The Use of Travel-Based Content for Personal Branding:A Case Study of Implicit Marketing on Instagram

Naila Fadia[1], Masharyono Masharyono, P. D. Dirgantari

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
nailafadia05@upi.edu

Abstract. In the era of Marketing 5.0, Instagram has evolved beyond a platform for personal expression into a strategic space for building personal brands and promoting products indirectly. Despite its growing significance, there remains a functional gap in understanding how travel-related content serves dual roles: as a tool for visual storytelling and as an implicit marketing channel. This study aims to explore how individuals utilize travel content on Instagram not only to express identity but also to enhance personal branding and engage in subtle promotional activities. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research analyzes three carefully selected public Instagram accounts that consistently share travel-themed content. The study investigates visual coherence, narrative authenticity, and brand-related integration. Expected findings highlight how curated aesthetics, emotional narratives, and consistent messaging shape online perception and trust. The implications of this study are relevant for marketers, influencers, and digital content creators aiming to leverage travel content as part of broader digital branding strategies in an increasingly saturated online environment.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Travel Content, Marketing, Social Media, Instagram.

1 Introduction

Marketing 5.0 is the fifth generation of marketing introduced by Philip Kotler in 2021, which emphasizes the integration of culture, technology, and human values. It responds to the growing need for marketing strategies that combine technological advancement with human-centric communication. Unlike previous approaches, Marketing 5.0 recognizes the essential differences between machines and humans and aims to deliver meaningful customer experiences by addressing emotional, social, and ethical expectations in a highly digital environment [1].

As online presence becomes a cornerstone of how people connect, express, and consume, travel content on platforms like Instagram has evolved beyond mere visual storytelling. It now functions as a deliberate strategy for personal branding and implicit marketing. The growing reliance on social and digital media, where users engage not

© The Author(s) 2026
R. Hurriyati et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 10th Global Conference on Business, Management, and Entrepreneurship (GCBME 2025)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 407,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6239-819-1_74

only for entertainment but also for information and purchasing decisions, underscores the strategic value of such content in shaping perceptions and influence [2]. Despite its widespread use, there is still a gap in understanding how travel content on Instagram operates not just as lifestyle documentation, but as a tool for personal branding and indirect promotion. While traditional advertising often feels detached, social media influencers (SMIs) are perceived as more authentic and relatable due to their presentation as ordinary individuals rather than corporate spokespeople [3]. Their influence is rooted in the portrayal of real life, carefully curated through the selective sharing of personal moments [4]-[6].

In the context of travel content, influencers often craft a persona that appears spontaneous and emotionally resonant. By presenting their journeys as genuine and immersive experiences, they foster a sense of connection with followers, who may see their own aspirations reflected in these narratives. This sense of relatability creates fertile ground for implicit marketing, where brand promotion is subtly embedded within lifestyle storytelling, often without overt advertising cues, a strategy aligned with the rise of social media influencers as "the new brands" [7] and the mythologizing of influencer success as an attainable lifestyle [8]. While influencer marketing and destination branding on Instagram have been widely studied [9], [10], there remains limited understanding of how micro-level users who employ travel content for subtle branding purposes use travel content as a tool for personal branding and implicit marketing.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how selected Instagram accounts use travel content to construct personal brands and apply implicit marketing strategies. Focuses on qualitative content analysis of travel-related posts from selected Instagram users by focusing on visual elements, narrative styles, and engagement tactics. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of content strategy in the digital branding landscape.

2 Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach through content analysis. It focuses on how Isntagram travel content is used as a tool for personal branding and implicit marketing, examining selected public profiles that consistenty post travel-related content. The data consists of Instagram posts (images, reels, captions, highlights, and user interactions) from three selected Instagram account (names anonymized as Account A, B, and C). This analysis was limited to publicly accessible content, and the researcher ensures the privacy and dignity of all individuals observed in this study. Account A has 341 posts and 170K followers. She is known for adventurous travel content across Indonesia, including destinations like Carstensz Pyramid, Ranu Kumbolo, and numerous diving sites. Her feed is highly curated, blending nature shots with modeling aesthetics. Her reels often feature motivational texts and high-quality visuals captured via smartphone, drone, and camera. She actively engages followers, uses trending audio, and occasionally promotes outdoor gear through tagged or collaborative content.

Account B features 1,016 posts with 129K followers. As a brand ambassador and trip organizer, he shares content from various mountains and natural destinations such as Semeru, Latimojong, Tanralili, and Baluran. His feed has a calm, earthy aesthetic with minimalist captions. His reels often open with a personal touch followed by scenic shots, using popular sounds or voiceovers. He maintains strong engagement through shares and responses, and collaborates with tourism and resort providers for promotions.

Account C has 3,142 posts and 15.6K followers. A 56-year-old lifestyle and travel enthusiast, she documents personal reflections, fitness, and travels including trips to Ciremai and Annapurna Basecamp. Her reels emphasize emotion, gratitude, and spirituality, using diverse audio tracks. While her visuals are simpler and filmed via smartphone, her storytelling is rich. Engagement is warm and consistent, and she occasionally tags trip organizers in collaborative content.

These accounts (A, B, and C) were selected using purposive sampling, based on criteria such as; dominant travel-related content, high follower engagement, consistency in aesthethic visual and unique storytelling or narrative, and public account status. Data was collected by taking screenshots and notes of visual elements (photos/videos), captions, and user engagement metrics (likes, share, and comments). The data was documented manually and organized thematically.

3 Results and Discussions

3.1 Visual Framing: Landscapes and Lifestyle in Instagram Feeds

Visuals serve as the primary tool in shaping audiences perception of self-representation on Instagram. Across the three case study accounts, there is a consistent visual language that conveys more than just scenery. It subtly shapes how the users wish to be perceived by their audiences.

All three users (Account A, B, and C) display a clear preference for natural landscapes such as mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and remote islands. These backdrops offer a sense of escapism and authenticity while positioning the user as someone who seeks beauty off the beaten path. For example, Account A frequently documents hikes to high-altitude destinations like Cartenz Pyramid and Ranu Kumbolo, framing herself as a capable, graceful, and faith-centered female adventurer. Her feed is characterized by serene blues and lush greens, accented with her modest yet stylish hijab look and premium hiking gear.

Account B, by contrast, emphasizes minimalism and masculinity, often appearing in simple, earthy outfits amid rugged terrains like Mount Semeru, Gunung Bawakaraeng, and Tanralili Lake. His aesthetic is dark green and deep-toned, giving an air of mystery and stoicism. Known as “Mang Ewok,” his posts often capture dense forests, foggy peaks, or quiet trails, supported by short, poetic captions like "Hanya tenang merelakan." His use of drone shots or close-up stills adds visual drama.

Meanwhile, Account C presents a more lifestyle-oriented framing, with colorful tones and soft outdoor light. Her images blend travel and everyday reflection, from trips to Annapurna Basecamp and Mount Ciremai, to casual visits to Nimo Highland. Her

pastel outfits, cheerful expressions, and uplifting captions give her feed a vibrant, warm tone, suitable for her persona as an active and optimistic woman in her 50s. Despite using only a smartphone, her visual style maintains clarity and coherence, focusing on framing emotions over technical polish.

Sample posts revealed that these visual choices are not merely pleasing to the eye but serve as intentional tools for constructing a digital persona. Camera angles such as drone shots, candid compositions, or silhouettes, function as semiotic resources that articulate social status, class, and exclusivity of experience. These framing styles do not merely display aesthetic skill but signify access to "hidden gems" and experiences associated with symbolic capital. Consistent use of filters, often warm, vintage, or slightly desaturated, further reinforces a cohesive visual identity, contributing to the performativity of a branded self.

This aligns with Zappavigna's [11] perspective on ambient affiliation, wherein Instagram visuals and hashtags operate as mechanisms for social bonding through shared values and lifestyles. The curated aesthetics act as visual metaphors for lifestyle niches such as "wanderlust", "cozy minimalism", or the "explorer archetype". In this way, Instagram visuals do not simply document travel; they stage aspirational narratives carefully crafted to engage, attract, and grow one's digital following.

3.2 Dynamic Visuality in Instagram Reels: Music, Movement, and Mood

Instagram Reels combine movement, music, and narrative timing, offering a compact yet emotionally rich format for personal branding. All three accounts use Reels to dramatize travel, express values, and foster intimacy with followers. Account A creates cinematic reels, such as her snowy Carstensz Pyramid climb layered with motivational text and emotive captions. Paired with curated music and smooth transitions, her content reflects strength, freedom, and self-love.

Account B uses concise POV captions and scenic transitions, often opening with close-ups followed by natural landscapes. Voiceovers, such as in his Mount Bismo reel, add informative depth, while editing apps like CapCut enhance visual appeal. Account C shares reels with a personal and spiritual tone. Simpler in style, her content emphasizes gratitude and reflection, often using religious or emotional music and collaborating with travel organizers.

Collectively, their approach through emotional cues, music, and rapid editing transforms Reels into identity narratives. This finding aligns with previous research [12], which highlights that short-form videos foster performed authenticity, multimodal expression, and narrative compression, thereby facilitating strong audience engagement and personal storytelling. Instagram Reels, therefore, act as visual self-portraits: condensed expressions of aspiration, healing, and branded lifestyle.

3.3 Narrative Strategies: Captions as Tools of Storytelling and Personal Reflection

In this section, it becomes evident that captions have evolved beyond mere image descriptors. They function as powerful narrative tools that build emotional resonance, deepen engagement, and offer insight into the user's identity construction.

Several narrative patterns were observed across the three accounts:

1. Emotional reflection: Users often share not only where they went, but how they felt. For instance, Account C, a 56-year-old female hiker, frequently documents her internal thoughts and physical endurance during high-altitude treks like Annapurna Basecamp or Ciremai Mountain. Her caption, "jalan menuju puncak memang terjal... tapi akan terbalas ketika kita mencapainya" serves as a motivational metaphor for life challenges, which resonates deeply with midlife audiences seeking both inspiration and relatability.

2. Philosophical tone: Particularly prominent in Account A, captions use meditative and lyrical expressions such as "enggak perlu merasa tertinggal. pasti, kamu akan sampai" to evoke emotional depth. These captions are often complemented by minimalist landscapes or solitary figures in nature, creating a poetic mood. The integration of personal reflection, inspirational quotes, and song lyrics reinforces a spiritual tone and positions the influencer as both a traveler and a thinker.

3. Use POV-style narratives: This strategy allows the reader to imagine themselves in the user's experience by creating a sense of inclusivity and relatability. Account B adopt the point-of-view (POV) format: "POV: kamu terlalu sibuk dengan pendakianmu", and this strategy invited the viewer into the creator's experience, fostering identification and encouraging aspirational behaviour. The captions work as hooks, often paired with visuals to create immersive storytelling. Overall, captions become a dual-purpose instrument: emotional anchor and branding text. They guide how audiences interpret the visual content, offering context, motivation, and curated vulnerability.

3.4 Identify Construction: Performing the "Wanderer" Persona

Through both visual and textual content, Instagram users construct identities that are not static but performed and curated. The three accounts examined here each construct a distinctive travel persona that reflects not only personal values but also audience expectations.

Symbol and Cues

1. Account A (Female mountaineer and outdoor enthusiast) embodies a graceful yet resilient persona, merging hijab-wearing modesty with adventure. Her consistent use of hiking gear, summits, and serene landscapes reflects a bal- ance of femininity, faith, and strength. Appealing to hijabi women seeking empowerment outdoors.
2. Account B (Male adventurer, known as "Mang Ewok") presents a rugged, minimalist explorer image. Earth-tone outfits, beards, and poetic captions like "gunung negeri dongeng" project confidence, endurance, and ecological au- thenticity.

3. Account C portrays a spiritual, grateful soul-seeker. With vibrant visuals, introspective captions, and lifestyle-fitness content, she expands the image of6 travel to include maturity, inner growth, and faith—diversifying age and gender narratives in digital travel culture.
4. These personas are supported by consistent body language, gaze, posture, and clothing, acting as semiotic codes that align with existing travel subcultures (e.g., "soul- searcher", "aesthetic explorer", or "content-creator adventurer".

3.5 Branding and Implicit Marketing Strategies in Instagram Travel Content

In today's influencer ecosystem, branding and marketing are no longer overt actions; they are embedded within the lifestyle narrative. The three accounts examined demonstrate how subtle visual and textual cues become instruments of implicit marketing.

1. Account A regularly features professional-grade gear, including branded diving equipment or high-end hiking outfits. While posts rarely mention brands explicitly, product tags in stories and occasional collaborations reveal a strategic form of low-key promotion. Her emotionally resonant narratives and aesthetic discipline make these promotions feel authentic rather than commercial.
2. Account B, more overt in his marketing approach, collaborates with tour providers and often tags accommodations or outdoor brands in both posts and stories. His use of reels with voiceovers or "mini-review" captions serves both informative and promotional purposes. For instance, in his reels for Gunung Bismo, he subtly introduces a trail provider while maintaining a personal tone.
3. Account C, though less focused on monetization, occasionally tags trip agencies, especially during major treks like Annapurna or Upas Hills. Her rare promotions are usually embedded in gratitude-laden captions and tagged shoutouts, maintaining authenticity while extending value to her network.

These branding strategies align with Balaban and Mustățea's theory of implicit marketing [13], where influence occurs through emotional association and perceived authenticity. Rather than promoting through traditional advertising, these influencers create symbolic value around experiences and products, inviting audiences to imagine themselves within those curated narratives.

4 Conclusions

This study highlights Instagram's role as a hybrid space for personal branding and implicit marketing through travel content. By analyzing three accounts, it becomes clear that the "wanderer" persona is not just leisure-driven but a strategic identity crafted through visual aesthetics, storytelling, and thematic consistency. Instagram encourages curated self-presentation, where authenticity and aspiration coexist. These performances build influence and trust while subtly promoting destinations, products, and lifestyles, blurring the line between personal expression and commercial strategy.

Instagram, therefore, is more than a social platform; it is a stage for identity construction and informal marketing, where travel creators shape aspirational narratives that serve both the self and the market.

References

1. Movahed, A.B., Movahed, A.B., Nozari, H.: Opportunities and challenges of Marketing 5.0. In: Smart and Sustainable Interactive Marketing, pp. 1–21. IGI Global (2024). https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1339-8.ch001
2. Faruk, M., Rahman, M., Hasan, S.: How digital marketing evolved over time: A bibliometric analysis on Scopus database. Heliyon 7(12), e08603 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e08603
3. Senft, T.M.: Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks. Peter Lang, Bern (2008).
4. Duffy, B.E., Hund, E.: "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. Social Media + Society 1(2), 1–11 (2015).
5. Whitmer, J.M.: You are your brand: Self-branding and the marketization of self. Sociology Compass 13(3), e12662 (2019).
6. van Driel, L., Dumitrica, D.: Selling brands while staying "authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers. Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 27(1), 66–84 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520902136
7. Weinswig, D.: Influencers are the new brands. Forbes, October 5 (2016). https://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahweinswig/2016/10/05/influencers-are-the-new-brands/
8. Duffy, B.E., Wissinger, E.: Mythologies of creative work in the social media age: Fun, free and "just being me". International Journal of Communication 11, 4652–4671 (2017).
9. Abidin, C., Ots, M.: The influencer's dilemma: The shaping of new brand professions between credibility and commerce. In: AEJMC 2015 Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA, August 6–9 (2015).
10. Glover, P.: Celebrity endorsement in tourism advertising: Effects on destination image. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management 16(1), 16–23 (2009).
11. Zappavigna, M.: Social media photography: Construing subjectivity in Instagram images. Visual Communication 15(3), 271–292 (2016).
12. Malik, N., Ramzan, M., Malik, Z., Tariq, I.: The rise of Reels: Analyzing the communicative power of short-form videos on social media. Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences 6, 138–145 (2025). https://doi.org/10.55737/qjss.vi-ii.25350
13. Balaban, D.C., Mustățea, M.: Users' perspective on the credibility of social media influencers in Romania and Germany. Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations 21(1), 31–46 (2019).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

