



## Tourism Marketing Communication as Institutional Practice: An Interpretive Study of *Waduk Malahayu* Promotion

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana komunikasi pemasaran pariwisata dipraktikkan oleh sebuah institusi pariwisata publik dalam mempromosikan *Waduk Malahayu*. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretif melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan analisis dokumen untuk menganalisis praktik komunikasi institusional. Hasil analisis menunjukkan adanya orientasi dominan pada visibilitas, pengumuman, dan kehadiran institusional, alih-alih pada konstruksi simbolik yang berkelanjutan atau keterlibatan relasional. Aktivitas komunikasi pemasaran diorganisasikan dalam pola koordinasi episodik, dengan kegiatan berbasis acara berfungsi sebagai momen sentral intensitas dan integrasi komunikasi. Praktik komunikasi tersebut mencerminkan konsepsi komunikasi berorientasi transmisi, di mana integrasi dicapai melalui keselarasan temporal, bukan melalui koherensi naratif lintas saluran dan waktu. Praktik-praktik ini dibentuk oleh logika institusional yang terkait dengan tata kelola sektor publik, termasuk perencanaan berbasis program dan tuntutan akuntabilitas. Studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian komunikasi dengan mengonseptualisasikan komunikasi pemasaran pariwisata sebagai komunikasi institusional serta menunjukkan bagaimana komunikasi pemasaran terpadu diredefinisi melalui praktik institusional. Temuan penelitian ini menawarkan wawasan konseptual yang dapat ditransfer bagi studi komunikasi sektor publik dan promosi pariwisata.

**Kata kunci:** Komunikasi Pariwisata, Komunikasi Institusional, Komunikasi Pemasaran, Komunikasi Pemasaran Terpadu, Pariwisata Publik

### Abstract

*This study examines how tourism marketing communication is practiced by a public tourism institution in promoting Waduk Malahayu. It adopts an interpretive qualitative approach using in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to analyze institutional communication practices. The analysis identifies a dominant orientation toward visibility, announcement, and institutional presence rather than toward sustained symbolic construction or relational engagement. Marketing communication activities are organized around episodic coordination, with events functioning as central moments of communication intensity and integration. Communication practices reflect a transmission-oriented conception in which integration occurs through temporal alignment rather than narrative coherence across channels and time. These practices are shaped by institutional logics associated with public-sector governance, including program-based planning and accountability demands. The study contributes to communication scholarship by conceptualizing tourism marketing communication as institutional communication and by demonstrating how integrated marketing communication is redefined through institutional enactment. The findings offer transferable conceptual insights for the study of public-sector communication and tourism promotion.*

**Key words:** Institutional Communication, Integrated Marketing Communication, Marketing Communication, Public Tourism, Tourism Communication



## INTRODUCTION

Tourism promotion is increasingly recognized not merely as an economic activity but as a communicative practice through which destinations are symbolically constructed, negotiated, and understood. In the Indonesian context, tourism development is closely tied to public policy frameworks governing the management of regional assets, cultural heritage, and public space, as articulated in national tourism law and regional autonomy regulations. Local governments are positioned not only as facilitators of tourism growth but also as custodians of public narratives that define how places are valued, accessed, and represented within broader development agendas.

Within this policy environment, tourism marketing communication functions as a central mechanism through which destinations are rendered meaningful to citizens and visitors alike. Rather than operating solely as a technical instrument to increase visitor numbers, marketing communication constitutes a social process that produces visibility, legitimacy, and collective identity. Recent Indonesian studies have highlighted that weak or inconsistent narrative communication at the local level often leads to fragmented destination images, reduced public engagement, and limited community ownership of tourism programs (Batubara, 2025; Humeniuk & Polova, 2025). Such failures are not merely promotional shortcomings but raise broader citizenship and public policy concerns, as they affect how public assets are interpreted, who feels entitled to participate in their use, and how accountability for tourism governance is perceived. From this perspective, narrative breakdowns in tourism communication signal deeper issues of policy implementation and institutional capacity, positioning tourism promotion as a critical site for examining the relationship between communication, governance, and public interest.

In communication studies, this shift has encouraged scholars to move beyond managerial evaluations of marketing effectiveness and toward interpretive analyses of how communication strategies are enacted in specific institutional and cultural contexts. Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Boehmer, 2024; Key & Czaplewski, 2017), for instance, is often presented in marketing literature as a strategic framework for coordinating promotional tools to deliver consistent messages (Evita & Ali, 2023; Pustaka, 2021). However, from a communication perspective, IMC can also be understood as a set of communicative practices (Utama et al., 2024) whose implementation is shaped by organizational structures, institutional logics, and symbolic priorities.

Previous research in tourism communication has shown that public-sector tourism institutions frequently adopt marketing communication concepts selectively (Salam & Syahza, 2023), adapting them to local constraints such as limited resources, bureaucratic procedures, and accountability demands (Efni & Hasan, 2025; Kade Dwi Arsana et al., 2024; Klijn et al., 2012; Tanjung et al., 2021). As a result, communication strategies often emphasize visibility-oriented activities (Wirawan, 2025) —such as events, announcements, and media exposure—while longer-term meaning construction and relational engagement remain underdeveloped. This condition suggests a gap between the theoretical ideals of integrated communication and its practical enactment in public tourism contexts.

Despite growing interest in tourism marketing communication (Nursyadiah et al., 2023), much of the existing literature remains dominated by managerial and evaluative approaches that prioritize performance indicators over communicative processes (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Arifda et al., 2025; Simabur et al., 2023). Fewer studies examine how marketing communication is actually practiced as a form of institutional communication, particularly at the local level. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how concepts such as IMC are translated into everyday communication practices within public tourism organizations.

This study addresses this gap by examining the tourism marketing communication strategy used to promote *Waduk Malahayu*, a local tourism destination managed by a public tourism institution in Indonesia. Rather than assessing the effectiveness of promotional activities in quantitative terms, this study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to explore how marketing communication is organized, prioritized, and enacted in practice. This study, therefore, is guided by the following research question: *How is tourism marketing communication practiced by a public*

### *tourism institution in promoting Waduk Malahayu?*

By addressing this question, the study contributes to communication scholarship in two ways. First, it provides an empirically grounded account of marketing communication as an institutional practice rather than a purely strategic tool. Second, it extends communication-oriented interpretations of IMC by demonstrating how integration is negotiated, constrained, and redefined within a local public tourism context.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design (Balakrishnan Nair, 2022; Conz et al., 2024) to examine tourism marketing communication as an institutional communication practice within a public tourism organization. Rather than measuring promotional effectiveness or causal impact, the study seeks to understand how marketing communication is organized, prioritized, and enacted through everyday organizational work. Data were generated through in-depth interviews and field observations involving key organizational actors responsible for planning, implementing, and communicating tourism programs.

To ensure analytical transparency while maintaining informant anonymity, the study provides a detailed informant profile table outlining participants' organizational roles, functional responsibilities, and length of service. This profiling allows readers to assess the institutional positioning and experiential depth underlying the perspectives analyzed, strengthening the credibility and interpretive validity of the findings. An interpretive approach is particularly appropriate for communication research that examines meaning-making processes and institutional logics embedded in routine organizational practices (Rejoice Natasya Titan & Ade Budi Santoso, 2024). Accordingly, marketing communication is approached not as a technical promotional instrument, but as a socially situated practice shaped by organizational hierarchy, policy constraints, and situational demands.

### **Research Site and Context**

The research was conducted at *Waduk Malahayu*, a local tourism destination managed by a public tourism institution in Brebes Regency, Indonesia. *Waduk Malahayu* was selected as the research site because it represents a locally managed destination where tourism promotion is conducted within public-sector constraints, including limited resources, bureaucratic procedures, and accountability requirements.

*Waduk Malahayu* was selected as the research site due to its strategic yet contested position within the regional tourism landscape of Brebes Regency. As one of the area's long-established public tourism assets, the destination has experienced fluctuating visitation patterns and recurring challenges in maintaining relevance amid changing tourism preferences and management arrangements. Recent efforts to revitalize *Waduk Malahayu* through renewed marketing initiatives and organizational restructuring provided a critical moment for examining how institutional communication is mobilized in response to perceived stagnation and image uncertainty. Compared to other destinations in Brebes or Central Java that rely heavily on private or event-based promotion, *Waduk Malahayu* offers a distinctive case of publicly managed tourism where marketing communication is closely entangled with bureaucratic accountability and public service mandates.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data were collected using three complementary qualitative techniques to ensure analytical depth and contextual understanding.

#### *In-depth Interviews*

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with five key informants who were directly involved in tourism promotion and destination management. Informants were selected purposively based on their roles in policy formulation, operational implementation, and community engagement.

The interviews focused on informants' experiences and perspectives regarding:

1. the forms of marketing communication employed,
2. the rationale behind communication choices,
3. perceived priorities and constraints in promotional activities.

This interview approach allowed participants to articulate how marketing communication is practiced rather than to evaluate its effectiveness numerically.

### **Observation**

Non-participant observation was conducted to capture how marketing communication practices materialize in situ, including the use of promotional materials, event-based communication, and on-site messaging. Observational data were used to contextualize interview accounts and to identify consistencies or discrepancies between stated strategies and observed practices.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data analysis followed a thematic interpretive approach informed by communication studies. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents were coded iteratively to identify recurring communication practices and patterns.

Kotler and Keller's marketing communication mix (Hatami & Hermawati, 2022) was employed not as a prescriptive evaluative framework, but as an analytic sensitizing concept to organize empirical themes related to advertising, events, public relations, digital communication, direct marketing, and word-of-mouth (Sulthan, 2018). This approach allowed the study to systematically map communication practices while remaining attentive to contextual meanings and institutional constraints (Izzulhaq, 2022).

To enhance analytical transparency, the frequency with which specific communication elements emerged across informants was recorded. These frequency counts function as qualitative salience indicators, illustrating the relative prominence of communication practices without implying statistical measurement or causal inference.

### **Research Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents was used to strengthen analytical credibility. Interpretive consistency was maintained by grounding analytical claims in recurring empirical patterns rather than isolated statements. Informant anonymity was preserved to encourage open and reflective responses.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. To protect confidentiality, informants are referred to using non-identifying labels. The study adheres to ethical standards for qualitative research in communication studies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents empirical findings on how tourism marketing communication is practiced by a public tourism institution in promoting *Waduk Malahayu*. The results are derived from in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The analysis focuses on patterns of communicative practice, rather than on evaluating effectiveness or outcomes.

Selected interview excerpts are presented to demonstrate how institutional actors articulate and rationalize their communication practices.

### **Salience of Marketing Communication Practices**

Interview analysis indicates that certain communication practices are consistently emphasized, while others are marginal. This pattern reflects institutional priorities in everyday communication routines

Tabel 1.  
Salience of Marketing Communication Practices across Informants

Communication Practice	Informants (n=5)	Interpretive Salience
Events-based communication	5	Highly salient
Advertising	5	Highly salient
Word-of-mouth	5	Highly salient (organic)
Public relations	4	Moderately salient
Digital communication	4	Moderately salient
Sales promotion	3	Limited
Direct marketing	2	Marginal

As one informant summarized:

*“Promotion mostly happens through events and announcements. That’s where people really notice us.”* (Informant 1)

#### **Event-Centered Communication as a Core Practice**

Events emerge as the most salient communicative practice. Informants consistently describe events as moments when communication becomes concentrated and visible.

*“When there is an event, communication becomes very active. People come, media come, and the place feels alive.”* (Informant 2)

Events are perceived as effective because they create immediate attention. However, communication tends to end when the event concludes:

*“After the event, there is usually no continued communication. Things go back to normal.”* (Informant 4)

These excerpts indicate that events function as episodic communication practices, producing short-term visibility rather than sustained communicative continuity.

#### **Advertising as Informational Communication**

Advertising practices are consistently described as informational rather than persuasive. Informants emphasize that advertising is intended to inform the public about the destination’s existence and activities.

*“Advertising is mainly to let people know that Waduk Malahayu exists and is open to visitors.”* (Informant 3)

Messages are described as general and undifferentiated:

*“We don’t really create different messages for different audiences. The content is mostly the same.”* (Informant 1)

This suggests that advertising functions as a baseline visibility mechanism rather than as a tool for narrative or identity construction.

#### **Digital Communication and Limited Interactivity**

Digital platforms are acknowledged as important communication channels, yet their use remains largely one-directional.

*"We use social media to post information, but interaction with followers is still limited."* (Informant 2)

Institutional constraints shape this practice:

*"There is no specific team to manage digital interaction, so we focus on posting information."* (Informant 5)

These accounts indicate that digital communication extends informational logic rather than enabling dialogic engagement.

### **Public Relations and Institutional Visibility**

Public relations activities are associated with maintaining institutional visibility and legitimacy through media exposure.

*"Public relations mostly involve coordinating with media so our activities are covered."* (Informant 4)

PR is not described as a coordinating communicative function:

*"Each activity handles its own promotion. Public relations doesn't integrate everything."* (Informant 1)

This reflects a supportive but non-integrative role of public relations within institutional communication practices.

### **Word-of-Mouth as an Organic Communication Process**

All informants recognize word-of-mouth as an influential communication process that operates outside institutional control.

*"Visitors often share their experiences themselves. That kind of promotion is not planned."* (Informant 3)

*"Word-of-mouth depends on visitor satisfaction, not on official promotion."* (Informant 2)

These excerpts highlight word-of-mouth as an experiential and emergent form of communication.

### **Marginal Practices: Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing**

Sales promotion and direct marketing appear infrequently in interview accounts and are described as situational.

*"Discounts are only given at certain times, not as a regular strategy."* (Informant 5)

*"Direct communication is usually limited to specific groups, like schools."* (Informant 4)

Their marginal presence reinforces the dominance of visibility-oriented communication practices.

The results show that tourism marketing communication for *Waduk Malahayu* is practiced as a visibility-oriented, informational, and institutionally constrained communication system. Communication practices prioritize episodic attention and institutional presence over sustained meaning construction or relational engagement. These findings provide the empirical grounding for the interpretive discussion presented in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

The findings invite an understanding of tourism marketing communication not as a strategic assemblage of promotional tools but as a form of institutional communication that organizes visibility, legitimacy, and meaning within public-sector tourism governance. Communication surrounding *Waduk Malahayu* is structured through routinized practices that prioritize announcement, exposure, and public presence, reflecting an underlying assumption that communicative responsibility is fulfilled once visibility has been achieved. This orientation situates communication within a transmission paradigm, positioning audiences as passive recipients of information rather than as participants in the co-construction of meaning.

This communicative orientation is not merely a matter of strategic choice but is shaped by structural constraints within public institutions. Limited digital literacy among personnel, uneven access to communication training, and restricted human resource capacity constrain the institution's ability to sustain dialogic and responsive communication practices. These constraints function as structural barriers that favor one-way dissemination over interactive engagement, reinforcing informational asymmetries between the institution and its publics. As a result, communication practices tend to privilege procedural clarity and formal reporting over interpretive accessibility and audience participation.

The emphasis on visibility also raises critical questions regarding the nature of accountability embedded in these communication practices. While communication is formally justified as a mechanism of public accountability, the findings suggest that communicative activity is often oriented upward toward demonstrating institutional activeness to supervisory bodies and government authorities rather than downward toward engaging tourists as communicative partners. In this sense, communication functions symbolically to signal compliance and productivity within bureaucratic hierarchies, potentially at the expense of meaningful public engagement. This contributes to an accountability paradox in public tourism management, where the appearance of communicative activity substitutes for communicative effectiveness, highlighting a tension between administrative accountability and public information literacy.

Within this framework, integration does not emerge as symbolic coherence but as operational coordination. The concept of integrated marketing communication, when translated into institutional practice, loses its narrative and relational dimensions and becomes a mechanism for aligning activities across channels during specific moments (Garcia & Wardhana, 2025). Integration therefore refers to simultaneity rather than to semantic continuity. Communication coherence exists within events but dissolves across time, preventing the accumulation of symbolic capital that could stabilize destination identity.

The centrality of events illustrates how communication meaning becomes temporally compressed. Events function as institutional stages where visibility, organizational performance, and public accountability converge. During these moments, communication intensity peaks, media presence increases, and institutional activity becomes legible to the public. Once the event concludes, communication loses urgency and returns to a dormant state. This cycle reveals a communicative logic that values immediacy over continuity and presence over narrative depth. Meaning does not sediment through repetition but resets through episodic exposure.

This pattern reflects institutional logics that shape public-sector communication. Administrative structures prioritize programmability, measurability, and procedural clarity. Communication practices align with these priorities through standardized messages and observable outputs. Symbolic work that requires reflexivity, interpretive control, and sustained narrative management conflicts with bureaucratic rationality (Kavoura, 2007). As a result, communication favors forms that remain legible within administrative systems while limiting engagement with ambiguity, interpretation, and dialogue.

Marketing communication therefore performs a dual symbolic function. On one level, it constructs the destination as accessible and active. On another level, it constructs the institution as operational and accountable (O. Wambarop et al., 2025). Visibility serves not only promotional goals but also governance goals. Communication becomes evidence of work rather than a medium of

relationship building. This duality explains the persistence of visibility-oriented practices even when their communicative depth remains limited.

This study extends understanding of tourism promotion by demonstrating how communication concepts migrate across disciplinary boundaries and transform during institutional enactment. Integrated marketing communication does not fail in this context; it mutates. Its meaning shifts from strategic integration toward institutional feasibility. This shift exposes a gap between theoretical models of communication and lived communication practices within public organizations.

The discussion underscores the importance of analyzing communication as a socially organized practice embedded within institutional power, temporal structures, and symbolic economies. Tourism marketing communication, when examined through this lens, reveals less about persuasion and more about how institutions manage presence, legitimacy, and public meaning. Such an approach repositions tourism promotion as a site of communication research concerned with how meaning becomes possible, constrained, or suspended within institutional life.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has approached tourism marketing communication in the promotion of *Waduk Malahayu* as an institutional communication practice rather than a managerial strategy. The findings show that communication operates through routines that prioritize visibility, announcement, and institutional presence, reflecting a transmission-oriented conception of communication. Integrated marketing communication, as enacted in this public-sector context, appears not as sustained narrative coherence but as episodic coordination centered on events and routine promotional activities. Communication thus functions to signal activity and maintain public presence, while limiting the accumulation of symbolic meaning that could stabilize destination identity over time.

These communication practices are shaped by institutional logics characteristic of public tourism organizations, including program-based planning, accountability requirements, and administrative rationality. Marketing communication therefore performs a dual symbolic role: constructing the destination as active and accessible while simultaneously constructing the institution as operational and accountable. By demonstrating how communication concepts are redefined through institutional enactment, this study contributes to communication scholarship by reframing tourism promotion as a site where visibility, legitimacy, and meaning are negotiated. The findings offer conceptual insights that may be transferable to similar public-sector communication contexts and invite future research to further examine the relationship between institutional communication practices and audience meaning-making processes.

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