

## Branding of Wasuemba Tourism Village and Strengthening of Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Groups

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### ABSTRACT

*Community service activities were carried out in Wasuemba Village, Buton Regency with participants from the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group. Wasuemba Village has tourism potential that can be developed as a tourist village. Wasuemba village has many interesting and unique things that can be presented to visitors/tourists who come to this place. Some of the partner's priority problems, namely the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group of Wasuemba Village has not prepared a mature concept for branding activities and the unavailability of human resources in managing the branding of Wasuemba Tourism Village. The Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group of Wasuemba Village is still lacking in branding Wasuemba Tourism Village, digital technology media is a means of marketing or digital marketing to advance the products they want to market. The data and information will make it easier for the Tourism Awareness Group to create or develop something that they want to market. The purpose of this service is to increase the knowledge and ability of the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group in branding Wasuemba Tourism Village so that it can target tourists. The method used in this community service activity is to conduct a survey, then conduct a needs analysis by the PKM Team, after that proceed with socializing and assisting PKM activities. The results of this activity were that the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group of Wasuemba Village received information about tourism awareness groups that are actors driving village tourism, and the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group received additional knowledge related to branding tourist villages.*

**Keywords:** Community Empowerment; Destination Branding; Digital Tourism; Pokdarwis; Wasuemba Village.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism development has emerged as one of the strategic sectors prioritized by the Indonesian government to stimulate national economic growth, particularly in rural areas endowed with unique natural and cultural assets (Baloch et al., 2022; Fadilla, 2024). In addition to its economic role, tourism also contributes to environmental sustainability and the preservation of local cultural identity (Pang et al., 2023; Cai & Imang, 2023). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism village programs have been adopted as part of national recovery strategies to revitalize rural economies (Krisnawati, 2021). Within this context, tourism villages serve as a concrete model of community-based tourism, combining local distinctiveness with creative economic practices.

Rural areas offer a wide array of authentic tourism experiences due to their distinctive landscapes, biodiversity, cultural rituals, and artisanal heritage (Liu, 2023; Qi et al., 2021). Tourist visits to rural ecotourism sites have been shown to positively influence the local

economy and household income (Amalia & Nuirndah Sari, 2021). The effective management of such tourism potential requires the active involvement of local communities and the strategic positioning of cultural assets as core elements of attraction and destination differentiation (Qiu et al., 2022). Research conducted by Li et al. (2023) highlights the significance of spatial correlation between traditional village structures and tourism activities in sustaining the socio-economic and environmental fabric of rural destinations. Thus, holistic branding strategies are essential in enhancing destination identity and appeal.

One of the key community actors in rural tourism development is the Tourism Awareness Group (Kelompok Sadar Wisata or Pokdarwis) (Salsabila & Puspitasari, 2023). As a grassroots institution, Pokdarwis plays a vital role in mobilizing community participation, managing tourism resources, and executing promotional initiatives (Rini & Yusuf, 2023). However, in the current digital era, Pokdarwis often faces challenges in effectively leveraging digital platforms for destination branding and marketing (Khan et al., 2021). Limitations in digital literacy, content production, and strategic communication frequently hinder their efforts to increase visibility and establish a credible digital presence.

Wasuemba Village, located in Wabula District, Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, serves as a representative case for this issue. The village possesses a diverse range of natural and cultural attractions, including a historical fort linked to the Buton Sultanate, Lahunduru Beach known for its seashell ecosystem, the sacred E'e Tobungku Pond associated with ancient fish folklore, and annual cultural events such as the Wasuemba Happy Nice Festival and the traditional Pindoko spear-fishing competition. Despite this richness, Wasuemba Village lacks a cohesive branding strategy and its local tourism actors, particularly the Lahunduru Pokdarwis, have not yet developed sufficient digital capabilities to promote the village effectively.

While existing studies have explored the general concept of tourism village development and community participation in tourism governance, few have addressed the integration of digital branding capacity building for local tourism actors within traditional rural contexts. This gap underscores the need for targeted interventions that focus not only on destination promotion but also on organizational strengthening and the development of practical digital competencies (Wan & Sikka, 2023; Shen et al., 2023).

In response to these challenges, this community engagement initiative aims to (1) design and implement a branding strategy aligned with the local character of Wasuemba Village, and (2) enhance the digital capacity of the Lahunduru Pokdarwis in managing tourism promotion. Through a participatory and collaborative approach, this program is expected to contribute to building a stronger destination identity while fostering inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development.

## 2. Tourism Potentials of Wasuemba Village

Wasuemba Village, located in Wabula District, Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, is endowed with a combination of historical, natural, and cultural attractions. These elements position the village as a strong candidate for tourism village development. The following sections describe the major tourism assets of the village and their potential for community-based tourism promotion.

### 2.1 Cultural and Natural Attractions

One of Wasuemba's most prominent historical landmarks is the Wasuemba Fortress (Benteng Wasuemba), a remnant of the Buton Kingdom era. Located approximately 200 meters from the village information center, this fort is easily accessible and holds historical

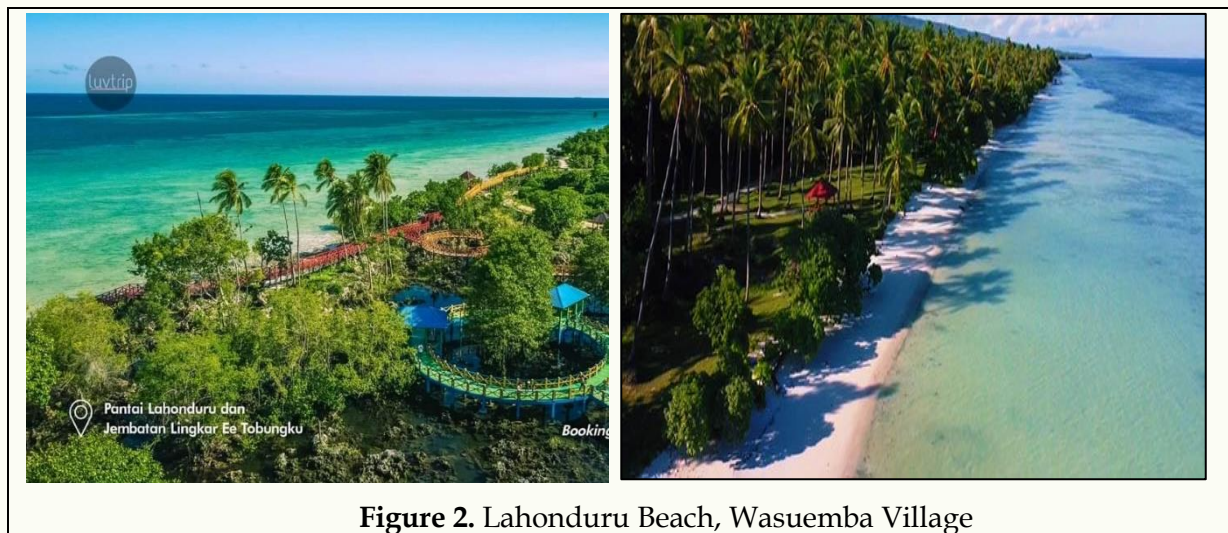
significance as part of the region's defense legacy. The structure is closely related to Benteng Keraton Buton—the largest fortress in the world—and to the historical journey of national hero Oputa Yi Koo.



**Figure 1.** Wasuemba Fort

Figure 1 shows the current condition of Wasuemba Fortress, where visitors can still observe stone walls, cannons, and the burial sites of royal guards. These relics make the site valuable for historical tourism and educational purposes.

Another prominent natural tourism asset is Lahonduru Beach, which features a pristine coastline with white sandy shores and calm turquoise waters. The beach is lined with coconut trees and is locally known as the “Kingdom of Conches” due to the abundance of marine snails that inhabit the coastal sandbanks. The peaceful setting makes it ideal for ecotourism, nature photography, and cultural retreats.



**Figure 2.** Lahonduru Beach, Wasuemba Village

As illustrated in Figure 2, Lahonduru Beach stretches along a scenic and undeveloped coastline, emphasizing its potential as a low-impact, sustainable tourism destination. Enhancing this natural landscape is a circular pedestrian bridge, shown in Figure 3, that extends toward the nearby sacred site of E'e Tobungku. This bridge not only facilitates visitor access but also blends naturally into the surrounding mangrove ecosystem, reinforcing Wasuemba's integrated coastal tourism concept.





**Figure 3.** E'e Tobungku Pond Wasuemba Village

Following the bridge path leads to the sacred E'e Tobungku Pond, often referred to as a “natural aquarium” by locals. This pond is believed to house ancient fish whose size and numbers have remained unchanged for generations. Locals consider these fish sacred; catching or harming them is strictly prohibited by tradition. Instead, visitors are encouraged to feed them and observe their presence from the bridge above.

## **2.2 Cultural Identity and Community-Based Activities**

The residents of Wasuemba Village are known for their hospitality and adherence to local customs. As a predominantly Muslim community, they uphold strong social and religious values that support a respectful and welcoming environment for tourists. Additionally, various MSMEs operate in the village, producing local culinary goods, woven textiles, and shell-based handicrafts – offering both economic empowerment and authentic visitor experiences.

A highlight of Wasuemba's cultural life is the annual Wasuemba Happy Nice Festival, held every November. This four-day celebration features a village-wide carnival, cultural performances, traditional games, and an open-house event. One of the most distinctive events is the Pindoko, a spear-fishing competition rooted in local wisdom.



**Figure 4.** Pindoko or Fish spears

Figure 4 captures the Pindoko spear fishing event, where participants engage in ancestral fishing techniques passed down through generations. This activity not only entertains visitors but also preserves the intangible cultural heritage of Wasuemba.

Other events during the festival include performances of Pajoge dance, MSME exhibitions, traditional culinary feasts (Kampo), and a Badenda Night Party. These traditions enhance the identity of the village while creating a strong foundation for cultural tourism branding.

### 2.3 Concluding Remarks

Despite the richness of its cultural, historical, and natural tourism assets, Wasuemba Village faces several critical constraints that hinder its full transformation into a well-branded and competitive tourism destination. These constraints were identified through field observations and preliminary stakeholder engagement. The first key issue is the absence of a mature and structured branding concept. The Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), which is institutionally responsible for managing tourism development and promotion in Wasuemba Village, has not yet developed a clear framework for destination branding. Branding is not merely about visual identity or slogans; it involves creating a coherent image and narrative that distinguishes the village in the eyes of both domestic and international tourists.

Effective branding contributes to the sustainability of tourism development by enhancing market recognition, community pride, and economic resilience (Harits et al., 2023). In the digital era, such branding must be closely integrated with information and communication technologies to ensure broader visibility and engagement, particularly through social media-based brand communities and digital marketing strategies (Cheung et al., 2020; Cueria et al., 2022).

Second, the village lacks adequate human resource capacity to manage and execute branding activities, particularly in digital formats. Members of Pokdarwis have limited exposure to digital tools, social media promotion, visual content creation, and online marketing strategies. These deficiencies significantly weaken their ability to disseminate information, attract targeted tourist segments, and keep pace with competing destinations that are already digitally visible. Human resource development in this context becomes essential—not only for branding, but also for operational sustainability, community empowerment, and tourism professionalism (Lungu et al., 2023).

Moreover, the lack of technical knowledge and limited access to data-driven content development further hinders Pokdarwis from crafting compelling promotional narratives. Digital media, if properly utilized, can serve as a low-cost, high-impact marketing channel to showcase Wasuemba's tourism products to a much wider audience. However, without targeted training and mentoring, the group remains under-equipped to tap into these opportunities (Saputri et al., 2023).

These two problems—conceptual underdevelopment of branding and human resource limitations—form the practical basis for the community service intervention described in the next chapter. The initiative seeks to strengthen both the strategic and operational aspects of tourism branding through a participatory approach involving capacity building, digital training, and co-creation of content aligned with the village's local identity (Opria et al., 2022).

### 3. Method

This community service program was conducted in Wasuemba Village, Wabula District, Buton Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. The main activities took place on February 19, 2025, preceded by preliminary observations and coordination during the first week of the month. The primary partner involved in this program was the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), consisting of 30 members, with additional support from the local village government.

The program employed an active participatory approach, emphasizing the direct involvement of the partner group at every stage of the activity. This method aligns with community-based empowerment models that emphasize collaboration, local contextualization, and co-learning (Puspytasari & Muslimin, 2022). The implementing team functioned as facilitators, guiding Pokdarwis members through problem identification, training sessions, and digital branding assistance.

The process began with field observations and initial surveys aimed at assessing existing conditions, tourism potential, and the group's current challenges. The results of this observation phase were analyzed to determine the partner's needs through focused group discussions (FGDs) with Pokdarwis leaders and village officials.

Based on the identified needs, the team developed a community service program that focused on digital branding training and strengthening destination identity. The training was delivered using interactive methods, including presentations, discussions, and hands-on demonstrations. Two main topics were covered: the strategic role of Pokdarwis in driving village-based tourism and practical skills in managing digital branding through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Strengthening Pokdarwis as tourism facilitators through structured training has been widely recognized as a key driver in rural tourism development (Ramadhan, Saefullah, & Iskandar, 2023).

Following the training sessions, participants engaged in a mentoring phase, during which they practiced producing digital content, managing social media accounts, selecting appropriate hashtags, and crafting informative promotional narratives. As a result of this intervention, the Lahunduru Pokdarwis successfully published tourism-related content on social media platforms, signaling their increased capacity in destination branding. This reflects findings from similar programs where combined training and mentoring approaches led to significant improvements in community-led digital promotion (Iqbal Erdiansyah et al., 2024).

The success of the program was measured through the level of participant engagement, observable improvement in branding knowledge during training, and the effective dissemination of promotional content by Pokdarwis members across digital platforms. These outcomes reflect the program's contribution to enhancing the digital marketing capabilities of local tourism actors in Wasuemba Village.

### 4. Result and Discussion

This community service program was implemented by lecturers from the University of Muhammadiyah Buton as a form of commitment to the *Tri Dharma* of higher education, particularly in community empowerment. The program aimed to enhance the capacity of the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis) in Wasuemba Village in the area of digital branding and tourism promotion. A participatory method was used to ensure active involvement of the local community in all phases, including problem identification, training, and implementation.

### 3.1 Partner Survey and Initial Coordination

The activity began with a field survey and coordination meeting with the Wasuemba Village Head and Pokdarwis representatives. This phase was intended to identify local tourism potentials and the challenges faced by the group. The survey revealed two main issues: the absence of a structured branding strategy and the limited capacity of Pokdarwis members in utilizing digital tools for tourism promotion. These findings informed the design of a capacity-building module tailored to the local context, focusing on tourism branding and digital communication (Pradana, Arifputri, & Haqqu, 2024).

Such participatory identification aligns with recent literature emphasizing the importance of stakeholder-driven planning in community-based tourism. Capacity development that involves local actors from the beginning tends to produce more sustainable outcomes, particularly in rural and peripheral tourism destinations (Atmoko, 2021).

The capacity-building module was designed not only to transfer technical skills but also to foster confidence and self-efficacy among local tourism actors. Training focused on digital storytelling, the use of visual platforms such as Instagram, and basic content planning. Similar initiatives in other tourism villages have shown that structured, hands-on training significantly improves digital visibility and local stakeholder engagement (Firmansyah et al., 2021; Meirinaldi, 2023).

Additionally, branding strategies that incorporate cultural identity, consistent visual themes, and community narratives are proven to be more sustainable in rural tourism settings (Karta et al., 2021). These strategies help strengthen emotional connection with potential tourists while empowering the host community to take ownership of their destination image.

### 3.2 Training and Mentorship

The main service activity was conducted on February 19, 2025, and involved 30 active members of the Lahunduru Pokdarwis. The first training session covered the role of Pokdarwis in managing community-based tourism. It emphasized the strategic importance of local institutions in organizing, promoting, and managing village tourism based on local uniqueness and identity. The participants were introduced to fundamental concepts of tourism awareness, community engagement, and destination differentiation (Kuntariningsih et al., 2023).

The second session focused on digital branding using platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Participants were taught how to create visually attractive content, write informative captions, use accurate hashtags, and maintain consistent narratives in their online promotions. Trainers provided examples and hands-on demonstrations that allowed participants to directly apply their learning (Cheng, Wei, & Zhang, 2020).

Incorporating digital platforms in tourism branding not only improves destination visibility but also enhances emotional connection with potential visitors. Story-based communication and user-generated content have proven effective in building authentic narratives and boosting public interest in local tourism destinations (Awaloedin et al., 2024).





**Figure 5.** Delivery of Pokdarwis Material as a Driver of Village Tourism

As illustrated in Figure 5, the training session was conducted in an open-air village hall setting, allowing for a more relaxed and participatory environment. The PKM team delivered the presentation using visual slides and direct interaction. Participants were actively engaged during the session, taking notes and asking questions related to their roles in tourism development and digital branding. This setup reflected the inclusive and community-oriented approach that underpinned the entire program.

### 3.3 Observed Outcomes and Impact

As a result of the training and mentoring, members of the Lahunduru Pokdarwis were able to produce and disseminate digital content featuring Wasuemba's tourism assets, including Lahunduru Beach, Wasuemba Fortress, and local cultural festivals. At least 10 digital posts were created and published during the program's implementation phase, signaling an increase in both confidence and competence among the group members.

In addition, Pokdarwis members demonstrated improved abilities in organizing digital campaigns, planning content themes, and using branding elements to present their village's identity. Although formal quantitative assessment was not conducted, qualitative observation and follow-up discussions with participants indicated a positive shift in knowledge and practices related to digital branding.

In conclusion, this community engagement program successfully addressed its two main objectives: strengthening the digital branding capacity of the Lahunduru Tourism Awareness Group and enhancing their practical skills in managing social media-based tourism promotion. Through a combination of targeted training and hands-on mentoring, the participants developed a clearer understanding of their strategic role in local tourism development and acquired the necessary competencies to promote Wasuemba Village in a competitive digital landscape.

The outcomes of the program demonstrate that a participatory and context-based approach is effective in empowering rural tourism actors. The observed improvements in content creation, platform engagement, and branding strategy highlight the potential for long-term impact when local communities are equipped with relevant digital tools. Moreover, the approach implemented in this program may serve as a replicable model for other tourism villages facing similar challenges in visibility, capacity, and digital adaptation.



## 5. Conclusion

Branding is an important activity that needs to be carried out so that the village has a competitive identity. Branding is nothing but an effort to label the village so that the village has uniqueness or uniqueness. Distinctiveness needs to be highlighted to produce strong branding. Branding helps increase people's awareness of the characteristics of the village they live in. This will help change the way people think about the village, both the village community itself and people from outside other villages in general.

Community service activities have been able to make a significant contribution to improving the ability of the Lahunduru Pokdarwis to brand digital-based tourist attractions. There are many further benefits obtained if the village has successfully branded, such as the ease of promotion. Promotion itself will increase the attractiveness of a village so that it has a place in the hearts of the community, especially in the current era of information and communication technology advancement. In the end, branding and promotion can also be useful for building a positive image of the village and making village development a success.

## 6. Acknowledgments

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