

WHOSE BALI IS IT? CULTURAL IDENTITY, SYMBOLIC POWER, AND ALGORITHMIC VISIBILITY IN INSTAGRAM TOURISM REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

Instagram has transformed tourism representation from a predominantly institutional communication practice into a platform-mediated field in which governments, tourism businesses, influencers, tourists, and community-oriented actors participate in producing and circulating images of destinations. This article examines how unequal power relations shape the construction and visibility of Balinese cultural identity on Instagram. Instagram materials concerning Bali, including posts and post descriptions associated with the Bali Government Tourism Office (@balitourismauthority), Wonderful Indonesia (@wonderfulindonesia), tourism businesses, the Bali tourism-curation account @thebaliguide, and public user-generated material identified through web-indexed Instagram embeds. The analysis is informed by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Michel Foucault's discourse and power/knowledge, and Pierre Bourdieu's field and capital theory, while extending the framework through the concept of symbolic visibility. The findings identify four interconnected representational patterns: the aestheticization of spirituality and authenticity; the conversion of culture into consumable lifestyle and tourism value; the unequal circulation of representations through social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital; and the platform-mediated amplification of content compatible with Instagram's recommendation and engagement logics. The article argues that

representation, discourse, capital, and algorithmic visibility operate as a relational mechanism rather than as separate processes. The article develops symbolic visibility as a sociological concept describing the process through which a representation becomes not merely present online but attentive, recognizable, legitimate, and capable of influencing how cultural identity is understood. The findings support a central argument: the visibility of local people is not equivalent to the visibility of local voices. Instagram therefore does not simply show Bali; it participates in deciding which Bali becomes culturally legible, commercially valuable, and socially authoritative.

Keywords: Bali; Instagram; cultural identity; representation; tourism; symbolic power; symbolic visibility; algorithmic visibility; influencers; Stuart Hall; Michel Foucault; Pierre Bourdieu

1. Introduction

Bali is iconic to worldwide tourism. Tourists recognise the island's temples, offerings, rituals, dance, traditional dress, rice terraces, beaches, spirituality, wellness, and hospitality. Tourism has also commodified cultural practises, religious sites, symbols, landscapes, and social life (Indrianto, 2005; Wohlan, 2024. Instagram's visual communication, user-generated content, influencer economics, commercial promotion, hashtags, recommendation systems, and engagement analytics make it important. Recent tourism scholarship uses Instagram for visual tourism research and destination-image analysis (Volo & Irimiás, 2021; Arefieva et al., 2021; Yu & Egger, 2021). In 2026, Mangolo et al. found that public social-media narratives about natural beauty, cultural authenticity, wellness and lifestyle, and emotional engagement co-create Bali's destination image. Public content can reach non-followers depending on recommendation eligibility (Meta, 2023; Instagram, 2025).

Hall helps the essay make an empirical case by explaining how cultural indicators are chosen and integrated to create meaning. Foucault describes how repeated representations normalise certain knowledge in speech. Bourdieu describes why players with unequal economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital enter the

digital world. Fourth, algorithmic recommendation and engagement systems structure unequal representations to amplify or marginalise them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Instagram, Tourism Representation, and Destination Image

Photos and information may be studied using numerous methods, Volo and Irimiás (2021) suggest Instagram for visual tourism research. Using machine learning to cluster Instagram photographs, Arefieva et al. (2021) show that destination images may be split into recurring visual clusters and uncover destination promotion blind spots. Yu and Egger (2021) again show that visual qualities of touristic Instagram images are connected to engagement, proving that aesthetics can influence destination portrayals.

The implication for Bali is significant. Mangolo et al. (2026) find that Bali's social-media destination image is repeatedly organized around natural beauty, cultural authenticity, wellness and lifestyle, and emotional engagement. The present study extends that insight by asking a different question: if destination image is co-created, who possesses the greater capacity to determine which forms of co-creation become visible and legitimate?

This distinction shifts the analytical focus from co-creation to unequal co-creation. A representation may be produced by a local resident and a multinational hotel alike, yet their capacity to distribute it differs. The problem is therefore not whether Instagram permits participation but how participation is stratified by capital, platform affordances, institutional authority, audience size, commercial resources, and culturally recognizable formats.

2.2 Cultural Identity, Authenticity, and Tourism Commodification

Tourism has traditionally chosen cultural markers to translate into visitor experiences. Bali is essential because cultural tourism has turned ceremonies, performances, religious locations, art forms, symbols, and social life into tourism

resources (Indrianto, 2005; Wohlan, 2024). Cultural markers may be removed from their social contexts and distributed as extremely portable visuals, digital platforms accelerate this process. Residents can find meaning in a ceremony while tourists discover what "Bali" is. The perceived congruence between a social-media endorser and a place might affect authenticity and destination image (Perceived tourism authenticity on social media, 2023). The authority to say "this is authentic Bali" may rely on who is speaking, how the depiction is structured, and if people trust the speaker.

2.3 Algorithmic and Platform Power

Instagram actively organises exposure, thus treating it as a cultural container is insufficient. Instagram also suggests posts based on users' activity, connections, post metadata, and account-level interaction histories (Meta, 2023; Instagram, 2025). Content can be shared outside an account's followers based on recommendation eligibility.

These methods change cultural representation circulation, which is sociologically significant. Platform power determines the likelihood of seeing certain postings, but not their content. Engagement matters because it sends signals that encourage continued circulation. Using large Instagram datasets, engagement can be modelled through content characteristics and social relations (Tricomi et al., 2023), while algorithmic influence research suggests that visibility is increasingly structured by computational processes rather than interpersonal interaction (Castelhano & Bitencourt, 2024).

2.4 Bali, Digital Tourism, and the Local Community

Bali is ideal for studying visibility politics because tourism is firmly ingrained in local culture. Recently, studies have highlighted the need of local community involvement in sustainable tourism and the ongoing conflict between tourism interests and community participation. Bali digital tourism policy research demonstrates that digital documentation and online communication are now part of formal tourism governance (Dewi, 2021). However, the issue is more than whether tourism imagery

features locals. The harder question is whether they are cultural people with agency or cultural objects whose visible presence promotes a destination narrative.

3. Theoretical Framework: From Representation to Symbolic Visibility

3.1 Hall: Representation as the Production of Meaning

Hall's theory of representation provides the first layer of analysis. Representation does not simply mirror a pre-existing reality; it participates in the production of meaning through cultural signs and codes (Hall, 1997). The analytical question is therefore not only "What is shown?" but "What does the combination of what is shown make Bali mean?" When spirituality, ritual, nature, beauty, and traditional dress recur together, they can construct a coherent cultural identity even though Bali contains many other social realities.

3.2 Foucault: Discourse, Power/Knowledge, and Authenticity

Foucault helps analyse meanings and their authoritative contexts. Discussion organises what can be expressed, recognised, and considered knowledge. Tourism discourse can define authentic, sacred, beautiful, traditional, sustainable, luxurious, or desired. Repetition can make these categories seem natural rather than institutionally created (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Official tourism institutions can define ideal tourist conduct, hotels can describe Bali as a luxury experience, influencers can define Bali as a lifestyle, and tourists can define Bali via personal testimony.

3.3 Bourdieu: Field, Capital, and Unequal Representational Authority

Bourdieu explains the unequal distribution of representational ability. Visual aesthetics, language, tourism conventions, cultural symbols, and platform-specific storytelling are cultural capital. Collaborations, followers, networks, and audiences are social capital. Symbolic capital gives an actor credibility or authority (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1993) capital is convertible.

3.4 Integrating Hall, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Platform Power

Avoid treating the three theorists as separate explanations. One sociological system has sequentially related yet mutually reinforcing events. Hall describes how cultural cues take significance. In discourse, recurrent meanings create legitimate knowledge, according to Foucault. Bourdieu discusses why some actors have more resources and recognition to spread meanings. Platform power illustrates how computational ranking and engagement algorithms spread unequal representations.

The integrated mechanism can therefore be expressed as follows:

Unequal capital and field positions → selection and styling of cultural signs → representation and meaning (Hall) → repetition and discourse normalization (Foucault) → recognition and legitimacy → platform-mediated circulation and engagement → unequal symbolic visibility → reinforcement of cultural identity and tourism value.

The process is recursive. Visibility drives interaction, which becomes a signal in platform systems, which ultimately increases familiarity, which can boost legitimacy and attract more attention and investment. Therefore, it can repeat. Repeatedly picked, distributed, recognised, and monetised representational choices can become hegemonic cultural scripts.

4. Research Questions

RQ1. How is Balinese cultural identity constructed through Instagram tourism representation?

RQ2. How do discourse, capital, and platform power shape which representations of Bali become authentic, legitimate, and desirable?

RQ3. How does unequal symbolic visibility affect the representational agency of governments, tourism businesses, influencers/curators, tourists, and local or community-oriented actors?

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study uses qualitative critical visual and discourse analysis. Instagram is considered a socio-technical cultural field, not just a marketing tool. Captions, hashtags, account positioning, reposting patterns, visible interaction cues, and the account's institutional or commercial identity are analysed alongside visual reading of photographs and videos. This technique follows contemporary tourism scholarship that accepts Instagram for visual methods and destination-image analysis (Volo & Irimiás, 2021; Arefieva et al., 2021).

5.2 Data and Sampling

The empirical corpus was constructed from publicly accessible Instagram materials that could be verified through open web sources between 2024 and July 2026. A purposive rather than statistical sample was used because the objective is to identify representational mechanisms rather than estimate the prevalence of every type of Bali post. The corpus includes: (1) official tourism/government accounts; (2) commercial tourism accounts and tourism-business posts; (3) influencer and tourism-curation accounts; and (4) publicly accessible user-generated or community-oriented materials where the actor identity and Bali context could be established from the available record.

The Bali Government Tourism Office confirms @balitourismauthority as its official Instagram account. Publicly indexed records identify, among others, a March 2024 post titled “Preserving Bali’s Beauty Together!” and a May 2024 post concerning routine checks on foreign tourist levies at tourism destinations. These posts are particularly useful because they demonstrate how government representation combines destination stewardship with regulation and visitor management. (Bali Government Tourism Office, 2026; Dewi & Prabawati, 2025)

The corpus also includes publicly indexed materials from @wonderfulindonesia. Recent reporting reproduces Instagram posts in which the

account describes Balinese traditions such as daily canang sari offerings and frames them as visible expressions of gratitude, devotion, identity, and community. Another official tourism narrative presents Nyepi and Omed-omedan as distinctive cultural experiences and explicitly directs audiences to follow @wonderfulindonesia for updates. □cite□turn5search5□turn5search1□

The corpus comprises @thebaliguide and publicly indexed Kimmie Conner (@kimmconn) postings for tourism-curation and influencer-mediated content. The Bali Guideline's Instagram stream promotes beach clubs, rooftop restaurants, spas, glamping, traditional markets, and bamboo housing using aesthetic and imperative language and asking users to tag or contribute content. Tourism curators have a lot of social capital, since the account has over 770,000 followers in the indexed profile record. Bali Guideline (2025) Kimm Conner's public material from Bali highlights Kintamani, Denpasar heritage, local markets, agricultural experiences, “hidden gems,” and highly aestheticised natural beauty, exhibiting a more personalised destination marketing. (Kimm Conner, 2025)

Commercial and hospitality representations are also included where Instagram posts are publicly embedded or independently documented. For example, public material associated with Desa Potato Head (@potatoheadbali) positions the property as a “creative village by the sea” and combines hospitality with cultural and wellness narratives, while its recent Merasa Origins program connects contemporary wellbeing to Indonesian ritual and cultural traditions. (Desa Potato Head, 2026)

5.3 Ethical and Methodological Limitations

Only public content was used. Non-public personal information, accounts, and communications were excluded. Users are not considered Balinese just because they appear in an image. Essential distinction: visual presence proves representation, not voice or consent. Because individualised rating information is not publicly available, the study does not indicate that a post was algorithmically recommended to a user.

Instead of unverifiable algorithm assumptions, platform power is analysed through specified recommendation architecture and observable platform-compatible practices.

6. Findings

6.1 Finding 1: Authenticity Is Produced Through Discourse

Data demonstrate authenticity is repeatedly manufactured, not uncovered. Tourist narratives portray traditions as unique cultural knowledge. Curated tourist stories highlight bamboo accommodations, traditional markets, local vendors, and cultural encounters in aesthetic language. To appear intimate and trustworthy, influencer content includes first-person testimonial, “hidden gem” framing, and experiential language. These factors form an implicit hierarchy: certain experiences feel more “real” than others.

Bali Guideline is a good example. Its indexed postings tout Ubud's traditional market as a location to “soak up local culture,” and Hideout Bali as a bamboo accommodation for serenity, nature, and digital disconnect. These representations organise existent features into a desirable and consumable experience package. (2025 Bali Guideline)

The importance is explained by Foucault. Authenticity can become normalised when institutions, corporations, and producers repeat similar storylines. Thus, whether the market or bamboo house is traditional or local is irrelevant. The sociological issue is how authenticity discourse selects cultural markers as attractive for tourism and establishes them as “the Bali experience.”

6.2 Finding 2: Culture Is Reframed as Lifestyle and Tourism Value

Commercial accounts translate cultural and environmental indicators into bookable, visitable, photographable, and shareable experiences. From beachside clubs to rooftop restaurants, spas, glamping, bamboo accommodations, and traditional markets, @thebali guideline posts are public. The representational field spans culture to lifestyle, not just “traditional” and “commercial.” (2025 Bali Guideline)

Desa Potato Head illustrates again. Its public image includes hospitality, design, food, wellness, sustainability, and culture. In its Merasa Origins program, modern wellness is linked to ritual, meditation, blessing, and Indonesian cultural traditions (cite: turn3search2). The social argument is not that these programs exploit. Instead, lived practice, history, wellness experience, and commercial value might share cultural terminology.

Wohlan (2024) claims that Bali's culture, nature, and constructed landscape are commodified. Instagram makes commodification visual and viral. A cultural sign might gain economic value by being easily converted into an appealing image, short movie, caption, or sharing experience.

6.3 Finding 3: Influencer and Curator Power Converts Social Capital into Cultural Authority

Influencer and curator content builds authority differently. The Bali Guideline's enormous readership and reposting procedures allow it to moderate which businesses, locales, and creator-produced photographs get more prominence. Its posts mix personal and artistic content with commercial information and direct calls to action—booking, tagging, sharing, or visiting. (2025 Bali Guideline)

Kimm Conner's Bali posts demonstrate cultural broking. Her indexed pieces emphasise tourist-missed Denpasar, local experiences, and “hidden gems,” and blend personal narrative with destination recommendations. This can expand representation beyond classic images, but it also shows how influencers can choose which Bali is shown. 2025 (Kimm Conner)

Bourdieu explains that influencer authority is not based on institutional legitimacy. It comes from social capital, audience awareness, content competence, and a distinct voice. This authority might become symbolic capital if viewers trust the influencer's perception. Thus, “I experienced this Bali” can become a powerful societal representation of Bali.

7. Discussion

7.1 From Three Theories to One Mechanism

The results show why Hall, Foucault, and Bourdieu work better together. Hall alone can determine how Bali is represented, but it cannot explain why some performers can better spread their thoughts. Normalisation and valid knowledge can be explained by Foucault, but actors' unequal resources and positions require Bourdieusian analysis. Hall must explain how cultural signs gain meaning, but Bourdieu can explain unequal capital and field positions. Platform power offers infrastructure to amplify representations.

7.2 Symbolic Visibility as a Sociological Contribution

The concept of symbolic visibility developed here is intended to capture precisely this gap. Symbolic visibility has five analytically connected dimensions: (1) presence, the representation is available online; (2) attention, it receives observable interaction or circulation; (3) recognition, audiences can identify its cultural meaning; (4) legitimization, the representation becomes accepted as credible or authoritative; and (5) identity influence, it contributes to how Bali and Balinese culture are understood. They constitute a qualitative mechanism for tracing how visibility becomes power.

This concept contributes to tourism sociology by connecting visual representation to inequality.

7.3 Algorithmic Power Does Not Replace Cultural Power

Analysis avoids technological determinism. Bali is not defined by Instagram. Communities, companies, producers, tourists, and institutions create cultural meanings. The platform creates circumstances for meanings to travel. Algorithmic recommendation systems choose from massive amounts of content based on user behaviour. Meta Engineering (2023) In this representation politics, the concern is not who speaks but whose speech is culturally significant. So the most crucial discovery isn't local people's absence. They're noticeable. Deeper issue: unequal socioeconomic

conditions dictate who frames, captions, circulates, monetises, and legitimises their portrayal.

9. Conclusion

This article argues that Instagram creates Bali's social meaning. Evidence suggests that spirituality, authenticity, nature, beauty, wellbeing, lifestyle, and cultural experience repeatedly shape cultural identity. Hall shows how signals signify. Foucault shows how repeated meanings become discourse and learnable. Bourdieu explains why agents make, circulate, and authorise meaning with unequal capacities. Platform research shows that Instagram's recommendation and interaction infrastructures facilitate greater attention to those representations. A cyclic system links cultural meaning, discourse, capital, and algorithmic visibility.

Social significance of representation is captured by symbolic visibility. Not just appearing is symbolic visibility. Attract enough attention, recognition, validity, and circulation to help define a destination. It's important to distinguish participation from influence. So, "Whose Bali Is It?" has no single answer. Numerous Balis. However, not all Bali can be seen, recognised, transmitted, and believed. The sociology of digital tourism asks how the unequal arrangement of representation shapes what tourists see and what cultural knowledge frames it.

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