

Digital Transformation for Sustainable Rural Tourism: Evaluating Branding Competencies in Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages

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ABSTRACT: Digital transformation has become a key strategy for advancing sustainable rural tourism, yet many destinations struggle to translate digital access into effective branding outcomes. This study examines how digital branding competencies shape sustainable tourism development in two tourism villages in Gianyar, Bali, namely Taro and Keliki. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, data were collected through in depth interviews with eighteen local stakeholders, participant observation, and a systematic audit of digital platforms. The analysis reveals that differences in digital performance are not primarily driven by technology availability but by variations in governance, human capital, and narrative coordination. Taro demonstrates an integrated digital branding model supported by institutional collaboration and clear role distribution, while Keliki exhibits fragmented practices reliant on individual initiatives. The findings highlight that sustainable digital transformation in rural tourism depends on institutionalized branding competencies rather than technical adoption alone.

Keywords: digital transformation, tourism village, destination branding, rural governance, digital competence

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic sectors supporting Indonesia's economic growth, cultural promotion, and regional development. In recent years, national tourism policies have increasingly emphasized sustainable and community-based tourism models that prioritize inclusive economic benefits, cultural integrity, and long-term environmental stewardship. A key institutional manifestation of this policy orientation is the development of Tourism Villages or Desa Wisata, which are now positioned as a central mechanism for advancing sustainable tourism transformation at the local level (Hariyadi et al., 2024; Pramono & Juliana, 2025). Conceptually, tourism villages align with global shifts that promote the decentralization of tourism away from mass, urban, and overcrowded destinations toward rural areas offering authentic cultural practices, everyday community life, and nature based experiences (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Yang et al., 2021). Beyond diversifying tourism products, this model functions as a tool for local empowerment, more equitable income distribution, and enhanced socio-economic resilience among rural communities.

Within this national landscape, Bali occupies a distinctive position in the development of tourism villages. The island's internationally recognized destination brand, strong cultural institutions, and deeply rooted community governance systems provide a fertile context for community-based tourism initiatives. At the



same time, Bali faces persistent structural challenges associated with overtourism, cultural commodification, environmental pressure, and spatially uneven development (Hitchcock & Putra, 2008). Tourism villages in Bali therefore serve a dual strategic function. They act as alternative tourism spaces that redistribute visitor flows away from saturated destinations, while simultaneously operating as cultural anchors that preserve and revitalize Balinese identity through participatory tourism practices grounded in local customs and collective governance arrangements (Cole, 2007; Suarta et al., 2022). In this sense, tourism villages constitute a critical component of Bali's broader strategy to maintain destination competitiveness while addressing sustainability concerns.

In the contemporary digital era, destination competitiveness is no longer shaped solely by physical attractions, infrastructure, or service quality. Increasingly, online visibility, digital storytelling, and virtual engagement play a decisive role in how destinations are discovered, evaluated, and consumed by global travelers. For tourism villages, which often operate with limited professional marketing capacity, digital platforms present both opportunities and challenges. Digitalization enables villages to enhance visibility, communicate authentic cultural narratives, and develop stronger value propositions through social media engagement, storytelling, virtual tours, user generated content, and integrated booking systems (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). When strategically managed, digital transformation can support regenerative tourism outcomes by expanding market reach while reinforcing local identity and community benefits.

Recent academic literature suggests that digital transformation in rural and community-based tourism has evolved beyond basic technology adoption toward more integrated digital ecosystems. Scholars emphasize the growing role of immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality, artificial intelligence driven personalization, and data analytics in shaping tourist decision making and destination competitiveness (Mariani & Baggio, 2022; Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Research on rural digital branding further highlights the importance of identity-based strategies, where authenticity, cultural narratives, and participatory storytelling become key differentiators in global tourism markets (Manis, 2020). In parallel, the concept of smart tourism villages has emerged, calling for the integration of information and communication technologies, digital governance, and data supported services to strengthen sustainability, cultural resilience, and community empowerment (Amir et al., 2020; Gretzel, Sigala, et al., 2015). Collectively, these studies indicate a global shift toward holistic and institutionally embedded digital transformation in rural tourism.

Despite this potential, the implementation of digital branding in Indonesian tourism villages remains uneven, particularly in Bali. Existing studies identify persistent constraints including unequal digital literacy, fragmented branding narratives, limited infrastructure, and the absence of standardized community level digital marketing frameworks (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Sriyani, 2021). Empirical evidence from Bali further indicates that many tourism villages exhibit disjointed digital initiatives, weak coordination among community actors, and inconsistent branding messages despite possessing strong cultural capital (Agustini Karta et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2024). This discrepancy highlights a critical gap between Bali's digitalization potential and its practical implementation, underscoring the need for systematic inquiry into the specific competencies required to manage digital branding effectively at the village level.

This study addresses these challenges through an empirical examination of Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages in Gianyar Regency. Both villages represent culturally significant destinations with distinctive tourism identities. Taro Tourism Village is widely recognized for its historical heritage and eco-tourism initiatives, while Keliki Tourism Village is internationally known for its miniature painting tradition and rural cultural landscape. Although both villages possess substantial cultural assets, their trajectories of digital integration reveal contrasting approaches to branding and governance. Examining these cases enables a nuanced assessment of how digital branding competencies are developed, coordinated, and institutionalized within community-based tourism settings.

Several research gaps remain insufficiently addressed in the existing literature. First, many Indonesian studies continue to conceptualize digital branding primarily as a promotional activity rather than as a strategic and institutional competence embedded within local governance structures. Second, empirical research exploring the interaction between cultural heritage, community participation, and digital branding in high value cultural destinations such as Taro and Keliki remains limited. To address these gaps, this study aims to evaluate the current digital branding competencies and readiness of Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages and to analyse the socio cultural and infrastructural factors shaping their digital transformation.

The contribution and novelty of this research lie in its context specific reconceptualization of digital branding as a socio cultural and strategic competency rather than a purely technical or promotional tool. By focusing on two culturally significant tourism villages in Bali, the study advances theoretical understanding of rural digital transformation while offering practical insights for policymakers and village stakeholders seeking to enhance digital competitiveness without compromising cultural sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Theoretical Framework

The rapid pace of digital transformation in the global tourism industry has generated substantial scholarly attention, particularly in understanding how technological change reshapes destination competitiveness, visitor behavior, and local development dynamics (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Gretzel, Reino, et al., 2015). Within this evolving landscape, rural and community-based destinations such as tourism villages have emerged as critical sites for examining the intersection of digital tools, cultural identity, and participatory governance in tourism development (Sukma et al., 2025). Existing research spans multiple strands, including digital tourism ecosystems, rural destination branding, community-based tourism, and smart tourism village frameworks. While these studies provide valuable theoretical and empirical insights, they often remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated.

To address these conceptual and empirical discontinuities, this literature review synthesizes three interrelated theoretical domains that collectively inform the digital transformation of rural tourism. First, the Community Based Tourism paradigm and the Tourism Village model provide a socio cultural and governance-oriented foundation emphasizing local ownership, participatory decision making, and cultural preservation as pillars of sustainable tourism development (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Second, digital transformation in tourism offers a technological and organizational perspective on how digital tools and platforms enhance destination management, community empowerment, and visitor experiences, while also exposing persistent capacity and literacy challenges in rural contexts (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Chuang, 2023). Third, destination branding theory, particularly in rural and emerging destinations, clarifies how cultural narratives, place identity, and storytelling can be strategically structured and digitized to strengthen competitive positioning (Ben Youssef et al., 2019). By integrating these domains, this review situates the present study within contemporary scholarship, identifies unresolved gaps, and establishes the conceptual basis for a community driven digital branding framework for tourism villages.

The Tourism Village Model and Community Based Tourism

Tourism Village or *Desa Wisata* model represents an increasingly institutionalized approach to tourism development in Indonesia, conceptually rooted in the broader philosophy of Community Based Tourism. In global tourism scholarship, Community Based Tourism is commonly defined as a development model in which local communities retain meaningful control over tourism activities and equitably benefit from tourism generated value, thereby supporting long term socio cultural and environmental sustainability (Manyara & Jones, 2007). At its core, Community Based Tourism emphasizes authenticity, localized governance, and the protection of cultural and ecological assets that distinguish rural destinations (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). This paradigm positions communities not as passive recipients of tourism development but as active agents shaping destination identity, governance, and development trajectories.

Within Indonesia's policy framework, the Tourism Village model operationalizes these principles through a structured national strategy aimed at diversifying tourism products, decentralizing economic growth, and strengthening regional resilience. Tourism villages are designed to leverage rural cultural resources such as traditional rituals, craftsmanship, agricultural landscapes, indigenous knowledge, and everyday community life to create distinctive tourism offerings that differ fundamentally from mass tourism products (Hariyadi et al., 2024; Pramono & Juliana, 2025). This approach aligns with Indonesia's broader commitments to inclusive development and cultural preservation, particularly in rural regions seeking greater participation within the national tourism economy.

In Bali, the relevance of the Tourism Village model is especially pronounced. While Bali's global reputation as a premier tourism destination has delivered significant economic benefits, it has also intensified challenges related to overtourism, cultural commodification, and uneven spatial development (Hitchcock & Putra, 2008). Tourism villages in Bali therefore play a dual role. They function as alternative destinations that redistribute visitor flows away from congested areas, while simultaneously serving as cultural

strongholds that sustain Balinese identity through participatory tourism practices grounded in customary governance systems (Cole, 2007; Suarta et al., 2022). These villages are deeply influenced by the Tri Hita Karana philosophy, which emphasizes harmony among humans, nature, and spirituality, reinforcing the cultural embeddedness of tourism development on the island.

Despite these strengths, existing scholarship exhibits a notable imbalance. Much of the literature emphasizes the socio economic and cultural benefits of Community Based Tourism, including empowerment, heritage preservation, and livelihood diversification, while paying limited attention to how tourism villages are positioned within digital global tourism markets (Cole, 2007). The mechanisms through which cultural authenticity and participatory governance are translated into coherent digital identities and competitive online branding remain underexplored. This gap is increasingly significant in an era where destination competitiveness is strongly influenced by digital storytelling, platform visibility, and online engagement. Consequently, there is a pressing need to integrate Community Based Tourism frameworks with contemporary digital branding perspectives to fully understand the strategic challenges facing tourism villages.

Digital Transformation in Tourism and Rural Contexts

Digital Transformation has become a strategic imperative across economic sectors, fundamentally reshaping how organizations and destinations create and deliver value (Hess et al., 2016). In the tourism sector, digital transformation has evolved beyond basic transactional functions such as online booking systems toward immersive, personalized, and data driven visitor experiences (Mariani & Baggio, 2022). The global pandemic further accelerated this shift, reinforcing digital capability as a critical determinant of destination resilience and competitiveness, particularly for small scale and community-based destinations (Yang et al., 2021).

For rural tourism and tourism villages, digital transformation presents both substantial opportunities and structural challenges. On the opportunity side, digital tools enable enhanced global visibility, direct market access through disintermediation, and the use of multimedia storytelling to convey authentic cultural narratives (Manis, 2020). However, rural destinations often face persistent constraints, including uneven digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, financial limitations, and governance challenges related to platform management, data ownership, and content control (Manis, 2020; Sriyani, 2021). To address these challenges, the Smart Tourism Village model has emerged as a key conceptual framework.

The Smart Tourism Village framework emphasizes the integration of Information and Communication Technologies into rural tourism governance, service delivery, and sustainability initiatives (Amir et al., 2020; Gretzel, Reino, et al., 2015). Drawing from broader smart tourism and smart destination theories, this model highlights data driven decision making, participatory digital governance, and technology enabled cultural resilience. However, while Smart Tourism Village frameworks address infrastructural and managerial dimensions of digitalization, they often pay limited attention to communicative outcomes, particularly destination branding and narrative construction. This limitation suggests the need to extend Smart Tourism Village discourse by explicitly incorporating digital branding as a strategic output of digital transformation in rural contexts.

Destination Branding and Digital Branding Strategies in Tourism Villages

Destination branding constitutes a central theoretical foundation for enhancing the global competitiveness of tourism destinations. It is widely understood as a strategic process through which destinations develop a distinct image, identity, and value proposition that differentiates them in competitive tourism markets (Manis, 2020). For Bali, destination branding operates at multiple scales, leveraging the island's global reputation while enabling individual tourism villages to articulate distinct cultural identities within the broader destination brand.

In line with Community Based Tourism principles, effective destination branding in tourism villages must be identity based and grounded in authenticity, local narratives, and participatory storytelling (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Digitalization has further transformed branding practices through the rise of digital branding strategies that utilize social media platforms, interactive websites, virtual and augmented reality, and user generated content to co create and disseminate destination identities (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). For tourism villages with limited marketing resources, digital branding offers a relatively accessible pathway to global visibility.

The effectiveness of digital branding in tourism villages depends on two interrelated dimensions. The first is narrative consistency, which refers to the ability to translate cultural heritage, historical depth, and community values into a coherent and authentic digital message across platforms. The second is community participation, which ensures that branding content remains culturally appropriate, locally controlled, and aligned with community governance structures (Oka & Subadra, 2024). Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that digital branding should not be treated as a purely promotional or transactional activity. Instead, it must be understood as a strategic, governance embedded process that supports long term cultural sustainability and inclusive economic development.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design with a comparative case study approach to explore and examine how digital branding competencies are developed and implemented within tourism villages. This design was selected to enable an in depth and holistic investigation of the underlying processes shaping digital branding practices, particularly the contextual factors that explain how and why such competencies emerge in real life community settings (Yang et al., 2021). The qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on governance dynamics, cultural embeddedness, and social interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The research focuses on two tourism villages in Gianyar Regency, Bali, namely Taro and Keliki. These cases were purposefully selected due to their contrasting levels of digital branding maturity while operating within the same regional governance environment and possessing comparable cultural heritage assets. Taro Tourism Village represents a proactive and integrated digital branding model, whereas Keliki Tourism Village reflects a reactive and fragmented approach to digital branding. This contrast enables a comparative analysis of how differences in governance coordination, human capital, and digital readiness influence branding execution and outcomes.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify informants with direct expertise, decision making authority, and operational involvement in tourism development and digital initiatives. This non probability sampling method ensured that data were collected from information rich sources with strong contextual relevance to the research objectives. A total of eighteen informants participated in the study. To achieve analytical depth and data saturation, informants were drawn from three stakeholder levels within each village. These included strategic actors such as Village Heads (*Perbekel*) and Customary Leaders (*Bendesa Adat*), who provided insights into policy direction, cultural regulation, and funding allocation through village budgets (APBDes). Tactical level informants consisted of Chairpersons and core members of Tourism Awareness Groups (*Pokdarwis*), who contributed perspectives on operational coordination, visitor management, and medium-term branding strategies. Operational level informants included members of local youth organizations (*Karang Taruna*) and active digital content operators, whose input was essential for understanding technical execution, content creation workflows, and community level digital literacy constraints. Data saturation was reached when subsequent interviews no longer produced new themes or substantive insights. An overview of informant codes, roles, and interview periods is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

Code	Village	Role	Interview Period
T-01	Taro	Village Head (<i>Perbekel</i>)	March 2025
T-02	Taro	Customary Leader (<i>Bendesa Adat</i>)	March 2025
T-03	Taro	Pokdarwis Chairperson	March 2025
T-04	Taro	Pokdarwis Core Member	March 2025
T-05	Taro	Pokdarwis Core Member	March 2025
T-06	Taro	Digital Content Operator	March 2025
T-07	Taro	Digital Content Operator	March 2025
T-08	Taro	Karang Taruna Member	April 2025
T-09	Taro	Karang Taruna Member	April 2025
K-01	Keliki	Village Head (<i>Perbekel</i>)	April 2025
K-02	Keliki	Pokdarwis Chairperson	April 2025

K-03	Keliki	Pokdarwis Core Member	March 2025
K-04	Keliki	Pokdarwis Core Member	March 2025
K-05	Keliki	Local Artist / Tourism Actor	April 2025
K-06	Keliki	Local Artist / Tourism Actor	April 2025
K-07	Keliki	Digital Content Operator	April 2025
K-08	Keliki	Karang Taruna Member	April 2025
K-09	Keliki	Karang Taruna Member	April 2025

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between March and April 2025. Each interview lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes, allowing sufficient time for detailed exploration of participants' experiences, roles, and perceptions related to digital branding and tourism governance. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy. To enhance trustworthiness, interview data were triangulated with participant observation and a systematic audit of official digital platforms. This approach enabled the researchers to observe how strategic decisions, such as the formulation of monthly branding themes, were translated into technical outputs, as well as to identify informal interactions and coordination challenges that might not surface through interviews alone.

In addition to field-based data, a systematic digital audit was undertaken to evaluate the external manifestation of digital branding practices in both villages. The audit covered official Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and website platforms associated with Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages. All content published between February and May 2025 was analyzed to assess narrative consistency, platform integration, content frequency, engagement characteristics, and the presence or absence of booking functionalities. The integration of interviews, observation, and digital audit constituted a triangulated data collection strategy designed to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (1994), which conceptualizes qualitative analysis as a cyclical process rather than a linear sequence. Interview transcripts and field notes were first subjected to data reduction through selection, focusing, simplification, and abstraction. Open and axial coding techniques were applied to identify recurring patterns and themes, including generational skills gaps, content authenticity, governance coordination, and infrastructure reliability. The reduced data were then organized into structured comparative matrices to facilitate systematic cross case analysis between Taro and Keliki. In the final stage, the displayed data were interpreted to assess the overall level of digital branding competency in each village and to relate empirical findings to the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical evaluation of branding competencies in Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages, derived from a triangulation of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and systematic digital audits, reveals a nuanced and complex interplay between inherited cultural wealth and contemporary digital readiness. In this study, "Digital Branding Competency" is operationalized not merely as technical skill (e.g., editing or posting), but as a multidimensional construct comprising: (1) Technical Proficiency (ability to use tools), (2) Narrative Governance (ability to control brand consistency), and (3) Institutional Integration (ability to align digital efforts with village regulations). The investigation highlights a distinctive paradox: while both villages possess robust offline brand equity, anchored in Taro's eco-spiritual heritage and Keliki's globally recognized artistic traditions, their capacity to translate these tangible assets into a coherent online brand identity differs significantly. This dichotomy suggests that the presence of rich cultural capital does not automatically equate to digital competitiveness; rather, it requires a specific set of strategic competencies to navigate the translation from physical experience to digital narrative.

The data indicates that the disparity is not merely infrastructural but is deeply rooted in human capital and governance structures. Where one village demonstrates a proactive, integrated digital ecosystem, the other struggles with fragmentation and sporadic engagement, highlighting an "adoption gap" characteristic of rural digitalization in developing economies. The findings are organized into three interrelated thematic pillars to provide a structured and critical analysis of these dynamics: 1) divergence in digital branding

maturity, 2) the competency gap in content creation, and 3) governance and the sustainability of digital initiatives.

Divergence in Digital Branding Maturity of Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages

The digital audit and interview data reveal a clear asymmetry in digital maturity between the two cases, with Taro Tourism Village exemplifying a proactive and integrated level of maturity. Unlike traditional rural tourism models that rely heavily on external travel agents or fragmented promotion, Taro has successfully established a self-sufficient digital ecosystem. The village utilizes a dedicated, professionally managed website equipped with a functional booking engine, effectively reducing reliance on third-party intermediaries and retaining economic value within the community. The village operates a dedicated, professionally maintained website that not only provides comprehensive information but also features a fully functional booking engine. This system streamlines visitor transactions, reduces dependency on third-party platforms, and ensures that greater economic value circulates within the local community. Moreover, the website functions as a central hub that integrates social media content, cultural storytelling, and visitor engagement features, reflecting [Gretzel & Stankov \(2021\)](#) describes as a shift toward holistic digital destination management (See Figure 1).

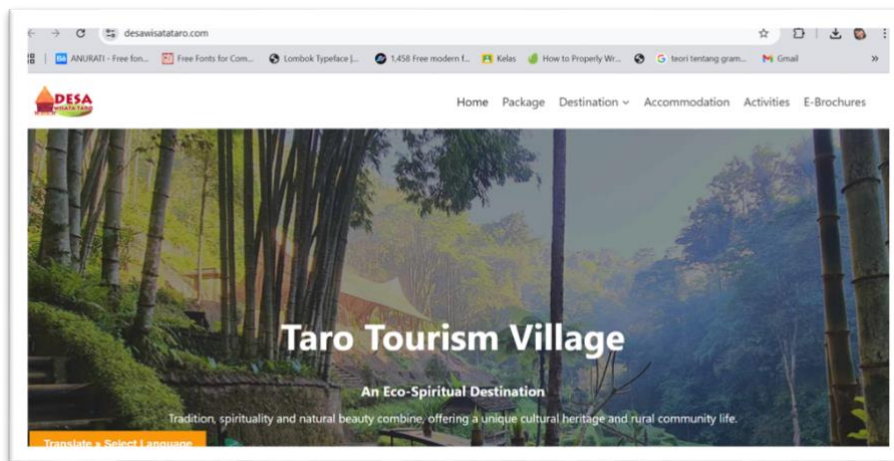


Figure 1. Digital Branding Assets of Taro Tourism Village
Source: Taro Tourism Village's Website, 2025

Strategically, Taro Tourism Village adopts a hybrid branding governance model in which the Tourism Awareness Group (*Pokdamwis*) oversees brand direction while the operational aspects are delegated to a dedicated multimedia unit formed by members of the local youth organization (*Karang Taruna*). This division of roles enables the village to maintain both organizational accountability and creative agility. As a result, the digital identity presented across online platforms, ranging from social media channels to the official website, appears unified, coherent, and professionally curated. Findings from the digital audit further illustrate that Taro consistently employs high-quality visual materials, particularly professional-grade photography and short-form videography, to communicate its distinctive eco-spiritual brand narrative. Key attractions such as the conservation of the sacred White Ox (*Lembu Putih*), immersive firefly-watching experiences, and other nature-based cultural rituals are framed not merely as tourist products but as components of a living cultural landscape rooted in environmental stewardship and spiritual heritage. This intentional storytelling strengthens Taro's positioning in the competitive tourism village ecosystem by emphasizing authenticity and local wisdom. Rather than presenting these features as isolated touristic spectacles, Taro constructs a narrative that situates each attraction within broader ecological cycles, community belief systems, and intergenerational practices. This interpretive framing reflects a growing shift in community-based tourism toward values-driven storytelling, where cultural assets are communicated through lenses of identity, meaning, and custodianship rather than commercial novelty.

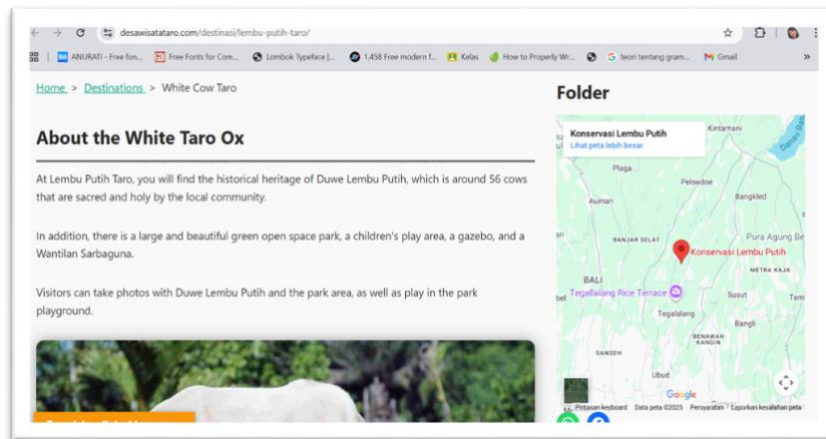


Figure 2. A Key Eco-Tourism Product Promoted Through Digital Storytelling
Source: Taro Tourism Village’s Website, 2025

Through this intentional narrative strategy (See Figure 2), Taro signals to visitors and digital audiences that its tourism offerings are grounded in local epistemologies and sustained community commitment. By foregrounding authenticity, sacredness, and ecological responsibility, the village effectively differentiates itself in the increasingly competitive tourism village ecosystem. This narrative depth enhances destination credibility, strengthens emotional resonance with travelers seeking meaningful and ethical travel experiences, and reinforces the village’s branding as an “eco-spiritual” destination. Ultimately, such positioning enables Taro to preserve cultural integrity and elevate its market appeal simultaneously, demonstrating how community-led storytelling can serve as a strategic resource for sustainable tourism development.

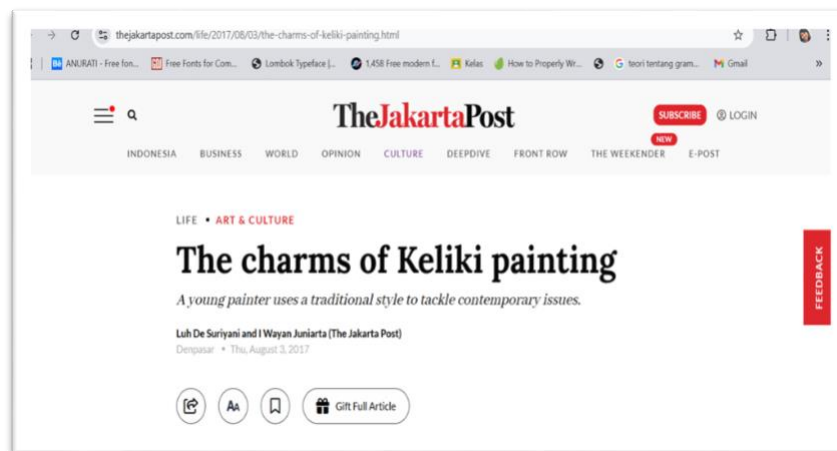


Figure 3. Digital Audit of Keliki Village: The Absence of a Centralized Official Website
Source: The Jakarta Post, 2025

Keliki Tourism Village, conversely, exhibits a reactive-fragmented level of digital maturity. Unlike the centralized approach observed in established villages, the digital audit confirms that Keliki’s promotion relies heavily on the personal social media accounts of individual guides and artists. While the village possesses a globally distinct cultural asset, the Keliki style of miniature painting, its digital footprint lacks a unified narrative. This fragmentation leads to brand dilution, where the absence of a central digital hub (official website) forces visitors to navigate outdated third-party blogs. This observation is substantiated by qualitative interviews with the local governance. As noted by the Head of the Keliki POKDARWIS:

"We do not have a dedicated team for the village account; most promotions happen through the personal WhatsApp and Instagram of the artists themselves. We usually only post on Instagram when we see the village is quiet or when there is a big

ceremony. We don't have a team to manage it every day. Most guests find us through the personal Facebook pages of our painters” (Interview, Informant K-02, March 2025).

Table 2. Comparative Digital Audit of Web Presence

Indicator	Taro Tourism Village	Keliki Tourism Village
Official Website	Available (High SEO, Booking Engine)	Unavailable (Rely on 3rd party blogs)
Social Media Identity	Unified Handle (@desawisatataro)	Fragmented (Multiple handles: @keliki_art, @keliki_trekking, @desawisatakeliki)
Content Strategy	Scheduled, Professional Storytelling	Ad-hoc, Personal/UGC dominant
Booking Method	Integrated Direct Booking	Direct Message (DM) / WhatsApp

Source: Primary Data Analysis, 2025

This study illuminates a critical divergence in the digital branding trajectories of rural destinations, evidenced by the contrasting maturity levels of Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages. Taro exemplifies a proactive-integrated model, where digital sovereignty is achieved through a self-sufficient ecosystem that merges professional web infrastructure with authentic, values-driven storytelling. By leveraging a hybrid governance structure that bridges institutional oversight (*Pokdamwis*) with the creative agility of local youth (*Karang Taruna*), Taro has successfully translated its eco-spiritual heritage into a coherent high-value brand that retains economic benefits within the community. Conversely, Keliki represents a reactive-fragmented stage, where a globally significant cultural asset is undermined by the absence of a unified digital anchor. The reliance on ad-hoc, individualistic promotion results in brand dilution and highlights a persistent second-level digital divide, defined not by infrastructure access but by a deficit in the strategic capacity to orchestrate a destination brand. Ultimately, these findings underscore that sustainable digital transformation in rural tourism extends beyond mere technological adoption. It necessitates the development of governance competence and collaborative stewardship. Bridging the gap for developing villages like Keliki requires shifting from sporadic promotion to strategic, community-led brand management to ensure that cultural integrity and economic resilience are simultaneously achieved in the digital age.

Governance, Institutional Capacity, and the Sustainability of Digital Branding

The sustainability of digital branding in tourism villages cannot be separated from the governance structures that shape how decisions, resources, and responsibilities are distributed within rural communities. While digitalization is often framed in the literature as a matter of technological adoption, recent work across digital rurality, smart tourism, and institutionalism argues that the key determinant of sustainability lies in the socio-political infrastructures that govern digital initiatives (Gretzel, Reino, et al., 2015; Gretzel & Stankov, 2021). Digital branding, as a socio-technical practice, requires long-term coordination between human actors, technological systems, and institutional support. Therefore, this study evaluates how governance affects the durability of digital initiatives in two contrasting cases, Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages, moving beyond descriptive findings to interrogate their implications for rural digital transformation theory.

Taro Tourism Village exemplifies a case where digital governance is successfully embedded within local development structures through adaptive planning mechanisms. A defining institutional innovation observed in Taro is the integration of digital funding into the Annual Village Budget (APBDes). This financial institutionalization effectively transforms digital initiatives from discretionary, ad-hoc projects into obligatory village commitments. Crucially, this mechanism ensures that recurrent expenditures, such as domain hosting, equipment maintenance, and internet subscriptions, receive consistent support, insulated from the volatility of leadership changes or shifting priorities. From a theoretical standpoint, Taro’s budgeting mechanism exemplifies what digital governance scholarship identifies as institutional routinization, wherein digital innovation becomes standardized within administrative cycles. This empirical finding aligns with the Smart Tourism Village framework by which posits that digital transformation must be grounded in local governance capacity, political will, and long-term planning rather than mere technological procurement (Gretzel, Sigala, et al., 2015). Furthermore, Taro demonstrates a high degree of

strategic narrative governance. Key attractions, such as the sacred *Lembu Putih* conservation, are positioned within coherent digital storylines that emphasize cultural authenticity and environmental stewardship. This suggests that local authorities actively guide online narrative construction to reinforce place identity, a critical function in the era of platformed tourism where authenticity is constantly negotiated (Mkono, 2020).

Keliki Tourism Village, in sharp contrast, presents a governance model characterized by fragmented, project-based digital practices. Keliki’s reliance on temporary digital labor also reflects what institutional theorists describe as capacity hollowing, the process whereby institutions become dependent on external expertise rather than cultivating internal digital competencies. Without a formal governance mechanism or dedicated personnel, digital initiatives remain peripheral and vulnerable to abandonment. In this case, the absence of a permanent digital coordinator within the *Pokdarwis* structure represents a critical governance gap. This gap prevents the formation of digital routines and disables knowledge retention, rendering digital transformation superficial rather than systemic.

Digital branding efforts in Keliki Tourism Village rely heavily on temporary external factors, such as university service-learning groups (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata*) or short-term volunteers. While these interventions contribute immediate technical skills, they fail to cultivate long-term internal capacity. Once external actors depart, digital platforms often fall into disuse, resulting in a phenomenon this study identifies as the stop-start digital cycle. Furthermore, Keliki exhibits limited narrative governance. Digital content produced by volunteers often lacks alignment with the village’s unique cultural identity and long-term branding goals. As a result, the digital narratives circulating about the village are fragmented, short-lived, and insufficiently grounded in local cultural logic. The absence of discursive strategy weakens the village’s ability to position itself in competitive digital tourism ecosystems.

Table 3. Comparative Theoretical Dimensions

Theoretical Dimension	Taro Tourism Village	Keliki Tourism Village	Implication
Governance Structure	Institutionalized through APBDes; adaptive and long-term	Fragmented; project-based; dependent on external volunteers	Confirms institutional theory that governance stability predicts digital continuity (Schroeder & Paolo, 2021).
Funding Model	Permanent digital budget line (domain, hosting, equipment)	No permanent allocation; dependent on short-term grants	Supports arguments that digital sustainability requires routinized public investment (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2022).
Digital Labor Regime	Village-based digital team; internal capacity building	Precarious digital labour; no designated digital coordinator	Echoes digital labour literature: institutionalized roles prevent skill leakage (Mkono, 2020).
Narrative Governance	Coherent branding rooted in cultural-spiritual heritage	Discontinuous narratives shaped by volunteers' content	Aligns with place-branding theory: narrative coherence determines identity strength.
Community Participation	Structured and regulated via <i>Pokdarwis</i>	Informal and inconsistent	Demonstrates that structured participation correlates with systemic embeddedness.
Platform Sustainability	Continuous posting schedule; cumulative algorithm authority	Dormant periods with content decay	Reinforces platform theory: consistency is central to algorithmic reputation.
Digital Ecosystem Maturity	Integrated digital-cultural-administrative system	Fragmented and externally driven	Supports smart tourism village theory: maturity requires socio-institutional integration.
Scalability Potential	High—due to institutional anchoring	Low—due to governance deficits	Confirms that governance determines scalability more than technology.

Source: Primary Data Analysis, 2025

The comparison between Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages demonstrates that the sustainability of digital branding is fundamentally a governance issue. Taro's adaptive governance model, characterized by budget institutionalization, narrative cohesion, and structured participation, illustrates how local institutions can create durable digital ecosystems. In contrast, Keliki's project-based digitalization and limited governance structures reveal the fragility of digital initiatives that lack institutional anchoring. These findings contribute to broader theoretical debates by reinforcing that rural digital transformation must be understood as an institutional process. Ultimately, sustainable digital tourism emerges when governance, culture, and community participation are aligned within long-term digital strategies

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how digital branding competencies are developed and enacted within tourism villages by comparatively analyzing Taro and Keliki Tourism Villages in Gianyar Regency, Bali. Drawing on qualitative evidence from interviews, participant observation, and a systematic digital platform audit, the findings demonstrate that digital transformation in rural tourism is not primarily determined by technological access, but by the presence of institutionalized branding competencies embedded within local governance structures. The comparative analysis reveals that Taro's relatively stronger digital branding performance is supported by coordinated governance, clearer role distribution, and the integration of cultural narratives into a coherent digital strategy. In contrast, Keliki's digital branding practices remain fragmented, largely dependent on individual initiatives, and insufficiently aligned with collective governance and long-term branding objectives.

The study contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing digital branding in tourism villages as a socio-cultural and strategic competence rather than a purely promotional or technical activity. By integrating perspectives from Community Based Tourism, digital transformation, and destination branding, the research advances understanding of how cultural heritage, community participation, and governance capacity shape digital outcomes in rural destinations. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and village stakeholders should prioritize capacity building, institutional coordination, and narrative governance to strengthen digital competitiveness while safeguarding cultural sustainability.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses on two tourism villages within a single regency, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regional or national contexts. Second, the qualitative design captures in depth processes and perceptions but does not quantify the causal relationships between digital branding competencies and tourism performance outcomes such as visitor numbers or economic impact. Third, the digital audit was limited to a specific time period, which may not fully reflect longer term dynamics or seasonal variations in digital engagement.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the comparative scope to include tourism villages across different provinces or cultural contexts in Indonesia. Mixed method approaches that integrate qualitative insights with quantitative performance indicators would also be valuable for assessing the measurable impacts of digital branding on destination competitiveness and sustainability. In addition, longitudinal studies examining the evolution of digital branding competencies over time would provide deeper insight into how governance reforms, capacity building initiatives, and technological change interact in shaping sustainable digital transformation in rural tourism destinations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with the conduct of this research, the analysis of the data or the preparation of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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