

Gastronomy Tourism Branding Strategy through Social Media: Netnographic Study on Instagram Account @jogjafoodhunter

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the branding strategy of gastronomic tourism carried out through social media, with a case study on the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter. Gastronomic tourism is increasingly developing as one of the main attractions of cultural tourism, where social media plays an important role in shaping the perception, image, and preferences of culinary tourism. This study uses a qualitative approach with a netnography method to observe digital communication practices, interaction patterns, and visual narratives built into the content of @jogjafoodhunter. Data were collected through observations of uploads, comments, hashtags, and user engagement over a certain period. The analysis technique used is thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify narrative patterns, visual strategies, and forms of audience engagement that contribute to the branding process. The results of the study show that the @jogjafoodhunter account implements an effective branding strategy through curating attractive visual content, using language that is close to young audiences, and collaborating with local culinary MSMEs. This strategy has succeeded in building the image of Yogyakarta as an authentic and dynamic culinary tourism destination. This study recommends optimizing social media as a branding tool for gastronomic destinations by paying attention to narrative authenticity, visual consistency, and digital community participation.

Keywords: branding; gastronomy tourism; instagram; netnography; social media

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Gastronomic tourism is increasingly developing as a form of cultural tourism that can strengthen local identity and provide authentic experiences to tourists. In this context, food not only functions as a consumption need, but also as a medium for representing the cultural and historical values of an area (Arifandi, 2024). This phenomenon shows that culinary has a strategic role in shaping the image of a destination and creating a unique tourism experience. Therefore, the promotion and management of gastronomic tourism requires a creative and targeted branding strategy so that local potential can be maximized and competitive in the competitive tourism industry.

Social media is now one of the most effective tools in the promotion strategy of tourist destinations, including gastronomic tourism. With its visual, interactive power, and wide audience reach, platforms such as Instagram allow destination managers and culinary MSMEs to build two-way communication and create digital communities (Harnika & Utama, 2023). Therefore, social media allows the branding process to run dynamically through user participation (user engagement), digital interaction, and the formation of images based on real experiences (user-generated content). As stated by Yuniati et al. (2020), social media-based promotions are effective in building loyalty and strengthening branding messages, especially for local culinary actors who previously had difficulty reaching a wider market.

The Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter is an example of a digital actor who actively promotes Yogyakarta's culinary tourism creatively. Through interesting content curation, a relaxed communication style, and synergy with local MSMEs, this account not only conveys information but also shapes the audience's perception of the city of Yogyakarta as a dynamic and authentic culinary destination. This approach is in line with Hendrayana's opinion (2022), which emphasizes the importance of digital strategy in developing local gastronomic tourism attractions. On the other hand, Kurnia and Huwae (2024) highlight that a strong and consistent communication strategy can encourage culinary identity to become a symbol of a city or region. Thus, effective branding is not enough to rely on distinctive products but also requires a strong narrative and consistent visuals to instill destination memories in the minds of tourists. However, previous research has still focused on general promotion strategies and not many have specifically analyzed gastronomic tourism branding practices through netnography methods on culinary community-based social media such as @jogjafoodhunter (Pratiwi et al., 2021; Noviani et al., 2024). In addition, some studies only highlight the effectiveness of content or user behavior without linking it deeply to the holistic construction of gastronomic destination branding. This shows a research gap in seeing how social media a promotional tool is not only, but also a digital cultural space where culinary identities are formed in a participatory and visual way.

Therefore, this study presents novelty by examining the branding strategy of gastronomic tourism using a netnography approach, through a case study of the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter. Unlike previous studies that focused more on content analysis or marketing effectiveness, this study explores communication patterns, visual narratives, audience engagement, and collective construction of destination meaning on social media platforms. By analyzing the digital dimension as part of the gastronomic tourism experience, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions in the development of digital culture-based tourism studies, as well as practical recommendations for tourism actors in managing culinary branding more strategically and authentically in the digital era.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Gastronomic Tourism as a Destination Attraction

Gastronomic tourism has become one of the main forces in attracting tourists because of its ability to represent local culture through food. (Arifandi, 2024) emphasized that gastronomy is not only about consumption, but also an element of identity that can increase the competitiveness of a destination. Similar research by (Hendrayana, 2022) revealed that Arabica coffee processing in Catur Village, Kintamani, can be developed into a gastronomic tourism attraction through an experience-based approach and local narratives. This is in line with the study of (Suarsana et al., 2023) which shows that tourist villages can develop gastronomic tourism effectively if managed through strategies based on local potential and community participation.

Branding Gastronomic Destinations through Communication Strategies

Destination branding is greatly influenced by the right communication strategy. (Kurnia and Huwae, 2024) emphasize the importance of local government communication in building the image of Salatiga as a gastronomic city, through cross-sector collaboration and strengthening culinary messages. In the context of tourist villages, (Noviani et al., 2024) show that developing village branding based on local culinary requires a consistent narrative and a strong visual approach to create

a distinctive destination identity. Suryandari et al. also emphasize the importance of persuasive and participatory communication to enhance the gastronomic tourism experience in areas such as Madura.

The Role of Social Media in Culinary Promotion and Branding

Social media is now the main platform in gastronomy branding strategies because of its ability to spread visual content and build direct interactions with audiences. (Harnika and Sutama, 2023) showed that social media can strengthen culinary tourism promotions such as in Mataram City, but the biggest challenge lies in content consistency and user engagement. (Yuniati et al., 2020) also found that social media, especially Instagram, is very effective for culinary MSMEs to build brand image and reach new consumers. In this context, visual content, hashtags, and communication style are key elements of a successful digital marketing strategy.

Netnography as a Digital Communication Study Method

Netnography is becoming an increasingly relevant method for examining digital behavior on social media, including in the context of culinary branding. (Nasih et al., 2020) used this approach to study the effectiveness of celebrity grams in food sales strategies, while (Santoso et al., 2023) used it to understand post-crisis electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) interaction patterns on social media. This study shows that netnography allows researchers to read community communication naturally in digital platforms, as well as understand the collective narratives that are formed. Thus, this approach is very suitable for analyzing how accounts such as @jogjafoodhunter build Yogyakarta's culinary tourism brand.

Digital and Interactive Gastronomy Tourism Experience

Several studies have shown the importance of direct experience and digitalization in culinary tourism. (Pratiwi et al., 2021) stated that digital technology can strengthen the appeal of gastronomy tourism through interactive media and visual narratives. Studies by (Adi, 2023) and (Antara et al., 2024) on tourists' experiences in attending cooking classes emphasize the importance of participatory and emotional elements in building attachment to culinary destinations. (Ramadhan, 2021) even shows that cultural diplomacy through culinary, or gastro diplomacy, can be a powerful tool in introducing national identity globally.

Culture and Tourist Perceptions in Culinary Tourism

(Hajiman et al., 2021) studied tourists' perceptions of the bedulang eating tradition in East Belitung and found that the cultural values carried through traditional eating procedures are a special attraction in culinary tourism. This strengthens the view that gastronomy destination branding must not only be visually appealing but must also be authentic and represent local cultural values that tourists value.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the Netnography method, which is an ethnographic study conducted in digital spaces to understand social, communicative, and cultural practices that are formed online. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring how gastronomic tourism branding strategies are constructed through digital activities on social media, particularly on the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter.

Netnography enables the researcher to understand the dynamics of interaction between the account administrator, followers, and the digital culinary community in a natural and contextual manner within the platform. The object of this study is the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter, selected for its significant influence in promoting culinary tourism in Yogyakarta and for having established an active digital community.

The research focuses on how this account builds its branding strategy through visual content, communication style, use of hashtags, collaborations with MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises), and follower engagement. The study was conducted over a two-month period of online observation, monitoring content uploads, comments, captions, and digital interactions.

Data collection was carried out through non-participant netnographic observation, where the researcher only observed and recorded digital activities without direct interaction. Additionally, documentation was done on featured content such as photos, videos, descriptions, number of likes, comments, and hashtags related to Yogyakarta's culinary tourism. The researcher also noted visual elements, language style, and interaction frequency for further analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006), consisting of six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Through these stages, the researcher identified narrative patterns, visual strategies, and forms of audience engagement that construct the branding of the @jogjafoodhunter account as a promoter of gastronomic tourism.

To ensure data validity, source and time triangulation techniques were used by comparing content at different times and observing the consistency of interaction patterns and messages conveyed. Data validation was also reinforced by comparing findings with relevant theories on digital communication, destination branding, and gastronomic tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on netnographic observations of the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter for two months, various gastronomic tourism branding strategies were found to be carried out through visual content, communication narratives, hashtag use, and digital interactions. Researchers identified three main themes that stood out: (1) Visual Curation and Aesthetic Consistency, (2) Communication Style Close to Young Audiences, and (3) Strategic Collaboration with Local Culinary MSMEs.

Visual Curation and Aesthetic Consistency

The content uploaded by the @jogjafoodhunter account is dominated by food photos with bright lighting, aesthetic shooting angles (food flatlay and close-up), and appetizing colors. Almost all posts have a uniform format and are easily recognized as the account's "signature style". This consistency forms a strong visual identity and helps followers immediately recognize the content even without seeing the account name.



Figure 1 Instagram Account Visual Post [Source: @jogjafoodhunter, 2025]

Close Communication with the Audience

The captions used are light, casual, and often use everyday language and slang words typical of Yogyakarta youth. Humor, personal recommendations, and invitations to taste or “go on culinary dates” are common narrative patterns. This shows a branding approach that adapts to the lifestyle of the target market, namely young tourists and active social media users.



Figure 2 Caption Example [Source: @jogjafoodhunter, 2025]

Collaboration with Local Culinary SMEs

Many contents are the result of collaboration with local food stalls, cafes, or culinary actors, marked by account mentions, location tags, or short reviews of culinary products. This collaboration not only expands the reach of the account but also strengthens Yogyakarta's image as a dynamic and inclusive culinary city for MSME actors.



Figure 3 Street Coffee and Resto in Yogyakarta [Source: @jogjafoodhunter]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the gastronomic tourism branding strategy through social media relies heavily on curating visually and emotionally appealing content. This is in line with the opinion of Pratiwi et al. (2021), who stated that digital technology plays an important role in shaping culinary perceptions and experiences aesthetically. A consistent visual style forms a digital identity that is easily recognizable, and creates positive associations with Yogyakarta as a modern and “Instagramable” culinary destination. A communication style that is close to a young audience is also an important strategy in building engagement. A casual narrative approach makes content feel more personal and authentic, as emphasized by Yuniati et al. (2020), that a communication style that is relevant to the market segment is key to building digital loyalty. Captions that encourage audiences to share experiences or recommend favorite foods also contribute to the formation of a participatory online culinary community.

Collaboration with MSMEs is a branding practice that is not only promotional in nature but also strengthens the local culinary tourism ecosystem. This supports the findings of Hendrayana (2022) and Suarsana et al. (2023) who emphasized that strengthening local products in the context of gastronomy needs to be supported by partnerships between digital promoters and business actors. In the context of @jogjafoodhunter, this collaboration plays a dual role: building the account's reputation as a “trusted culinary curator” and at the same time empowering the MSME sector through digital exposure. Overall, the @jogjafoodhunter account has succeeded in implementing a gastronomic tourism branding strategy based on digital communities, visual storytelling, and participatory interactions. This strategy has proven to shape the image of Yogyakarta as an authentic, creative, and friendly culinary city for young tourists. This branding approach is in line with the current trend in digital tourism communication which emphasizes audience participation, authenticity of narrative, and emotional involvement.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Instagram account @jogjafoodhunter has implemented an effective gastronomic tourism branding strategy through a creative and participatory digital approach. Consistent and attractive visual curation is the main identity of the account, which strengthens the image of Yogyakarta as a modern and appetizing culinary destination. The communication style used

is relaxed, close to a young audience, and is able to create emotional engagement between content and followers. In addition, collaboration with local MSMEs is a branding strategy that supports the empowerment of regional culinary while forming a mutually beneficial digital ecosystem. This strategy proves that social media can be a dynamic branding space, where the image of a destination is formed collectively through user participation. The netnographic approach in this study allows researchers to contextually understand how visual narratives and digital communication influence tourists' perceptions of local cuisine. The results of this study also support previous findings that digital technology and social media play an important role in the development of gastronomic tourism. Thus, accounts such as @jogjafoodhunter contribute significantly to shaping and strengthening Yogyakarta's gastronomic identity through an inclusive, creative, and sustainable digital branding strategy.

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