore, are often put into the limelight; however, their production and dissemination are



largely controlled by institutional representatives. This circumstance highlights an ongoing disconnection between the cultural resources of local communities and their communicative agency in the tourism industry.

In addition, online public relations efforts are expressed in many different forms (e.g., social media campaigns such as #Derawan or local tourism festivals); however, they are all placed within the context of co-creation at the community level. Most local inputs are largely symbolic or externally driven, mostly due to issues such as digital illiteracy, unequal access to technology, as well as inadequate formal education. These issues are not unique to East Kalimantan but are characteristic of greater trends viewed elsewhere in the Global South, where branding campaigns have also struggled in achieving a balance between market appeal and authenticity. Without investment in community media literacy and a concerted cross-sector planning effort, integrity and long-term sustainability of narrative-based tourism marketing are substantially compromised. To address these limitations, the present research presents a conceptual framework that reconceptualizes narrative public relations as an iterative and cooperative ecosystem. The framework begins with cultural narratives, or the central source of content, and then progresses through public relations channels that are digital in nature and which act as amplifiers for these narratives. The third phase focuses on the importance played by community engagement as a necessary factor affecting the authenticity and effectiveness of the narratives. Finally, the process ends in the development of a destination identity that is not only cogent and attractive but also ethically developed through collective ownership. Importantly, the framework includes a feedback component where audience and community feedback is integrated into the process of developing the narratives, with the ultimate result of continuous refinement and adaptive storytelling.

This theoretical model, shown in Diagram 1, contributes to the strategic public relations and destination branding literature, particularly in the under-studied island and coastal contexts. By drawing on Excellence Theory tenets of collaborative place branding and participatory communication, the model underscores that digital storytelling needs to move beyond promotional utility and towards inclusive narrative governance. It calls on policymakers, tourism marketers, and community leaders to adopt systems-thinking that appreciates storytelling as more than a marketing tools; it is positioned as a dialogic and ethical practice necessary for building resilient cultural identities in this age of globalization.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed to examine the role of strategic public relations in maritime cultural tourism promotion by local stories in Berau Coast Areas and Derawan Island, East Kalimantan. Though efforts such as the Derawan Campaign and Berau Bahari Festival show that maritime local identity can be promoted, findings suggest that such efforts are still very disintegrated and institutionally driven, with minimal local community contribution and participation. It appears that the main problem lies with the lack of story integrity and connectivity among and between institutionally and locally driven narratives, and with local community limitations in terms of internet and media connectivity, creating difficulties not only in communication but also limiting local residents' contribution and participation in storytelling and promotion. Through maritime local stories concerning local legends, maritime ceremonies, and traditional fishing habits are employed and utilized, such storytelling and dissemination can be

institutionally and topically driven and one-way, with minimal roles and responsibilities placed on local communities, and with minimal potential offering and providing narratives sought by Grunig and Grunig's Excellence Approach. This one-way method and approach can and may be deliberately commodified or over-commercialized, with minimal potential offering and providing regarding grassroots empowerment. To fill such gaps, this research proposes and recommends its own framework regarding maritime local story and public relations concerning interaction, involvement, and influence regarding narratives and such interaction and involvement concerning digital channels and platforms, with and through feedback mechanisms concerning reintegration and reorienting local and visitor stories and responses concerning such narratives and responsibilities. The proposed research framework, which can be and may be contextually and theoretically founded and supported by theories of participatory communications and local place-branding creativity and developments, can and may be specifically and particularly applicable and significant regarding such small local and remote destinations, by such efforts concerning balancing local and maritime identity with developments and developments concerning tourism developments and potentials.

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