

*Exploring Aceh's Virtual Destination Image Through Netizen's Perception on Tiktok*Mawaddah^{a,1*}, Ulfa Erfendy^{a,2}^{a,b} Politeknik Negeri Medan, Indonesia^{1*} mawaddah@polmed.ac.id;² ulfaerfendy@polmed.ac.id

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Abstract

This study examines the virtual destination image of Aceh Province as a halal tourism destination through user interactions on TikTok. Using a qualitative content analysis of 3,960 user comments on the three most highly engaged Aceh tourism videos, the findings reveal that destination image (381 comments) is the dominant theme, indicating that visual appeal, natural beauty, and aesthetic qualities shape Aceh's virtual image more strongly than informative narratives. Travel interest emerged as a significant theme (176 comments), demonstrating that visual exposure on TikTok influences visit intention. Netizen sentiment was balanced between positive (92) and negative (86) opinions. Negative comments primarily expressed concerns about Sharia law enforcement for non-local tourists, while positive comments emphasized Aceh's cultural uniqueness and religious identity. Islamic and halal values appeared as supporting elements (114 comments) but were secondary to visual representation.

Keywords: *virtual destination image, halal tourism, Aceh, TikTok, analysis of netizen comments, electronic word of mouth*

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**1. Introduction**

The Province of Aceh has contributed significantly to the development of halal tourism as a crucial strategic economic sector since it is the only area having special authority in the application of Islamic Sharia law (Manan, 2023). One of the primary attractions that Aceh highlights is Islamic-based tourism. Since 2016, the slogan "The Light of Aceh" has defined Aceh's image within the context of Islamic tourism. The goal of this new Islamic-based tourist branding is to change the world's perception of Aceh, which was formerly thought to be a conflict-ridden area where strict Islamic Sharia law was enforced, into one that is inviting, safe, and rich in culture (Razali et al., 2021)

This approach was further reinforced by the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism designating Aceh as a province with a core economy in halal tourism that same year, as well as the province's achievement in winning the coveted "World's Best Halal Cultural Destination" award at the 2016 World Halal Travel Awards (WHTA) in Abu Dhabi. This award promotes the development of a more sustainable and welcoming tourism environment in addition to giving Aceh's halal identity international recognition (Adinugraha et al., 2025). Aceh's tourism potential, which includes its rich cultural legacy, unique cuisine, strong Islamic values, and breathtaking natural beauty, attracts both local and foreign travelers (Saleh & Anisah, 2019)

Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Aceh Province, which shows a significant increase in foreign tourist trips to Aceh throughout 2025, clearly proves this appeal. Between

January and December of 2025, there were 46,325 foreign visitors, a 35.86 percent rise from 34,097 in 2024 (BPS Aceh, 2026). This statistical growth demonstrates that, in reality, tourism in Aceh is growing in popularity following the pandemic and that the government's rebranding initiatives are producing noticeable outcomes.

In the digital age of today, the growth in tourism is inextricably linked to the dynamics of destination image formation in cyberspace. Social media now serves as an interactive public forum where travelers share real-life, grassroots experiences rather than just a one-way information route. TikTok is one of the channels that has the biggest impact on visually advertising travel these days (Devylia, 2025). TikTok has emerged as Millennials' and Gen-Z's go-to resource for evaluating a destination's desirability, safety, and environment prior to traveling there, thanks to its interest-based algorithms and highly interactive features (Wulandari et al., 2025)

Digital representations and real public reactions on social media are frequently dynamic and complex, despite the fact that official government branding campaigns like "The Light of Aceh" have won numerous prizes (Adinugraha et al., n.d.) The majority of the literature currently available on Aceh tourism has concentrated on formal marketing methods, government macro-policies, or the preparedness of halal infrastructure. Few studies have explicitly looked at how Aceh's virtual image is shaped by the "authentic voices" of netizens in social media comment sections, which frequently convey sincere opinions, persisting preconceptions, or even natural appreciation. There is a lack of data on how far the government's promotion of an amiable and Islamic image aligns with the opinions of the general people on TikTok.

In light of previous research's shortcomings, this study intends to examine how interactive social media content portrays Aceh as a travel destination by thoroughly examining user comments on TikTok videos with the greatest engagement rates. The analysis concentrates on films with an Acehnese tourist subject that have received the most views and interactions since these viral materials are the main narratives that the internet community consumes and reacts to the most. This strategy seeks to expose the polarization of opinions, prevailing viewpoints, and any lingering stigmas that internet users have dismantled. The study's conclusions are noteworthy for their theoretical contribution to the field of digital tourism communication as well as for providing policymakers with an empirical assessment based on cyber data to help them develop more flexible marketing and communication plans for halal travel

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to explore netizens' perceptions of Aceh's virtual destination image on the social media platform TikTok (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were collected from TikTok between January 15 and April 15, 2026. Using the hashtag #WisataAceh, approximately 95,500 posts were identified. From these, three videos with the highest engagement levels were selected based on the following criteria: (a) minimum 500,000 views, (b) minimum 50,000 likes, and (c) minimum 500 comments. A total of 3,960 user comments were extracted for analysis. Comments were primarily written in Indonesian, with some in English and Acehnese. All non-English comments were translated into English by a bilingual researcher (Indonesian-English) with five years of translation experience. A back-translation process was conducted by an independent translator to ensure accuracy. Purposive sampling was employed to select comments relevant to the formation of virtual destination image. Inclusion criteria included comments addressing: (a) Islamic and halal values, (b) destination image perceptions, (c) travel interest, (d) destination information, (e) personal travel experiences, and (f) netizen sentiment toward featured destinations. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing

themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. To ensure trustworthiness, the following strategies were employed Peer debriefing: Two independent researchers reviewed the coding scheme and thematic categories. Inter-coder reliability: A second coder analyzed 10% of the comments (396 comments). Cohen's Kappa coefficient was 0.87, indicating strong agreement. And Member checking: Findings were presented to five Indonesian netizens who had commented on Aceh tourism content to verify interpretation accuracy. All usernames were anonymized to protect privacy. Only publicly available comments were analyzed. This study did not interact with or contact any comment authors.

3. Result and Discussion

Results

This study examines how netizens perceive Aceh as a virtual travel destination through user comments on TikTok. A search using the hashtag #WisataAceh yielded approximately 95,500 posts, from which three videos with the highest levels of engagement (based on views, likes, and comments) were selected for analysis.

Table 1. Data on Analyzed Tiktok Videos

Video	Views	Comments	Likes
Video 1	3.5 Million	2,824	265,800
Video 2	1.2 Million	605	55,100
Video 3	737,300	531	50,900
Video 1	3.5 million	2,824	265,800

Source : Data collect by author

Thematic coding of the comments identified six primary themes related to virtual destination image formation: destination image, travel interest, personal experience (UGC), positive and negative sentiment, and Islamic and halal values. The analysis revealed that the destination image theme was the most dominant, with 381 comments, indicating that TikTok content significantly influences netizens' visual perceptions of Aceh—particularly regarding natural beauty, ambiance, and tourist attractions—suggesting that the virtual construction of Aceh's destination image is primarily driven by aesthetic appeal rather than informative narratives. The travel interest theme emerged as the second most significant category with 176 comments, demonstrating that visual exposure on TikTok not only shapes destination perceptions but also directly influences viewers' intentions to visit Aceh.

Meanwhile, personal experience comments accounted for 139 remarks, where netizens shared recommendations, visit experiences, and other forms of user-generated content, illustrating how peer-to-peer interactions digitally reinforce the destination's image through authentic testimonials. Sentiment analysis revealed a relatively balanced distribution between positive (92 comments) and negative (86 comments) attitudes.

Table 2. Thematic Catagorized

Destination Image	381
Tourism Interest	176
Personal Experience	139
Islamic Tourism	114
Positive Sentiment	92
Information	89
Negative Sentiment	86

Positive perspectives predominantly emphasized Aceh's cultural uniqueness and religious identity as distinctive assets, while negative opinions primarily expressed concerns about Sharia law enforcement—particularly mandatory hijab—for non-local visitors. The Islamic and halal values theme, mentioned in 114 comments, appeared as a supporting rather than dominant element, indicating that while Aceh's religious identity remains a significant factor in netizens' impressions, it is secondary to the destination's visual portrayal. A detailed thematic breakdown, including representative examples and interpretations, is presented in Table 2

Table 3 Data Intrepetation

Theme	N	Example Comment (Original)	English Translation	Interpretation
Destination Image	381	"Acèh surga tersembunyi"	"Aceh is a hidden paradise"	Netizens perceive Aceh as possessing natural beauty comparable to world-class destinations yet undiscovered by mainstream tourism, creating a sense of exoticism and curiosity.
Islamic & Halal Values	114	"di aceh nonis ga harus pake jilbab kali wkwk"	"In Aceh, non-Muslims don't have to wear a hijab, lol"	Local residents actively correct misconceptions about Sharia enforcement, demonstrating a grassroots effort to reconstruct Aceh's image as tolerant and welcoming.
Travel Interest	176	"Jadi pengen ke Aceh setelah nonton video ini"	"I want to go to Aceh after watching this video"	Visual exposure on TikTok successfully transforms passive viewing into active visit intention, demonstrating the platform's persuasive power in tourism marketing.
Personal Experience (UGC)	139	"Saya sudah ke Aceh tahun lalu, memang seindah ini"	"I went to Aceh last year, it really is this beautiful"	User-generated testimonials validate the video's content authenticity and serve as credible social proof that reinforces positive destination image.
Positive Sentiment	92	"Aceh tuh beda dari tempat lain, ada nilai Islamnya yang kuat"	"Aceh is different from other places, it has strong Islamic values"	Islamic identity is perceived as a unique differentiator rather than a barrier, positioning Aceh as a distinctive destination within Indonesia's tourism landscape.
Negative Sentiment	86	"Gatau kak, takut dipaksa berhijab"	"I don't want to, sis, afraid of being forced to wear a hijab"	Persistent misconceptions about mandatory hijab for non-Muslim tourists create psychological barriers that potentially deter potential visitors, despite being inaccurate.

Destination Information	89	"dari banda aceh kesitu brpa lama kak?"	"How long from Banda Aceh to there, sis?"	Netizens actively seek practical travel information (distance, routes, costs) as part of their pre-visit information-seeking behavior, indicating genuine travel planning.
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Discussion

The findings show that TikTok has become an important platform for millennials and Generation Z when assessing potential trip destinations. Users rely on TikTok for information on destinations' ecology, safety, and appearance in addition to enjoyment. This indicates that in the digital age, travelers' impressions and travel habits are greatly influenced by social media. These findings align with Martin et al. (2024), who argued that TikTok plays a significant role in influencing travel intentions through its engaging visual and interactive content, which can shape users' perception of destinations. Furthermore, Fong et al. (2024) also found that TikTok content positively affects Generation Z's intention to visit tourism destinations, especially through authentic shot-video experiences shared by other users. TikTok's interest-based algorithm, which regularly offers tailored travel-related content based on users' likes and viewing habits, is one potential explanation for this case (Anam et al., 2025, 2026; MR, 2019; MR et al., 2024). Additionally, users may interact more actively with travel-related content because of TikTok's interactive features like likes, shares, and comments. As a result, compared to traditional promotional media, information about places spreads swiftly and has a greater impact on the audience. This study also supports Rizal et al (2025), who claimed that TikTok's accessibility and interesting content format have a significant influence on Gen Z's travel habits. Therefore, tourism marketers and destination managers ought to think about using TikTok as a strategic promotional tool.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze Aceh's virtual destination image through netizen interactions on TikTok, focusing on user comments on three highly engaged videos. The findings reveal that Aceh's virtual image on TikTok is predominantly shaped by visual stimuli—particularly natural beauty, beaches, and scenic landscapes—rather than by religious or halal attributes, as the Destination Image theme (381 comments, 34.2%) far outweighed the Islamic and Halal Values theme (114 comments, 10.2%), indicating that on short-form video platforms, aesthetic appeal serves as the primary driver of virtual destination image formation among general audiences. Theoretically, this study extends Virtual Destination Image (VDI) theory by demonstrating that on TikTok, visual stimuli significantly outweigh religious or informational attributes in shaping destination image, suggesting that the medium itself influences which destination attributes become salient. Furthermore, the findings refine the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework by showing that the comment section functions not merely as a response but as a mediating filter where netizens actively validate, correct, or deconstruct the initial viral stimulus—particularly by countering negative stereotypes about Sharia enforcement. The balanced sentiment (92 positive vs. 86 negative) and the prevalence of local netizens correcting misconceptions also indicate that Aceh's virtual image is not a static top-down construct imposed by official branding campaigns like "The Light of Aceh," but rather a dynamic, co-constructed entity continuously negotiated through dialogic interactions between skeptical potential tourists and defending local residents. Practically, this study offers three recommendations for the Aceh Tourism Office: first, prioritize visual storytelling in digital marketing campaigns, as natural beauty resonates more strongly with TikTok audiences than religious branding; second, proactively address Sharia-related concerns in official TikTok responses or dedicated videos clarifying that hijab requirements apply only to Muslims, not tourists, to reduce misinformation

and psychological barriers among non-Muslim potential visitors; and third, leverage user-generated testimonials by encouraging visitors to share authentic experiences through hashtag campaigns, as personal experience comments functioned as credible social proof that reinforced positive destination image. This study has several limitations, including the analysis being limited to three videos, the absence of demographic data from TikTok, the focus on a single platform, and the analysis being restricted primarily to Indonesian-language comments. Future research should expand the sample to include a wider range of content creators, employ surveys or interviews to complement comment analysis, conduct comparative studies across multiple social media platforms, and examine English-language comments from international tourists to capture cross-cultural perceptions. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that TikTok plays a significant role in shaping Aceh's virtual destination image, with visual beauty acting as the primary stimulus while Islamic identity functions as a supporting element that enriches netizens' digital perceptions, and the comment section emerges as a contested arena where negative stereotypes are negotiated and corrected by local residents, suggesting that Aceh's virtual image is not a fixed top-down construct but a dynamic entity continuously co-constructed through dialogic interactions.

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