Hybrid food narratives and emerging rural influencers: Rethinking sago-based culinary heritage in village tourism

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Journal of Tourism, Culinary, and Entrepreneurship

e-ISSN: 2776-0928

Publisher:
School of Tourism,
Universitas Ciputra Surabaya,
Indonesia

Keywords:
Hybrid Food Narratives
Rural Influencers
Sago-Based Food
Rural Tourism
Cultural Identity

Received: *August 25, 2026*
Revised: *September 17, 2026*
Accepted: *September 25, 2026*

ABSTRACT

This study explores how sago-based local food is constructed as a narrative within rural tourism and how local actors contribute to shaping these narratives in Rutong Village, Ambon, Indonesia. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, digital content analysis, and supporting document analysis involving approximately 15–25 participants, including local food producers, community members, tourism actors, and visitors where available. The findings indicate that sago-based foods, such as *sinoli* and sago noodles, function as cultural resources associated with tradition, collective memory, local identity, and ecological knowledge. As tourism develops, these foods are increasingly incorporated into visitor experiences through storytelling, participation, and social interaction. The findings also indicate that food narratives are constructed through a combination of face-to-face communication and limited digital engagement. Local food producers and community members contribute to this process through cultural knowledge, social relationships, and direct interaction with visitors. The study conceptualizes this pattern as a hybrid food narrative, highlighting the coexistence of digital and non-digital communication in an emerging rural tourism context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food tourism has emerged as a significant area of interest within contemporary tourism studies, as local cuisine increasingly becomes a key component of destination attractiveness. Rather than being limited to consumption, Kapelari et al. (2020) and Pugra et al. (2025) found that food is now recognized as a medium through which cultural identity, heritage, and local knowledge are expressed. In rural contexts, traditional foods often embody long-standing relationships between communities and their natural environment (Apriyanto et al., 2024; Hoaihongthong & Tuamsuk, 2024; Batyrbek & Chisbiyah, 2025; Rollo, 2025). These foods are

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frequently positioned as symbols of authenticity (Mapes, 2020), offering tourists opportunities to engage with local ways of life (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). As a result, food plays a central role in shaping both tourism experiences and destination images.

Alongside this development, the rise of digital media has transformed how food is represented and communicated within tourism (Nafarin & Oktavio, 2021; Dawson et al., 2023; Hjalager, 2022). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable the circulation of food-related content that combines visual, textual, and experiential elements. Through these platforms, local food is increasingly embedded in narratives that highlight cultural meaning, lifestyle, and place identity (Franzidis et al., 2023; Widjanarko et al., 2024; Firman, 2025). This shift has given rise to the concept of digital food narratives (Lupton, 2020), where storytelling becomes a key mechanism in shaping how food is perceived by wider audiences (Gago, 2025; Trisdayanti et al., 2026; Vitting-Seerup & Matthiessen, 2026). Consequently, study from Gaspar et al. (2020) revealed that food is no longer only consumed physically but also experienced through mediated representations.

In this context, the role of influencers has become increasingly prominent in shaping tourism perceptions. Influencers act as intermediaries who curate and communicate narratives about destinations and local experiences (Dorta-Preen & Santana-Talavera, 2025). More recently, Banks (2022) added that attention has shifted toward rural influencers, who are often embedded within local communities and draw on their cultural knowledge to construct authentic narratives. Unlike conventional influencers, their influence is not solely based on digital visibility but also on their social and cultural positioning (Nomishan et al., 2024). This highlights a shift from externally driven promotion to more localized and community-based forms of storytelling (Lowery et al., 2020; Taylor & Wei, 2020).

Despite these developments, existing studies on digital food narratives and influencers tend to focus on highly digitalized environments, where access to technology and social media engagement is already well established. Such contexts often overlook rural areas where digital practices are still emerging or unevenly distributed (Priyadharma, 2024; Shrestha et al., 2025). As a result, there is limited understanding of how food narratives are constructed in settings where digital and non-digital forms of communication coexist (Beneito-Montagut, 2022; Jain et al., 2021; Steinke et al., 2024). This gap is particularly evident in underrepresented regions such as Eastern Indonesia, where rich culinary traditions remain insufficiently explored within tourism research.

Rutong Village in Ambon, Indonesia, provides a relevant context to address this gap. The village is known for its sago-based culinary heritage, including foods such as *sinoli*, sago noodles, sago pancakes, and traditional fruit-based beverages. These foods are deeply rooted in local culture and reflect the community's relationship with natural resources. At the same time, Rutong has begun to engage with tourism activities (Oratmangun et al., 2025; Salhuteru

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et al., 2025), positioning its culinary practices as part of the visitor experience. This creates an opportunity to examine how local food is reinterpreted within a tourism context.

Importantly, the construction of food narratives in Rutong does not occur solely through digital media. Instead, narratives are shaped through a combination of storytelling, daily practices, and social interactions, alongside emerging forms of digital engagement. This suggests the presence of hybrid food narratives, where offline and online elements interact in shaping meaning (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020; Kent, 2021). Such a perspective challenges dominant assumptions that digital platforms are the primary drivers of tourism narratives (Sujatmiko et al., 2025). It also opens up new ways of understanding how narratives develop in less digitally saturated environments (Mariani & Ciancia, 2023).

Based on this background, this study aims to explore how sago-based local food is constructed as a narrative within tourism and how local actors function as emerging rural influencers in shaping these narratives. The study seeks to understand the processes through which food is transformed from a cultural practice into a tourism resource. It also examines how narratives are communicated, interpreted, and experienced by both local actors and visitors. By doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between food, narrative, and tourism in rural contexts.

This study contributes to literature in several ways. First, it extends the discussion of digital food narratives by introducing the concept of hybrid narrative construction in rural settings, where face-to-face communication remains important alongside emerging digital practices. Second, it broadens the notion of rural influencers by emphasizing cultural embeddedness, social relationships, and local knowledge rather than digital visibility alone. Third, it provides empirical insights from an underrepresented region, highlighting the role of sago-based culinary heritage in emerging rural tourism development. Overall, this research offers a context-sensitive understanding of the relationship between food, narrative, local actors, and tourism in a rural setting.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study design following Stake (2005) to explore how sago-based local foods are constructed as narratives within rural tourism and how local actors contribute to the communication of these narratives. The case study approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of complex social and cultural processes within a specific context (Schoch, 2020). The research was conducted in Rutong Village, Ambon, Indonesia, a rural community recognized for its sago-based culinary heritage and emerging tourism activities. The case provides a context in which traditional culinary practices, community interaction, tourism experiences, and emerging digital communication coexist.

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Data collection was primarily based on in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to capture participants' perspectives and lived experiences concerning local food practices (Scanlan, 2020). Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included local food producers, community members, tourism actors, and visitors where available. The manuscript records approximately 15-25 participants, selected to provide depth and variation in perspectives. The interviews addressed the meanings of local food, storytelling practices, perceptions of tourism, culinary experiences, and the role of media in communicating local food practices.

Participant observation was conducted to obtain contextual and experiential understanding of everyday culinary practices (Harvey, 2021). The researcher observed the preparation of sago-based foods such as *sinoli* and sago noodles, as well as social interactions surrounding food preparation, sharing, and consumption. Particular attention was given to non-verbal practices, cultural routines, embodied knowledge, and interactions through which culinary meanings were communicated. These observations complemented the interview accounts by documenting practices that might not have been fully articulated verbally.

Digital content analysis was also conducted to examine emerging representations of local food in online spaces. The analysis focused on publicly accessible content from social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube that represented Rutong Village, sago-based food, culinary practices, or tourism experiences. Visual elements, captions, and available audience interactions were examined to identify how local food was represented and narrated digitally. Given the limited and uneven nature of digital engagement in the study context, digital materials were treated as supplementary evidence rather than as the primary source of the food narratives. This allowed the study to examine the relationship between emerging digital representations and established face-to-face forms of communication.

Document analysis was incorporated to support data triangulation. The materials examined included photographs, local archives, tourism promotional materials, and other relevant documents concerning Rutong's culinary and tourism activities. These materials were used to provide contextual information and to examine how local food has been positioned within cultural and tourism discourses.

The data collected were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis involved familiarization with the interview and observation materials, generation of initial codes, grouping of related codes, development of candidate themes, and refinement of themes into coherent analytical categories. Interview accounts, observation notes, documentary materials, and digital content were examined comparatively to identify recurring patterns concerning cultural identity, food practices, storytelling, tourism experiences, local actors, and digital communication. Where digital materials contained visual, textual, and

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symbolic elements, these dimensions were considered together to understand how meanings were communicated. Themes were refined by comparing their consistency across the available data sources and by relating the emerging patterns to the research questions and relevant literature.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information from interviews, participant observations, digital content, and supporting documents. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to obtain clarification and confirm the interpretation of their accounts. Reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to acknowledge the researcher's role in interpreting participants' experiences and cultural practices. These strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and transparency of the analytical process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings indicate that sago-based foods in Rutong Village are deeply embedded in local cultural identity and everyday social life. Across the interview and observation data, foods such as *sinoli*, sago noodles, and sago pancakes were associated with tradition, heritage, collective memory, and relationships between the community and its natural environment. These meanings were communicated not only through participants' descriptions but also through culinary practices and social interactions observed during food preparation and consumption.

Sinoli provides a particularly clear example of the connection between culinary practice and communal life. Its preparation involves shared labor and participation among community members, making the preparation process itself an important social practice. Rather than being understood solely as a finished food product, *sinoli* is embedded in interactions through which culinary knowledge, traditions, and social relationships are maintained. The preparation and consumption of sago-based foods therefore reflect values of togetherness, mutual cooperation, and shared cultural identity.

The observation of culinary practices further indicates that these meanings are communicated through everyday activities surrounding food preparation, sharing, and consumption. Such practices provide opportunities for cultural knowledge to be experienced directly and collectively. This finding suggests that the cultural significance of sago-based food lies not only in the food itself but also in the social practices through which it is prepared, shared, and understood.

As Rutong Village gradually engages with tourism activities, local food has begun to shift from a purely subsistence function to a tourism-oriented resource. Sago-based dishes are

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increasingly presented to visitors as part of the local experience, indicating a transformation in their social and economic roles. This shift reflects a broader trend in rural tourism, where traditional practices are recontextualized as attractions that can generate economic value.

Moreover, the preparation and consumption of sago-based foods are closely associated with social values such as togetherness, cooperation, and shared identity. For instance, the process of making *sinoli* involves collective participation, reinforcing communal bonds and social cohesion. Table 1 shows the cultural meanings and social functions of key sago-based foods identified in this study.

Table 1. Cultural Meanings and Social Functions of Sago-Based Foods in Rutong

Food Type	Cultural Meaning	Social Function
Sinoli	Tradition & heritage	Communal preparation
Sago noodles	Daily sustenance	Household consumption
Sago pancake	Adaptation & creativity	Informal sharing
Tomi-tomi wine	Local identity	Social gatherings

Table 1 shows that each type of sago-based food in Rutong carries distinct cultural meanings and social functions, reflecting the multifaceted role of food within the community. Sinoli, for instance, is strongly associated with tradition and heritage, as its preparation involves collective participation that reinforces social cohesion. Sago noodles, on the other hand, represent everyday sustenance and are primarily linked to household consumption, indicating their role in daily life. Sago pancakes demonstrate elements of adaptation and creativity, reflecting how traditional ingredients are reinterpreted in more flexible and informal contexts. Meanwhile, tomi-tomi wine embodies local identity and is commonly associated with social gatherings, highlighting its role in strengthening communal relationships. Overall, the table illustrates that sago-based foods function simultaneously as cultural symbols and social instruments within Rutong Village.

Furthermore, the study finds that narrative construction operates within a hybrid communication system, combining offline and limited digital media. While some actors have begun to use social media, face-to-face interaction remains dominant. Table 2 shows the key elements of food narrative construction identified in this study.

Table 2. Elements of Food Narrative Construction in Rutong

Element	Description
Local Food Resource	Sago-based foods as cultural foundation
Narrative Themes	Tradition, authenticity, simplicity, nature
Actors (Rural Influencers)	Local community, food producers
Communication Forms	Offline interaction, limited digital media
Audience Engagement	Tourist participation and interpretation
Outcome	Tourism imaginary (Rutong as sago destination)

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Table 2 summarizes the relationships identified across the empirical materials. Sago-based food provides the cultural foundation, while local actors contribute to the interpretation and communication of food-related meanings. Storytelling, experiential practices, and visual representations provide the main narrative mechanisms. These narratives are communicated through face-to-face interaction alongside limited digital media. Audience participation and interpretation subsequently contribute to the development of a tourism imaginary associated with Rutong as a sago-based rural destination.

This transformation is also evident in the ways food is staged and experienced by tourists. In some cases, visitors are invited to observe or participate in the preparation of sago-based dishes, turning everyday practices into performative experiences. Such interactions allow tourists to engage with local culture in a more immersive manner, thereby enhancing the perceived authenticity of the destination. This process illustrates how food becomes a medium through which tourism experiences are constructed and delivered.

The study further identifies that local food narratives are actively constructed through storytelling practices. These narratives often emphasize themes such as tradition, simplicity, and a close connection to nature. Informants frequently describe food in relation to ancestral knowledge, local ingredients, and rural lifestyles, thereby creating a coherent narrative that positions Rutong as an authentic and culturally rich destination. These findings suggest that narratives are not incidental but are deliberately shaped to convey specific meanings.

In addition to verbal storytelling, narrative construction also occurs through observational and experiential dimensions. The visual appearance of food, the setting in which it is prepared, and the interactions between community members all contribute to the formation of meaning. These elements work together to create a multi-sensory narrative that extends beyond language. Figure 1 explains the process of narrative construction identified in this study, including the interaction between food, actors, and media.

The findings also indicate that some local actors perform roles that resemble those commonly associated with rural influencers. These actors include local food producers and community members who contribute to how local food is presented, explained, and experienced by visitors. Their influence is not primarily associated with follower counts or online visibility but with their cultural knowledge, participation in community life, and direct interaction with visitors. The account illustrates how local actors can influence visitors' understanding of culinary heritage through direct cultural communication. In this context, influence is produced through social relationships and cultural embeddedness as well as through emerging digital communication.

In some instances, these actors have begun to engage with digital platforms, although such engagement remains limited and uneven. Social media is used selectively to share images, videos, or stories about local food, indicating the early stages of digital narrative

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formation. However, offline interactions continue to play a dominant role in shaping food narratives. This suggests that rural influencers in Rutong operate within a hybrid system that combines digital and non-digital forms of communication.

The hybrid nature of narrative construction highlights an important distinction from more digitally advanced contexts. In Rutong, narratives are not solely mediated by technology but are grounded in lived experiences and face-to-face interactions. This finding challenges the assumption that digital media is the primary driver of food narratives, suggesting instead that multiple forms of communication coexist and interact in rural settings.

The study also reveals that audience engagement plays a crucial role in shaping food narratives and tourism imaginaries. Visitors interpret and respond to experiences with local food in ways that reinforce certain images of the village, such as authenticity, simplicity, and cultural richness. These perceptions are not passively received but are actively constructed through interaction, observation, and participation.

Through these processes, Rutong Village is increasingly imagined as a “sago-based cultural destination,” where food serves as a central element of its identity. This tourism imaginary is co-created by local actors and visitors, reflecting a dynamic interplay between production and consumption. The findings indicate that food narratives contribute significantly to how destinations are perceived and valued.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Food Narrative Construction and Tourism Imaginary in Rutong Village
Source: Generated using Google Gemini AI (2026)

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Figure 1 demonstrates the conceptual framework of food narrative construction and tourism imaginary in Rutong Village. It illustrates how sago-based local food serves as a cultural foundation that is interpreted and communicated by local actors as emerging rural influencers. Through processes of narrative construction encompassing storytelling, experiential practices, and visual representation, these meanings are transmitted via both digital and non-digital media. The interaction between local actors and audiences subsequently shapes engagement and co-creates tourism imaginary, positioning Rutong as a distinctive sago-based rural destination.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the idea that local food can be understood as a narrative construct shaped by social, cultural, and communicative processes. At the same time, the study extends existing frameworks by demonstrating that such narratives can emerge in contexts where digital engagement is still developing. This highlights the need to consider hybrid and emerging forms of narrative construction in future research.

Furthermore, the concept of rural influencers is expanded in this study to include actors who may not fit conventional definitions associated with social media popularity. In Rutong, influence is rooted in cultural authority, authenticity, and social relationships, rather than digital metrics. This redefinition offers a more inclusive understanding of influence in rural tourism contexts.

In conclusion, the results and discussion demonstrate that sago-based local food in Rutong Village is not only a cultural artifact but also a dynamic narrative resource that shapes tourism experiences. The interplay between cultural identity, narrative construction, local actors, and audience engagement highlights the complexity of food tourism in rural settings. These findings provide important insights into how local food can be leveraged as both a cultural and economic asset in emerging tourism destinations.

Discussion

The findings support the view that local food in rural tourism is not merely a material product but a socially and culturally situated narrative resource. In Rutong Village, sago-based foods are connected with collective memory, cultural identity, everyday practices, and relationships with the local environment. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the symbolic and experiential dimensions of food tourism (Ingrassia et al., 2022). The contribution of the present study lies in showing how these meanings are produced through everyday interaction within a rural community where tourism and digital engagement are still developing.

A particularly important finding concerns the coexistence of digital and non-digital communication. Existing research has highlighted the increasing importance of digital platforms in food and tourism communication. The Rutong case suggests, however, that digital

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communication may operate alongside rather than replace face-to-face storytelling and embodied culinary practices. Local food is communicated through direct interaction, observation, participation, and social relationships, while digital media provides an additional means of representation.

This pattern is conceptualized in this study as hybrid food narrative construction. The concept emphasizes the coexistence of communicative practices rather than assuming that rural food narratives become meaningful only after they enter digital platforms. In the Rutong context, digital communication appears to be layered onto existing cultural practices. The finding therefore extends discussions of digital food narratives by drawing attention to rural contexts in which digital adoption remains uneven.

Furthermore, the study supports the argument that food narratives are actively constructed rather than naturally occurring. The results demonstrate that storytelling practices both verbal and experiential, play a central role in shaping how local food is perceived by visitors. This finding is consistent with Wang et al. (2026), who argue that hybrid food narratives transform local food into meaningful tourism content through curated storytelling processes. In the case of Rutong, although digital platforms are not yet dominant, similar narrative mechanisms are evident in offline interactions.

However, an important distinction emerges from this study. Unlike the context examined by Wang et al. (2026), where digital media plays a central role, Rutong represents a setting where digital engagement is still limited and uneven. The findings indicate that narrative construction occurs through a combination of face-to-face interactions, lived experiences, and selective digital usage. This suggests the presence of what can be conceptualized as hybrid food narratives, where digital and non-digital forms coexist and mutually reinforce each other.

This notion of hybridity extends existing theoretical frameworks by highlighting that digitalization is not a prerequisite for narrative formation. Instead, narratives can emerge organically from everyday practices and gradually integrate digital elements over time. Similar observations are reported by Mkono (2011), who found that food-related narratives in tourism can be constructed through both online and offline engagements. Therefore, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how food narratives evolve in less digitally saturated environments.

Another significant finding relates to the role of local actors as emerging rural influencers. The results show that individuals such as food producers and community members play a central role in narrating and presenting local food. These actors may not possess large online followings, yet they influence visitors' perceptions through direct interaction and cultural authority. This expands the conventional definition of influencers, which is often limited to social media metrics and visibility.

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The findings also broaden the understanding of rural influencers by drawing attention to locally embedded forms of influence. In conventional digital influencer research, influence is often associated with online visibility, audience size, and social media engagement (Wies et al., 2023). In Rutong, however, local food producers and community members can influence visitors through their cultural knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and direct involvement in culinary practices. This does not necessarily replace the conventional digital understanding of influence; rather, it demonstrates that influence in rural tourism can also be exercised through social and cultural embeddedness.

Moreover, the results indicate that narrative construction is a multi-sensory process involving visual, social, and experiential elements. Food presentation, preparation settings, and social interactions all contribute to how narratives are formed and interpreted. This supports the idea that food narratives are not solely textual or visual but are embedded in lived experiences. As such, the concept of narrative should be expanded to include embodied and performative dimensions.

The study also highlights the importance of audience engagement in shaping tourism imaginaries. Visitors do not passively consume narratives but actively interpret and co-create meanings through their experiences. The results show that tourists perceive Rutong as an authentic and culturally rich destination, largely based on their interactions with local food and community members. This aligns with the broader literature on tourism imaginaries, which emphasizes the co-creation of meaning between hosts and guests (Makkar et al., 2024).

In this context, food serves as a central element in constructing the image of Rutong as a “sago-based cultural destination.” This image is reinforced through repeated narratives and experiences, both offline and online. The findings suggest that local food plays a strategic role in destination branding, even in the absence of formal marketing strategies. This reinforces the idea that grassroots narrative practices can significantly influence tourism development.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature by extending the concept of digital food narratives into rural and emerging contexts. It demonstrates that narrative construction is not exclusively dependent on advanced digital infrastructures but can develop through hybrid processes. This challenges dominant assumptions in the literature and calls for more inclusive frameworks that account for varying levels of digital engagement.

Additionally, the study redefines the concept of rural influencers by emphasizing their social and cultural roles rather than their digital presence. In Rutong, influence is derived from trust, knowledge, and participation in community life. This perspective broadens the understanding of influence in tourism studies and highlights the importance of local actors in shaping destination narratives.

The practical implications of this study are also noteworthy. The findings suggest that rural tourism development strategies should focus on empowering local communities to

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become active storytellers of their own cultural heritage. Rather than relying solely on external marketing or professional influencers, communities can leverage their existing knowledge and practices to create authentic tourism experiences.

Moreover, this study demonstrates that food narratives in rural tourism are complex, dynamic, and context-dependent. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that rural tourism development can benefit from strengthening the capacity of local residents to communicate their own culinary heritage. Community-based storytelling can complement formal tourism promotion by enabling visitors to encounter food through local knowledge and lived experience. Recent research similarly emphasizes the importance of community empowerment and participation in tourism development (Nomishan et al., 2024; Batyrbek & Chisbiyah, 2025; Daryana & Waluyo, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025). By examining the case of Rutong Village, it highlights the interplay between cultural identity, narrative construction, local actors, and audience engagement. The concept of hybrid food narratives and the redefinition of rural influencers offer valuable contributions to both theory and practice, particularly in understanding tourism development in underrepresented regions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how sago-based culinary heritage is constructed as a tourism narrative and how local actors contribute to this process in Rutong Village, Ambon, Indonesia. The findings indicate that the tourism meaning of sago-based food emerges through the interaction of cultural knowledge, everyday culinary practices, storytelling, visitor participation, and emerging digital communication.

The study's main theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of food narrative construction as a hybrid process in which face-to-face, embodied, and digital forms of communication coexist. The findings also broaden the understanding of rural influence by showing that local actors can shape food-related tourism experiences through cultural knowledge, social relationships, and direct interaction, even where digital visibility is limited.

Practically, the findings suggest that rural tourism initiatives can strengthen local communities' role as storytellers and interpreters of culinary heritage. Digital storytelling can be developed as a complementary capacity while maintaining community-based practices through which cultural meanings are transmitted and experienced.

This study is limited by its focus on a single case and by the relatively limited availability of digital data. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating the general effects of digital media on rural tourism. In addition, researcher positionality may have influenced access, interaction, and interpretation, while language and translation processes may have affected the interpretation of participants' accounts where local linguistic expressions were involved. Future research could compare rural tourism destinations with

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different levels of digital adoption and examine how hybrid food narratives develop as digital engagement increases.

Practically, the findings suggest that rural tourism development should prioritize empowering local communities as active storytellers of their culinary heritage. Strengthening local capacity in both traditional and digital storytelling can enhance destination attractiveness while preserving cultural authenticity. However, this study is limited to a single case and a relatively low level of digital data, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research is therefore recommended to conduct comparative studies across different regions and to further explore the role of digital media in shaping food narratives in rural tourism contexts.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Director of Politeknik Negeri Ambon for the institutional support and encouragement throughout this research. We extend our deep appreciation to all research team members and the dedicated student assistants whose commitment in the field and data collection efforts were invaluable to this project. Our heartfelt thanks are also dedicated to the village leadership (*Pemerintah Negeri*) and the warm community of Rutong Village, particularly the local food artisans, elders, and residents, for their gracious hospitality, openness in sharing their lived culinary traditions, and invaluable insights, without which this study would not have been possible.

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