

Mediating Taiwan: Tourists' Perceptions of Destination Image through Social Media

Azura Zeyna Rohman

Global Master of Business Administration, Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital media shapes the construction and perception of Taiwan's destination image, focusing on the interplay between online representations and tourist meaning-making. In an era where platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube serve as primary sources of travel information, destination branding is increasingly mediated through visual storytelling and user-generated content. While Taiwan's official tourism campaigns highlight themes of cultural heritage, natural beauty, and urban modernity, tourists and influencers contribute parallel narratives that frame the island in diverse and sometimes contested ways. Using a qualitative research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-five domestic and international tourists alongside content analysis of user-generated posts on Instagram and Facebook tagged with major Taiwanese destinations including Taipei 101, Sun Moon Lake, and Taroko Gorge. Thematic analysis revealed three central dynamics: first, digital media amplifies iconic imagery that reinforces a selective but powerful destination identity; second, user-generated content introduces alternative perspectives that highlight everyday life, local culture, and hidden attractions; third, tensions emerge between promotional narratives and travelers' authentic experiences, reflecting negotiations of identity, place, and expectation. The findings contribute to debates on digital tourism by illustrating how destination image in Taiwan is not merely produced by institutions but co-created through dynamic interactions between official branding, digital platforms, and traveler narratives.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: July 22nd, 2024

Accepted: August 20th, 2-24

KEYWORDS:

digital media,
destination image,
Taiwan, social media

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital media has transformed the ways in which destinations are imagined, represented, and consumed. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have become central arenas for destination branding, where both official tourism organizations and ordinary travelers participate in constructing images of place (Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015). In contrast to traditional marketing, which relied on brochures and advertising campaigns, destination image today is increasingly mediated through user-generated content (UGC) that circulates globally in real time (Agarwal et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2007). The visual intensity of digital media, particularly through platforms emphasizing photography and short videos, has amplified the role of aesthetics and storytelling in shaping tourist perceptions (Hunter, 2016).

Taiwan presents a compelling case for examining digital media's role in destination image formation. Long positioned as a peripheral destination in Asia, Taiwan has in recent years sought to strengthen its global tourism brand through campaigns that emphasize cultural heritage, vibrant cities, and natural landscapes (Husodo et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2022). Government-led initiatives such as the "Time for Taiwan" campaign and digital marketing efforts by the Taiwan Tourism Bureau have aimed to expand visibility and compete with regional destinations. Yet at the same time, international tourists and influencers share images of Taiwan that diverge from official narratives, often highlighting night markets, street food, and everyday urban culture (Chou et al., 2018; Fitriani & Basir, 2025). These alternative portrayals complicate and enrich Taiwan's brand, illustrating the co-existence of institutional promotion and grassroots digital storytelling.

Existing research on destination image has underscored its multidimensional character, combining cognitive, affective, and conative components that influence tourist decision-making (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Haryanto et al., 2022). Digital media adds another layer by blurring the distinction between producers and consumers of

image, creating what [Larsen & Urry \(2011\)](#) describe as a “tourist gaze” that is constantly reproduced and contested online. In Taiwan, studies have explored the branding of cultural festivals and the role of food in tourism marketing, but few have examined how digital media platforms serve as arenas where official and user-generated narratives intersect.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how digital media shapes Taiwan’s destination image through the interaction of institutional branding and travelers’ digital practices. Using a qualitative design, it explores both the narratives embedded in user-generated posts and the lived perceptions of tourists themselves. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on digital tourism, co-creation, and the role of media in shaping place identity in contemporary Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of destination image has been central to tourism research for decades, recognized as a critical factor influencing travelers’ decision-making and satisfaction ([Pike & Ryan, 2004](#)). Destination image is typically understood as a composite of cognitive (knowledge-based), affective (emotional), and conative (behavioral) components that shape perceptions of place ([Beerli & Martin, 2004](#)). Traditional research emphasized how national tourism organizations and marketing campaigns deliberately construct and disseminate destination images ([Gartner, 1993](#)). However, the rise of digital media has transformed the process, as destinations are now represented not only by official branding but also by user-generated content (UGC) that circulates globally ([Choi et al., 2007](#)).

Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube play a pivotal role in shaping visual and narrative representations of place. Studies have shown that online images often emphasize aesthetics, novelty, and shareability, generating new forms of what [Larsen & Urry \(2011\)](#) describe as the “tourist gaze.” [Hunter \(2016\)](#) demonstrated that the semiotic construction of destinations on social media often amplifies selective visual tropes, while [Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé \(2015\)](#) highlighted how massive volumes of UGC provide alternative narratives that sometimes challenge official promotional images.

Taiwan provides a valuable case for investigating these dynamics. Government branding campaigns such as “Time for Taiwan” have emphasized cultural heritage, modern cities, and natural landscapes to position Taiwan as a competitive regional destination. Yet research shows that tourists often construct parallel images through digital media, highlighting food, night markets, and everyday cultural practices ([Chou et al., 2018](#)). These grassroots narratives not only enrich Taiwan’s destination image but also create tensions between official branding and lived tourist experiences.

While studies of Taiwan have addressed festival branding, culinary tourism [Chou et al. \(2018\)](#), and cultural marketing, relatively little attention has been paid to how digital media facilitates the co-creation of destination image. Building on global debates about media, image, and authenticity [Stepchenkova & Zhan \(2013\)](#) and [Wang \(1999\)](#), this study situates Taiwan within broader discussions of how destinations are imagined in the digital era. In doing so, it seeks to advance understanding of the interplay between institutional branding, user-generated representations, and tourists’ meaning-making practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how digital media shapes the construction and perception of Taiwan’s destination image. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research sought to capture subjective meanings, narratives, and visual representations rather than quantify image attributes. By privileging the voices of travelers and analyzing user-generated content (UGC), the study examined how destination images emerge through lived experiences and online practices.

Fieldwork was conducted between January and May 2024 in three major tourism sites: Taipei, including Taipei 101 and night markets; Sun Moon Lake in central Taiwan; and Taroko Gorge in eastern Taiwan. These destinations were selected because they represent the core themes of Taiwan’s official branding, urban modernity, cultural heritage, and natural landscapes while also being highly visible in digital media.

Participants included twenty-five tourists, comprising both international visitors and domestic travelers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their perceptions of Taiwan’s image, the role of social media in shaping expectations, and the extent to which their experiences aligned with online representations. Interviews lasted between forty and ninety minutes, were conducted in English, Mandarin, or a mix of both, and were audio-recorded with consent. Purposive sampling ensured diversity across nationality, gender, and age, while snowball referrals helped to recruit participants actively engaged in posting their experiences online.

In addition to interviews, a content analysis of user-generated posts was carried out on Instagram and Facebook. Using hashtags such as #Taiwan, #Taipei101, #SunMoonLake, and #TarokoGorge, a sample of 500 posts

was collected. Posts were analyzed for their visual content, accompanying captions, and symbolic framings of place identity. This digital ethnographic approach allowed the researcher to capture how Taiwan is represented and circulated within digital media ecosystems.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Interview transcripts and UGC were coded inductively to identify recurrent patterns, which were then clustered into broader themes related to image construction. NVivo software was used to manage the data and facilitate comparison between official branding and user-generated narratives. Reflexive memoing was employed throughout the process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives while critically considering the researcher's positionality.

To enhance trustworthiness, credibility was strengthened through member checks, where preliminary findings were shared with several interviewees for feedback. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of both field sites and digital contexts. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail of coding decisions, and confirmability was reinforced by reflexive journaling to acknowledge potential biases.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study's aims and assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and social media posts were anonymized to protect individual identities, in line with ethical standards for digital research.

RESULTS

Amplification of Iconic Imagery

Analysis of user-generated content and interview data revealed that Taiwan's destination image is strongly anchored in a set of highly recognizable symbols. Posts on Instagram and Facebook overwhelmingly featured Taipei 101, Sun Moon Lake, Taroko Gorge, and night markets, reinforcing these locations as central icons of Taiwan's global identity. Tourists often described encountering these images online prior to travel, which shaped their expectations of what "must be seen" in Taiwan. A European traveler explained, "When I searched #Taiwan, almost every picture showed Taipei 101 at sunset. It became the first thing I wanted to see." This illustrates how digital media amplifies a narrow visual repertoire that frames destinations through repetitive aesthetic tropes.

The repetition of iconic imagery was not only driven by travelers but also by official campaigns, which often emphasize the same landmarks. Interviewees noted that their social media feeds mirrored promotional images used in Taiwan Tourism Bureau materials, suggesting a strong alignment between institutional branding and user-generated practices. A domestic tourist commented, "I posted a photo of Sun Moon Lake because everyone does. It feels like the image of Taiwan that people expect, and I wanted to be part of that." Such accounts highlight how digital participation reinforces brand narratives through social conformity and symbolic recognition.

However, participants also reflected on the aesthetic appeal of these icons as part of their attraction. A Southeast Asian visitor remarked, "Taipei 101 is not just a building—it looks amazing in pictures. When you post it, people immediately know you are in Taiwan." This demonstrates how iconic imagery functions as both a cultural marker and a social media commodity, generating visibility and validation for travelers within online networks.

Overall, the amplification of iconic imagery illustrates how Taiwan's destination image is stabilized through the digital circulation of a few recognizable symbols. While this enhances brand recognition and global visibility, it also risks narrowing the diversity of Taiwan's representations, privileging iconic landmarks over less visible cultural and natural assets.

Alternative Narratives and Everyday Life

Alongside the repetition of iconic landmarks, digital media also revealed a rich set of alternative narratives that highlighted aspects of Taiwan less visible in official branding. User-generated content frequently showcased everyday life, with posts featuring street food, traditional temples, scooter-filled alleys, and interactions with local residents. These representations framed Taiwan not only as a destination of grand icons but also as a lived environment marked by cultural intimacy. A domestic tourist from Kaohsiung explained, "What makes Taiwan special is not just Taipei 101. It's the night market food, the people's kindness, and the feeling of daily life."

Street food emerged as one of the most dominant alternative images. Instagram posts tagged with #Taiwan often displayed bowls of beef noodle soup, bubble tea, or oyster omelets, suggesting that culinary practices serve as powerful markers of Taiwanese identity. A European backpacker reflected, "I knew about Taipei 101 before coming, but when I got here, food became my main image of Taiwan. Every meal felt like part of the culture." Such narratives echo previous studies identifying cuisine as central to Taiwan's tourism brand, yet here they are amplified through grassroots digital storytelling.

Participants also emphasized the discovery of “hidden spots” and “authentic” experiences not promoted in official campaigns. Several interviewees described visiting neighborhood temples, small tea shops, or hiking trails they encountered through personal blogs or influencer recommendations. One Southeast Asian tourist noted, “I wanted to show my friends something different, so I posted pictures of an old temple and a local tea house. For me, that is the real Taiwan.” These posts disrupted the dominance of iconic imagery by situating authenticity in ordinary spaces rather than spectacular landmarks.

The emphasis on everyday culture illustrates how tourists and locals use digital platforms to broaden Taiwan’s destination image, creating more diverse representations that coexist with official branding. However, these alternative narratives also highlight a tension between visibility and marginality: while they enrich Taiwan’s image, they remain overshadowed by the dominance of iconic tropes in the digital sphere.

Negotiating Authenticity and Expectation

A recurring theme across interviews was the negotiation between expectations shaped by digital media and the realities encountered on the ground. While many participants were drawn to Taiwan through visually striking online images, several reported that their actual experiences diverged from these portrayals. Crowds, commercialization, and staged performances often contrasted with the tranquil or idealized representations circulating on social media. A European tourist explained, “On Instagram, Sun Moon Lake looked peaceful and empty. When I arrived, it was crowded with buses and vendors. It was beautiful, but not the picture I had imagined.” Such accounts highlight the gap between promotional aesthetics and lived reality.

Participants also reflected on feelings of disappointment when digital images created unrealistic expectations. A Southeast Asian visitor described Taroko Gorge as “less dramatic in person” compared to photos online, noting, “I still enjoyed it, but I realized the pictures were edited. The colors and emptiness were not the same.” These experiences illustrate how digital media can generate both inspiration and disillusionment, functioning as a double-edged sword in shaping destination image.

At the same time, many travelers described positive moments when their experiences exceeded expectations, especially in relation to local culture and everyday life. A domestic tourist commented, “The photos online made me want to see Taipei 101, but what stayed in my memory was eating with strangers at a night market. That was more authentic than the tower itself.” This demonstrates how authenticity was redefined in interaction with lived encounters, often shifting from iconic attractions to cultural practices.

Several participants acknowledged that digital media itself played a role in negotiating authenticity, with tourists seeking to capture and share “real” images that countered official branding. A European backpacker noted, “I didn’t want to just repeat the same Taipei 101 picture. I tried to show the daily life I experienced. For me, that felt more authentic.” Such practices illustrate how travelers actively negotiate meaning through their digital storytelling, complicating simple divisions between authenticity and commodification.

Overall, this theme reveals that authenticity in Taiwan’s destination image is not fixed but dynamically negotiated between expectation and experience. Digital media inspires travel through iconic representations but also prompts travelers to question, reinterpret, and sometimes contest these images, producing a more layered understanding of place.

Co-Creation of Destination Image

The findings demonstrate that Taiwan’s destination image is not constructed solely by official branding campaigns but emerges through the interplay between institutional narratives, user-generated content, and tourists’ meaning-making practices. Interviewees often acknowledged the role of government promotion in shaping awareness of Taiwan, citing slogans and imagery from the “Time for Taiwan” campaign. However, they also emphasized how social media influencers, travel bloggers, and ordinary visitors expanded and sometimes challenged these narratives. A young domestic tourist reflected, “The Taiwan Tourism Bureau shows the big landmarks, but influencers show hidden cafés, hiking trails, or murals. Together they make Taiwan’s image richer.”

Social media influencers were frequently described as mediators between official campaigns and grassroots narratives. Participants mentioned following popular Instagram accounts or YouTube vloggers before traveling, and many admitted that these sources shaped their itineraries as much as government websites. An international visitor explained, “I saw an influencer’s video about a small town near Taipei, and it made me curious. I never saw that in official brochures.” Such accounts suggest that digital media broadens the reach of Taiwan’s image by integrating institutional branding with experiential storytelling.

Importantly, tourists themselves played an active role in co-creation by reproducing or contesting destination images through their posts. Some described intentionally replicating iconic images to “join the collective story,” while others sought to differentiate their narratives by highlighting everyday encounters. A European backpacker

stated, “I posted one photo of Taipei 101 because it feels obligatory, but then I shared many more of street food and night markets, because that felt more real.” This balance between repetition and differentiation illustrates how travelers contribute both to reinforcing and diversifying Taiwan’s brand.

Overall, the results indicate that Taiwan’s destination image is co-created through dynamic interactions between institutional promotion, influencer mediation, and traveler participation. Rather than a fixed representation, the image of Taiwan emerges as a hybrid, constantly evolving through digital circulation and negotiated meanings.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study highlight the dynamic role of digital media in constructing Taiwan’s destination image. While iconic landmarks such as Taipei 101, Sun Moon Lake, and Taroko Gorge dominated online representations, tourists also engaged with alternative narratives that foregrounded everyday culture, local food, and hidden attractions. This duality reflects the coexistence of institutional branding and grassroots storytelling, supporting earlier studies that conceptualize destination image as both a promotional construct and a lived, co-created phenomenon (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Hunter, 2016; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015).

The amplification of iconic imagery illustrates how digital media stabilizes Taiwan’s global identity by circulating easily recognizable symbols. Yet, as participants noted, such repetition risks narrowing the diversity of representations, producing expectations that sometimes lead to disappointment when realities diverge from online portrayals. This tension echoes Wang (1999) argument that authenticity in tourism is negotiated rather than absolute, shaped by the interplay between visual ideals and lived encounters. The emphasis on everyday life—street food, neighborhood temples, and informal interactions demonstrates how user-generated content enriches Taiwan’s image, shifting the focus from monumental icons to cultural intimacy.

The study also illustrates the co-creative nature of destination image in the digital era. Social media influencers act as intermediaries between official campaigns and grassroots narratives, while ordinary tourists both reproduce and contest dominant images through their posts. This aligns with broader debates on participatory culture (Ilyas et al., 2023; Larsen & Urry, 2011), where the distinction between image producers and consumers becomes blurred. In Taiwan, this dynamic suggests that destination branding is no longer a top-down process but a hybrid negotiation involving multiple actors.

Implications for theory include the need to conceptualize destination image as fluid, hybrid, and mediated by digital participation. Rather than treating official and user-generated narratives as separate, future research should analyze how they interact to form layered images that are simultaneously promotional, experiential, and contested.

Implications for practice are equally significant. For the Taiwan Tourism Bureau and related agencies, the findings suggest the importance of embracing user-generated narratives in promotional strategies, highlighting everyday cultural practices alongside iconic landmarks. Encouraging collaboration with influencers can help broaden the scope of Taiwan’s brand and reduce the risk of overreliance on a narrow set of symbols. Moreover, destination managers should recognize the risk of mismatched expectations created by digital imagery, working to ensure that tourist experiences on the ground align more closely with promotional representations. Finally, integrating grassroots storytelling into official campaigns could foster a more inclusive and authentic portrayal of Taiwan that resonates with diverse visitor motivations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how digital media shapes the construction and perception of Taiwan’s destination image, emphasizing the interplay between official branding, user-generated content, and tourist meaning-making. The findings revealed that Taiwan’s image is strongly anchored in iconic landmarks such as Taipei 101, Sun Moon Lake, and Taroko Gorge, which dominate both institutional campaigns and user-generated posts. At the same time, travelers actively introduced alternative narratives that highlighted everyday cultural practices, including street food, neighborhood temples, and ordinary urban life. These grassroots depictions enriched Taiwan’s brand, offering more diverse and intimate perspectives than those provided by official promotion.

A central contribution of this study lies in showing how authenticity is negotiated between online expectations and lived experiences. Tourists frequently described both moments of disillusionment when realities diverged from digital portrayals and moments of surprise when unbranded cultural encounters felt more “authentic.” This illustrates that destination image is not static but fluid, shaped by the ongoing dialogue between digital representations and on-site experiences.

The study's limitations include its focus on three major destinations and a relatively small interview sample, which may not capture the full range of digital narratives across Taiwan. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches that combine large-scale social media analytics with qualitative fieldwork to compare diverse regions and visitor groups.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that Taiwan's tourism authorities should integrate user-generated narratives into official branding to present a more inclusive and authentic image. Engaging with influencers and everyday travelers can help bridge the gap between promotion and experience, ensuring that Taiwan's digital image reflects both iconic symbols and everyday cultural richness.

Funding

This research received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have nothing to disclose.

Data Availability

The data is available upon reasonable request.

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