

Ruined or Accessible? TikTok and Stakeholder Narratives of the Kelingking Beach Elevator

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Kelingking Beach elevator project in Nusa Penida is constructed and contested through digital and local visual narratives. Using a qualitative-dominant design, the research combines TikTok netnography, manual stance coding, Multinomial Naive Bayes classification, and photo-elicitation interviews with five local stakeholders. TikTok comments were collected from one international and one national news account, cleaned, coded into pro-elevator, contra-elevator, and neutral or ambiguous categories, and transformed into TF-IDF features for classification. The results show that opposition dominates the online discourse: 513 comments were classified as contra, 122 as pro, and 39 as neutral or ambiguous. Contra narratives frame the elevator as environmental degradation, visual damage, overtourism, weak governance, and unequal tourism benefits. Supportive narratives, although smaller, emphasise accessibility, visitor safety, and modern tourism infrastructure. Photo-elicitation findings largely confirm these tensions, while adding place-based concerns about legality, investment certainty, local economic justice, and misplaced infrastructure priorities. The study concludes that the elevator is perceived less as a neutral access facility than as a symbolic arena where conflicting visions of sustainable tourism, social inclusion, and landscape protection in Bali are negotiated.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana proyek elevator Kelingking Beach di Nusa Penida dikonstruksi dan diperdebatkan melalui narasi digital serta interpretasi visual pemangku kepentingan lokal. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif-dominan yang menggabungkan netnografi TikTok, pengodean manual, klasifikasi sentimen Multinomial Naive Bayes, dan wawancara photo-elicitation dengan lima pemangku kepentingan lokal. Komentar TikTok dikumpulkan dari satu akun berita internasional dan satu akun berita nasional, kemudian dibersihkan, dikodekan ke dalam kategori pro-elevator, kontra-elevator, dan netral atau ambigu, serta diubah menjadi fitur TF-IDF untuk proses klasifikasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dominasi sikap kontra, yaitu 513 komentar kontra, 122 komentar pro, dan 39 komentar netral atau ambigu. Narasi kontra menempatkan elevator sebagai bentuk kerusakan lingkungan, gangguan visual, overtourism, lemahnya tata kelola, dan ketimpangan manfaat ekonomi pariwisata. Sebaliknya, narasi pro menekankan aksesibilitas, keselamatan wisatawan, dan modernisasi infrastruktur. Hasil photo-elicitation memperkuat temuan tersebut, sekaligus menambahkan isu

legalitas, kepastian investasi, keadilan ekonomi lokal, dan prioritas infrastruktur yang dianggap kurang tepat. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa elevator tidak dipahami sebagai fasilitas akses yang netral, melainkan sebagai ruang simbolik tempat visi keberlanjutan, inklusi sosial, dan perlindungan lanskap Bali dinegosiasikan.

INTRODUCTION

Bali is widely recognised as one of the world's leading island destinations because of its coastal landscapes, cultural heritage, and spiritual atmosphere. In this context, Nusa Penida has grown rapidly as a tourism hotspot, with Kelingking Beach becoming one of its most visible icons. The cliff formation and secluded beach have been repeatedly circulated through social media and destination promotion, turning the site into a highly recognisable visual symbol of Bali's natural tourism appeal (Arndt, 2023; Kurniadi et al., 2024). However, the same digital visibility that strengthens destination image also intensifies visitor pressure, infrastructure demand, and public scrutiny.

The proposed glass elevator at Kelingking Beach illustrates a difficult tension in island tourism development. On the one hand, the project is presented as a solution to the steep and physically demanding access path, particularly for older visitors, children, and tourists with limited mobility. On the other hand, critics argue that a large built structure on the cliff face may damage the natural landscape, intensify crowding, and weaken the ecological and visual qualities that make the site attractive. Similar debates in tourism studies show that infrastructure in fragile destinations is rarely judged only by function; it is also assessed through its social acceptability, environmental implications, and perceived fairness (Kim et al., 2020; Prokopiou & Tselentis, 2022; Suhardono & Suryawan, 2024).

Social media has become a crucial arena where such debates are produced and amplified. Platforms such as TikTok do not only circulate destination images; they also create a digital public sphere where tourists, residents, and informal publics evaluate tourism projects in real time. In tourism, electronic word-of-mouth and social media discourse influence destination image, trust, behavioural intention, and the perceived legitimacy of tourism development (Fedeli, 2020; Meenakshy et al., 2024; Mehraliyev et al., 2021). When controversy is attached to an iconic place, comment sections can become informal consultation spaces in which netizens express support, anger, humour, fear, and moral judgement.

Previous tourism research has discussed overtourism, carrying capacity, social media power, and destination image, but limited attention has been given to how a specific infrastructure controversy in Bali is simultaneously negotiated through TikTok comments and local visual interpretation (Capocchi, et al., 2019; Antonio & Alamsyah, 2024). Netnography allows researchers to examine naturally occurring online discourse, while photo-elicitation helps reveal the emotional, symbolic, and place-based meanings attached to visual material (Canavan, 2018; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Winter & Adu-Ampong, 2021). Combining these approaches is useful for understanding not only whether people support or reject a project, but also why the project becomes meaningful in relation to sustainability, accessibility, and governance.

Based on this gap, the study aims to analyse public and local stakeholder narratives surrounding the Kelingking Beach elevator project. Specifically, it examines the distribution of pro, contra, and neutral or ambiguous stances in TikTok comments; identifies sustainability-related concerns expressed in the discourse; explains how these digital reactions can inform tourism infrastructure planning; and explores how local stakeholders interpret the elevator through photo-elicitation.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative-dominant netnographic design as seen on figure 1 supported by quantitative sentiment classification and visual photo-elicitation. TikTok comment threads were treated as digital field sites because they contain naturally occurring reactions to news videos about the Kelingking Beach elevator. Two videos were purposively selected: one from an international news account and one from an Indonesian national news account. The selection considered relevance to the elevator controversy and the level of public engagement. Publicly visible comments were crawled, stored in tabular form, and prepared for analysis.

The data were cleaned by removing duplicate, irrelevant, and spam comments; normalising text; removing URLs, excessive punctuation, and unrelated tags; and checking language context. The cleaned comments were manually coded into three stance categories: pro-elevator, contra-elevator, and neutral or ambiguous. The coded data were then transformed into TF-IDF features and classified using Multinomial Naive Bayes to support pattern recognition. The computational classification was used as an analytical aid, while interpretation remained grounded in qualitative reading of comment meanings, expressions, and themes.

To complement the digital analysis, five local stakeholders in Nusa Penida were purposively selected for photo-elicitation interviews. Participants included a local resident, small business actors, and tourism workers whose activities are connected to Kelingking Beach. Each participant was shown a photograph of the partially

constructed elevator and asked to describe immediate reactions, perceived risks and benefits, and what the structure signified for the future of Nusa Penida. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, transcribed, and thematically coded through open and axial coding. The results from TikTok and photo-elicitation were then compared to identify convergence and divergence between online public discourse and place-based interpretation.

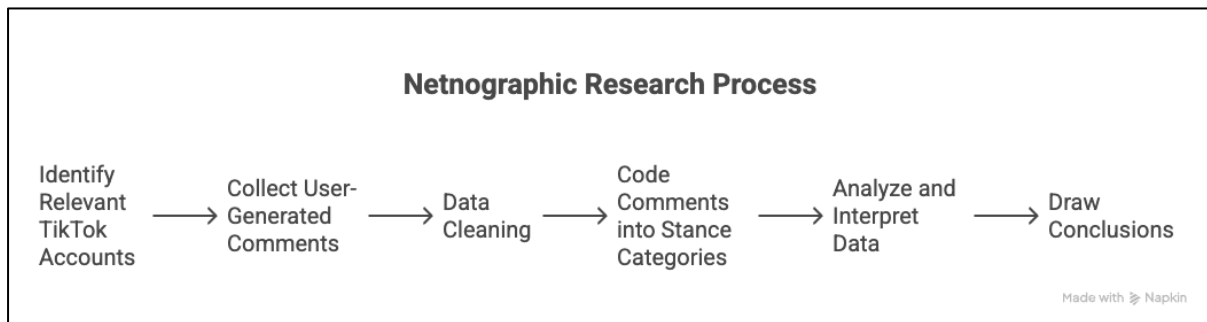


Figure 1. Netnographic research process
Source: Authors (2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The digital sentiment pattern shows a clear dominance of opposition. Manual coding identified 513 contra-elevator comments, 122 pro-elevator comments, and 39 neutral or ambiguous comments. This means that more than three quarters of the observed comments rejected or criticised the project. The Naive Bayes classification supported this overall tendency by predicting a dominant contra stance across the corpus. The result indicates that, within this TikTok arena, the elevator has not gained strong social acceptance and is more often interpreted as a problem than as a functional solution.

The imbalance between contra and pro comments is important because it shows that the debate is not only a technical disagreement about access. The project is framed by many users as something that should not have happened in an iconic natural landscape. Expressions such as “ruined,” “destroyed,” “ugly,” “eyesore,” “rusak,” “jelek,” and “parah” reveal that affective responses are central to the controversy. The elevator is therefore judged through emotion, aesthetics, and moral concern, not only through practical calculation.

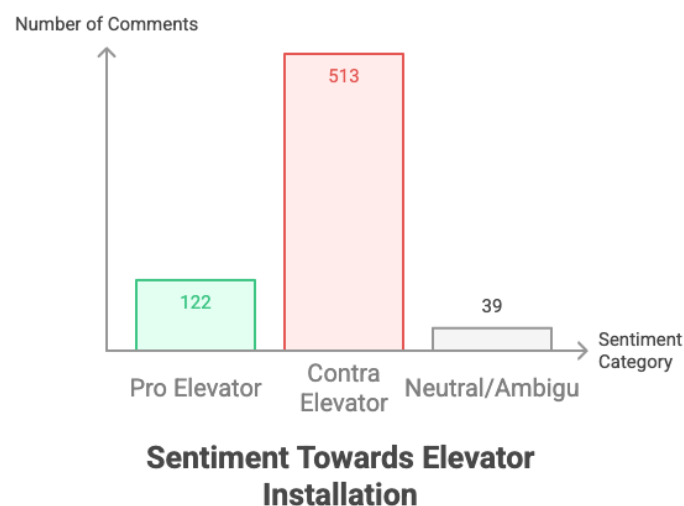


Figure 2. Sentiment toward elevator installation
Source: Authors (2025)

Environmental degradation and loss of scenic value form the strongest theme in the online discussion. English and Indonesian comments repeatedly associate the structure with damage to the cliffscape and the loss of Kelingking’s natural identity. This pattern shows that netizens treat the cliff not merely as a tourism product, but as a fragile landscape whose visual integrity must be protected (Blázquez-Salom, et al., 2023; Chaney & Séraphin 2023; Moreno, et al., 2025). In this sense, the elevator becomes a symbol of overdevelopment and overtourism in Bali. Accessibility and inclusion appear as the main supportive narrative. Some users argue that the elevator could help elderly visitors, children, and tourists who are unable to descend the steep path safely. These comments are fewer, but they raise an important point: sustainability also includes social access and safety. The controversy

therefore cannot be reduced to a simple conflict between development and conservation. It reflects a deeper planning challenge: how to design access without damaging the landscape that creates tourism value.

Governance and economic justice also shape the debate. Several comments question who benefits from the project and whether local communities will receive meaningful advantages (Saarinen, 2019; Liu, et al., 2023; Turčinović, et al., 2025). Others criticise authorities for allowing the structure to progress before stronger public scrutiny emerged. In this reading, the problem is not infrastructure alone but trust: trust in permits, environmental assessment, spatial planning, and benefit distribution. The debate therefore links sustainability with the quality of governance and the fairness of tourism development (see figure 3).

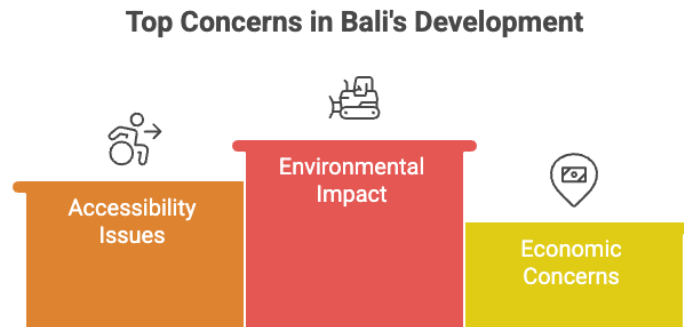


Figure 3. Top Concern in Bali Development
Source : Author (2025)

First, the results demonstrate that digital platforms are now central arenas for negotiating the meaning and legitimacy of tourism projects. Even though TikTok is designed for short-form entertainment, its comment sections function as a digital public sphere where global and local audiences articulate critiques, fears, and aspirations. These discourses may not have formal decision-making power, but they shape reputations and can influence how projects are covered by other media, how tourists talk about destinations, and how policy-makers anticipate public backlash. For controversial infrastructure in sensitive landscapes, ignoring such discourses risks deepening perceptions that development is imposed “from above” without listening to stakeholders.



Figure 4. Photo used for visual elicitation
Source: Instagram user @visitnusapenida (2025)

Second, the findings suggest that planners and developers need to treat social licence to operate as a dynamic, digitally mediated construct. The dominance of contra sentiment, characterised by words like “ruined” and “eyesore,” indicates that the Kelingking elevator failed to resonate with widely held expectations about how an iconic landscape should be treated. Greater transparency about design rationale, environmental impact assessments, and benefit-sharing mechanisms communicated in accessible formats and languages on the very platforms where debate is happening could help build trust and reduce misunderstandings.

Third, the tension between accessibility and preservation that emerges in the comment’s points toward the need for design innovation rather than a binary choice between infrastructure and conservation. Some users

clearly value making Kelingking more accessible, especially for those with limited mobility, but they simultaneously expect solutions that minimise visual and ecological intrusion (see figure 4). This suggests opportunities for exploring alternative forms of access (e.g., low-impact paths, controlled shuttle systems, or viewpoint platforms away from the most fragile cliffs) that better align with sustainability principles while still addressing legitimate concerns about safety and inclusivity.

Photo-elicitation interviews strengthen and deepen the TikTok findings. When local stakeholders were asked to read the photograph of the elevator, their responses clustered into seven interpretive categories: environmental and scenic destruction; overtourism, crowding, and spatial misfit; legality, compliance, and governance distrust; local economic justice versus big investors; accessibility, safety, and modernity; misplaced infrastructure priorities; and reputation, image, and the future of Bali. Stakeholders who rejected the project read the structure as visually intrusive, ecologically risky, and inconsistent with the character of Kelingking Beach. They also connected the elevator with broader concerns about congestion, pressure on narrow access routes, and a development model that prioritises large investment over basic local needs such as roads, sanitation, water supply, pier facilities, signage, and safety management. In this view, the elevator is not only a physical object but also a sign of misplaced priorities. However, the interviews also revealed a minority interpretation that saw the elevator as a symbol of modernity, safety, and inclusive access. For these participants, halting the project after visible construction had begun could create uncertainty for investment and planning. This ambivalence shows that local narratives are not homogeneous. The same structure may be interpreted simultaneously as environmental damage, accessibility innovation, governance failure, economic risk, and reputational challenge (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Stakeholder themes from visual interpretation
Source: Authors (2025)

The findings suggest that infrastructure planning in iconic landscapes must consider social licence as a digitally mediated process (de San Eugenio Vela, et al., 2017; Hassan, et al., 2024). TikTok users and local stakeholders may not hold formal authority, but their narratives shape public legitimacy, destination reputation, and future acceptance. For planners and developers, this means that environmental impact assessment, design rationale, and benefit-sharing mechanisms should be communicated transparently before construction becomes controversial. The study also indicates that accessibility should not be dismissed, but it must be integrated with low-impact design, carrying capacity management, and meaningful community participation. In sensitive destinations such as Kelingking Beach, access solutions should be assessed not only for convenience but also for their visual footprint, ecological risk, crowd distribution, and contribution to local well-being. A sustainable response requires moving beyond the binary of “ruined” versus “accessible” toward design alternatives that protect place identity while improving visitor safety and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyse how the Kelingking Beach elevator project is interpreted through TikTok discourse and local stakeholder photo-elicitation. The findings show that TikTok users predominantly position themselves against the project, with 513 contra comments compared with 122 pro comments and 39 neutral or ambiguous comments. Opposition is mainly driven by concerns about environmental degradation, visual damage,

overtourism, weak governance, and unequal tourism benefits. Supportive comments, although less dominant, highlight accessibility, safety, and modernisation as legitimate concerns in destination management. The photo-elicitation findings confirm the importance of visual meaning in tourism controversy. Local stakeholders do not interpret the elevator as a purely technical facility; they read it through intersecting issues of ecological protection, legality, investment certainty, infrastructure priorities, local economic justice, and Bali's future image. This confirms that sustainable tourism infrastructure in iconic landscapes must be evaluated through environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions at the same time. The main contribution of this study is its integration of TikTok netnography, sentiment classification, and photo-elicitation to understand a tourism infrastructure controversy. Practically, the study suggests that future infrastructure planning in Nusa Penida and similar island destinations should prioritise transparent public communication, carrying capacity assessment, low-impact design alternatives, and stronger community involvement. The study is limited by its focus on two TikTok videos and five stakeholders; future research can expand to multiple platforms, longer observation periods, and more advanced computational or multimodal analysis.

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