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TOURIST PERCEPTIONS OF THE LACK OF PROMOTION AND TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AT MALAYA BEACH

Raida Syafira[1]*, Nazmah[1]

[1]Program Studi Manajemen, Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Manajemen Sukma, Medan, Indonesia
*Email Corresponding Author: *na7m4blink.naz@gmail.com*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji persepsi wisatawan terhadap daya tarik alam, fasilitas wisata, dan efektivitas promosi Pantai Malaya, Kabupaten Langkat, sebuah destinasi yang mengalami penurunan jumlah kunjungan wisatawan meskipun memiliki potensi sumber daya alam yang kuat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan data primer yang dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan 20 wisatawan yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif yang terdiri dari kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, dengan validitas data diuji melalui triangulasi sumber, teknik, dan waktu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa wisatawan memiliki persepsi yang sangat positif terhadap keindahan alam Pantai Malaya, namun bersikap kritis terhadap fasilitas pendukung yang rusak serta menilai promosi resmi destinasi ini masih sangat terbatas, sehingga informasi lebih banyak tersebar melalui promosi dari mulut ke mulut (word of mouth). Temuan ini mengungkapkan adanya kontradiksi persepsi ganda, di mana daya tarik alam yang kuat berdampingan dengan lemahnya fasilitas dan promosi, sehingga keberlanjutan kunjungan wisatawan saat ini rentan karena hanya bertumpu pada modal alam semata, bukan pada pengelolaan destinasi yang adaptif dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: Persepsi Wisatawan; Promosi Pariwisata; Daya Tarik Wisata; Fasilitas Wisata; Pantai Malaya

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine tourists' perceptions of the natural attractions, tourism facilities, and promotional effectiveness of Malaya Beach, Langkat Regency, a destination that has experienced a decline in visitor numbers despite its strong natural resource potential. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with primary data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving 20 tourists selected through purposive sampling, which were then analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with validity tested through source, technique, and time triangulation. The results show that tourists hold a very positive perception of the natural beauty of Malaya Beach, but are critical of the damaged supporting facilities, and consider the destination's official promotion to be very limited, so that information is mostly spread through word of mouth. These findings reveal a contradiction in perceptions, in which strong natural attraction coexists with limited facilities and promotion, making the current sustainability of tourist visits fragile, as it relies solely on natural capital rather than on adaptive and sustainable destination management.

Keywords: Tourist Perception; Tourism Promotion; Tourist Attraction; Tourism Facilities; Malaya Beach

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1. INTRODUCTION

Malaya Beach in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, was once widely known through the organic spread of information from one tourist to another. However, over the past year, this destination has experienced a fairly significant decline in visitor numbers. This phenomenon is not isolated but linked to the deteriorating quality of supporting facilities such as huts, seating, canteens, and toilets, which are now damaged and no longer functioning properly. When facilities are inadequate, the tourist experience is disrupted. It ultimately shapes a negative perception of the destination, as the quality of infrastructure significantly affects a tourism system's effectiveness in achieving its goals (researcher's observations and interview documentation, 2026).

Beyond the issue of facilities, the lack of promotion is a factor that cannot be ignored. In the digital era, promotion plays a strategic role in shaping a destination's image and attracting tourist interest; digitalization is used to strengthen a destination's appeal and create a more personal and dynamic experience for tourists (Siregar, 2025). A destination's absence from the digital space essentially means it "erases itself" from public awareness, so promotion can no longer be seen as a supplementary activity but as a strategic necessity for the destination's sustainability.

Tourist perception, promotion, and tourist attraction are three interrelated variables that cannot be separated from one another. Tourist perception is formed through the interaction between expectations of a tourist attraction and the experience obtained during a visit, which is influenced by the quality of facilities and the intensity of promotion; when one variable declines in quality, this affects the overall change in tourist perception (Apriana & Kusumah, 2025). This phenomenon is the novelty this study seeks to highlight: not merely measuring the quantitative influence between variables, but tracing how tourists interpret the contradiction between a natural attraction that remains strong and facilities and promotion that are, in fact, weakening.

Tourist perception of a destination is dynamic and multidimensional; positive memories do not automatically result in revisit intention, since empirical critiques point to a perceived risk of disappointment that can weaken the nostalgia effect on return visits, particularly when tourists experience a significant degree of change in the destination's condition (Primananda, 2026). This phenomenon creates a perceptual contradiction: positive perceptions of natural attraction coexist with negative perceptions of facilities and management. This conceptual novelty has not been widely explored in local-scale coastal tourism studies.

Previous research shows that effective promotion through digital media can significantly increase tourist visits (Ariyani, 2024), while physical facilities, completeness, and the comfort of supporting amenities are important factors that determine visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Nago et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most of these studies remain limited to quantitative analyses of relationships among variables and have not extensively explored how tourists interpret their experiences to form perceptions of a destination — a gap this study seeks to address through a qualitative approach.

The mismatch between tourism facilities and tourist expectations is not merely a technical issue, such as damaged infrastructure, but also a result of governance failure that has not actively involved tourists in the decision-making process (stakeholder co-creation). Tourists are no longer merely passive consumers but "prosumers" who help shape the tourism experience and critically evaluate services through post-consumption processes, making facility failures a major cause of their dissatisfaction (Amelia, 2024). Without an adaptive governance framework responsive to changing consumer expectations, tourist destinations risk a self-destructive trajectory as negative reviews spread across social media.

The sustainability of tourist visits under such conditions is more accurately understood as a form of pseudo-resilience that is fragile and unsustainable, since an effective management system does not support it but rests solely on the inherent strength of natural attraction. Excessive dependence on natural capital without balanced, adaptive management reflects structural stagnation in the governance of tourist destinations (Rahmawati et al., 2025). Based on the above

discussion, this study seeks to examine in depth "Tourist Perceptions of the Lack of Promotion and Tourist Attraction at Malaya Beach," with the following research questions: (1) how do tourists perceive the natural attraction and tourism facilities of Malaya Beach; (2) how do tourists perceive the effectiveness of Malaya Beach's promotion in encouraging visitor interest; and (3) how do tourists interpret the quality of facilities and services as part of their tourism experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Grand Theory: Perception Theory

The grand theory underlying this study is the theory of perception in cognitive psychology, which explains that perception is a psychological process involving individuals' cognitive activity in receiving, organizing, and interpreting stimuli obtained through the five senses, which are then processed based on prior experience, knowledge, and expectations (Sthapit et al., 2026). This process unfolds through complex stages of selection, organization, and interpretation of information, in line with the concepts of selective exposure and selective retention in communication and perception theory: individuals tend to choose and pay attention to information that matches their interests and beliefs (selective exposure), and find it easier to remember information they consider relevant to their experience and views (selective retention). This theory is emphasized as the study's main framework (grand theory) because it explains why tourists who visit Malaya Beach together can form different assessments of the natural attraction and the available facilities.

2.2. Applied Theory: Tourist Attraction, Tourism Facilities, and Tourism Promotion

At the applied level, this study draws on three concrete constructs that translate the middle-range concept of quality tourism into observable objects of tourist perception. First, the concept of tourist attraction quality holds that a destination’s uniqueness and overall appeal shape tourists’ satisfaction and subsequent word-of-mouth behavior; in a study at Tanah Lot, perceived attraction quality was found to significantly affect both tourist satisfaction and word-of-mouth intention (Apriana & Kusumah, 2025). Second, tourism facility theory explains that supporting infrastructure, such as access, sanitation, and rest areas, functions as a factor shaping visitor satisfaction and interest; a study of tourism facilities at Loang Baloq Beach found that facility quality significantly and positively affected visitor satisfaction and visiting interest, with destination image strengthening this relationship (Nur Haj et al., 2025). Third, tourism promotion theory holds that the effectiveness of a destination’s promotional efforts, particularly through digital and social media channels, determines the extent to which tourists become aware of, and accurately informed about, a destination’s attractions and facilities; this is demonstrated in a study of social media promotion strategies aimed at attracting millennial visitors to Grand Maerakaca, Semarang, which found such strategies effective in shaping visitor awareness (Wilhelmina & Mistriani, 2025).

2.3. Thinking Theory

These three levels of theory are structured into a coherent conceptual framework: the grand theory of perception explains the individual tourist's cognitive process in evaluating destination stimuli; the middle-range theory of quality tourism explains how these individual assessments ultimately converge into a collective evaluation of the destination system's quality; while the applied theories of attraction, facilities, and promotion explain the concrete objects that tourists perceive on the ground. This tiered framework allows the study to explain why Malaya Beach's natural attraction can be perceived very positively, even as its facilities and promotion are perceived negatively, without reducing the issue to a single, uniform assessment.

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of tourists' perceptions of Malaya Beach's tourist attractions, based on their experiences, assessments, and views during their visit. Qualitative research is understood as a method used to study natural conditions of an object, with the researcher serving as the main instrument of data collection (Sugiyono, 2022), while the descriptive type is used because the study seeks to systematically describe the facts, characteristics, and perceptions of tourists without manipulating the object of study.

The study was conducted at Malaya Beach, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, over a period of five months (April–July 2026). The research subjects were tourists who had visited or were visiting Malaya Beach, selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: had visited or were currently visiting Malaya Beach, were at least 17 years of age, were willing to serve as informants, and were able to provide clear information regarding their visit experience. The number of informants was determined based on the point of saturation, that is, when the information obtained became repetitive, and no new information emerged, resulting in a total of 20 informants (research documentation, 2026).

The data used were qualitative, consisting of information, opinions, experiences, and perceptions of tourists regarding Malaya Beach's tourist attractions. Primary data were obtained directly from informants through in-depth interviews and field observation, while secondary data were obtained from books, scientific journals, articles, and relevant official documents. Data collection techniques included observation of environmental conditions, supporting facilities, and accessibility; in-depth interviews using a semi-structured guide; and documentation in the form of photographs and field notes.

Data analysis employed an interactive analysis model consisting of data collection, data condensation the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and categorizing data based on specific themes such as tourist attraction, facilities, promotion, comfort, and service (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024) data display in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, matrices, and interview excerpts to make patterns in tourist perception clearer (Rahmani et al., 2025), and conclusion drawing and verification, carried out by comparing the results of observation, interviews, and documentation to arrive at valid findings (Safrudin et al., 2023). The validity of the data was tested through source, technique, and time triangulation to enhance the credibility of the research findings.

Figure 1. Interactive Data Analysis Model (Miles & Huberman, 2014)

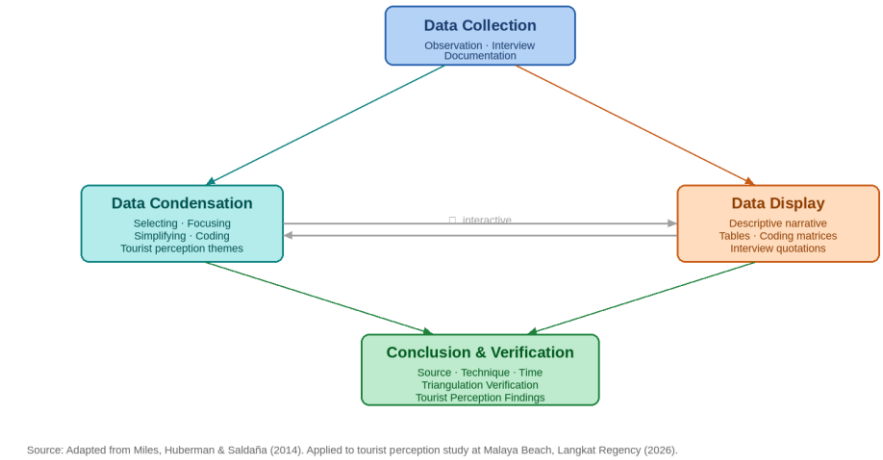


Figure 1. Interactive Data Analysis Model Applied in This Study (Adapted from Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014)

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Informant Characteristics and Visit Frequency

This study involved 20 tourists who had visited Malaya Beach, from several areas in the coastal region of Langkat Regency, such as Tapak Kuda, Tanjung Pura, Pangkalan Biduk, Jaring Halus, Batang Buluh, Kuala Serapuh, and Paluh Gusta. A total of 11 informants (55%) had visited only once, while 9 informants (45%) had visited twice (research data, 2026). In studies of tourist behavior, repeat visits are one indicator of satisfaction and positive experience; a tourist's decision to return is generally influenced by a favorable impression of the tourist attraction, the comfort of the environment, and the service received during previous visits.

Table 1. Visit Frequency of Informants to Malaya Beach

Visit Frequency	Number of Informants	Percentage
1 time	11 people	55%
2 times	9 people	45%
Total	20 people	100%

In the grand theory of perception, prior experience is an internal factor influencing an individual's perception of a tourist destination: tourists with positive experiences tend to hold favorable perceptions and a desire to revisit (Sthapit et al., 2026). The finding that nearly half of the informants had visited more than once, although most of them were critical of the condition of the facilities, indicates that Malaya Beach's primary appeal does not lie solely in its facilities, but in the quality of the natural resources it possesses

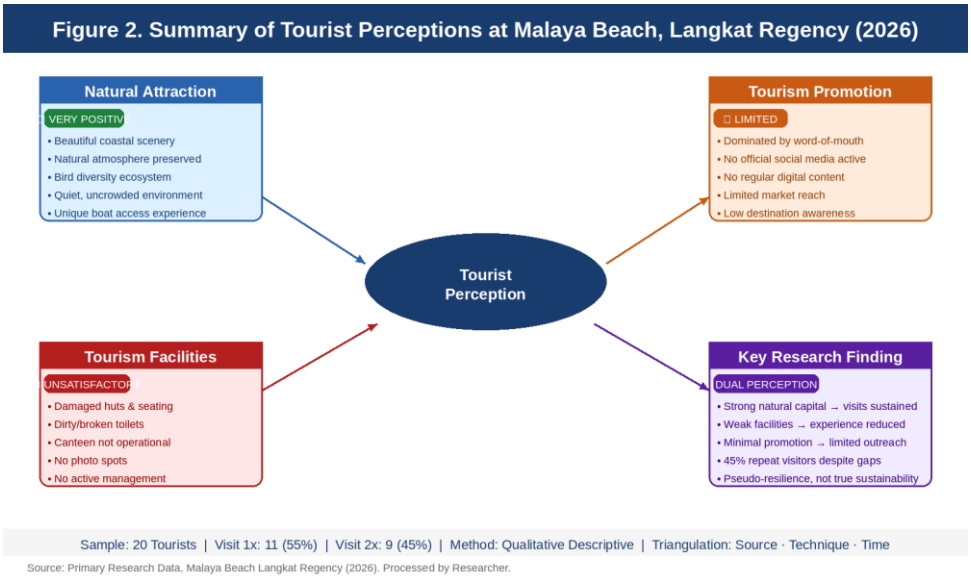


Figure 2. Summary of Tourist Perceptions at Malaya Beach, Langkat Regency (Source: Primary Research Data, 2026)

4.2. Perceptions of Natural Attraction and Tourism Facilities

Table 2. Initial Coding Matrix: Tourist Perceptions of Natural Attraction and Tourism Facilities

Informant Quote	Initial Code	Theme
"The beach is still beautiful, it is just that some of the facilities are not well-maintained."	Beach still attractive; facilities poorly maintained	Tourist attraction and facility condition
"It used to be fairly decent; now some things are broken."	Declining facility quality	Facility condition affects visitor comfort

Interviews with all informants show that natural beauty is the primary factor shaping tourists' positive perception of Malaya Beach; almost all informants stated that the main reason for their visit was the well-preserved natural scenery and the beach's relatively untouched atmosphere. Tourists view Malaya Beach not merely as a recreational spot but as a destination with a distinctive coastal ecosystem and a diversity of bird species, in line with the concept of natural attraction as a fundamental element that determines a destination's existence and competitiveness (Wustho, 2025).

The appeal of the natural scenery was consistently the opening theme across interviews. One informant remarked, *"The beach is still beautiful, it is just that some of the facilities are not well-maintained"* (Interview, 2026), a sentiment echoed broadly across informants and indicative of the perceptual split between natural attraction and facility upkeep.

In contrast, perceptions of the tourism facilities show a much more critical tendency. Several facilities that were previously available in the canteen, swings, seating, rest huts, and photo spots have now deteriorated in quality, with some no longer usable at all. This condition aligns with tourism facility theory, which states that facilities lacking regular maintenance will deteriorate, thereby reducing the quality of the tourist experience (Rahmadani et al., 2025). This phenomenon is understood in the study as a form of perceptual contradiction: tourists do not judge Malaya Beach in black-and-white terms as an entirely good or entirely bad destination, but rather evaluate each element of the destination separately — perceptions of the natural attraction fall into the very positive category, while perceptions of the tourism facilities fall into the less satisfactory category.

4.3. Perceptions of Promotional Effectiveness

Table 3. Initial Coding Matrix: Tourist Perceptions of Promotional Effectiveness

Informant Quote	Initial Code	Theme
"I found out about it from a friend, not from Malaya Beach's official social media."	Information via word of mouth	Promotion still limited
"If there were an official account that uploaded regularly, more people would probably know about it."	Need for official social media presence	Digital promotion is needed

Based on findings from 20 informants, tourists' perceptions of the effectiveness of Malaya Beach's promotion are generally less positive. Most informants learned about Malaya Beach not through official promotional media but through information from family, friends, relatives, or recommendations from people who had previously visited, indicating that the spread of information about this destination is still dominated by word of mouth. In tourism marketing studies, recommendations from tourists constitute a valuable form of promotion because they stem from real experiences considered more trustworthy by prospective tourists (Rosi & AS, 2024); however, the dominance of this informal channel also indicates that formal promotion by the management has not been running optimally, resulting in a limited promotional reach.

This pattern was reflected clearly in the interviews. A typical response was, *"I found out about it from a friend, not from Malaya Beach's official social media"* (Interview, 2026). Informants also recognized the latent opportunity, with one suggesting, *"If there were an official account that uploaded regularly, more people would probably know about it"* (Interview, 2026), underscoring that tourist themselves perceive digital promotion as a realistic and necessary step.

This finding shows that the main issue at Malaya Beach is not the low quality of its tourist attractions, but the lack of optimal dissemination of information to the wider public. Referring to the applied theory of tourism promotion by Kotler and Armstrong, promotion is not only intended to introduce a destination but also to shape a positive image in the public mind through a combination of advertising, sales promotion, public relations, digital marketing, and word of mouth and e-WOM; when one or several of these channels are not utilized optimally, as found in

the still-minimal use of social media for Malaya Beach, the promotional reach becomes disproportionate to the destination's actual attraction potential (Wilhelmina & Mistriani, 2025).

4.4. Perceptions of Facility and Service Quality as Part of the Tourism Experience

Table 4. Initial Coding Matrix: Tourist Perceptions of Facility and Service Quality

Informant Quote	Initial Code	Theme
"If there were an active manager, maybe the facilities would get more attention."	Management is not yet active	Service quality
"The toilet and seating need to be cleaned and repaired."	Cleanliness is insufficient; facilities are damaged	Facility quality

The tourism experience at Malaya Beach is shaped by two opposing conditions: on the one hand, tourists enjoy the beach's natural beauty and untouched atmosphere, while on the other hand, they face limitations in the available facilities and management. When facilities such as seating, canteens, and photo spots are unavailable or not functioning properly, the quality of the tourism experience obtained by visitors diminishes, even though the natural beauty can still be enjoyed, consistent with the view that facilities are not merely complementary but an important part contributing to tourists' comfort, safety, and satisfaction (Octaviani & Yudhistira, 2024).

In terms of cleanliness and environmental comfort, most tourists gave positive assessments; the beach was considered relatively clean, with litter remaining at a tolerable level that did not disrupt tourism activities. Environmental cleanliness plays an important role in shaping tourists' perceptions: a clean environment fosters a sense of comfort and safety, whereas a dirty environment can lead to a negative perception of the destination (Sinaga et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in terms of service, tourists generally did not raise significant complaints. Still, they expressed hope for an overall improvement in the quality of tourism management, particularly regarding facility maintenance and the development of supporting amenities.

Informant responses were consistent on this point. One participant stated, *"The toilet and seating need to be cleaned and repaired"* (Interview, 2026), while another noted, *"If there were an active manager, maybe the facilities would get more attention"* (Interview, 2026). These remarks reveal that shortcomings in tourist frame facilities are not merely physical deterioration but evidence of an underlying deficit in destination governance and ongoing management attention.

Overall, tourists' perceptions of the quality of facilities and service as part of the tourism experience fall into the fairly good category: tourists acknowledge shortcomings in the facility aspect, yet the natural beauty, environmental comfort, and unique tourism experiences — such as boat rides and the diversity of bird species are still able to create an overall positive impression. Referring back to the grand theory of perception, this condition confirms that tourist perception is multidimensional: tourists engage in selective selection and interpretation of destination stimuli, so that shortcomings in one dimension (facilities and promotion) do not automatically erase positive assessments in other dimensions (natural attraction and environmental cleanliness). Nevertheless, the long-term sustainability of this condition remains vulnerable, as modern tourists are increasingly critical and hold higher expectations for a destination's overall quality (Nur Haj et al., 2025).

4.5. Implications for Destination Management

The findings above point to several concrete steps that Malaya Beach's management can take to close the gap between its strong natural attraction and its weaker facility and promotional performance.

The first implication concerns facility revitalization. This implication is grounded in the interview coding rather than in theory alone. The facility-related coding identified “declining

facility quality" and "facility condition affects visitor comfort," supported by the statements, "*It used to be fairly decent, now some things are broken*," and "*The toilet and seating need to be cleaned and repaired*" (Interview, 2026). These statements are consistent with the thesis findings that the canteen, swings, seating areas, rest huts, and photo spots have deteriorated and that some are no longer usable. The implication is therefore to prioritize systematic maintenance and repair of the facilities most directly associated with comfort and basic visitor needs, while retaining the natural character that tourists already value.

The second implication concerns promotion. The coding matrix identifies "information via word of mouth" under the theme "promotion still limited," together with "need for official social media presence" under the theme "digital promotion is needed." One informant stated, "*I found out about it from a friend, not from Malaya Beach's official social media*," while another observed, "*If there were an official account that uploaded regularly, more people would probably know about it*" (Interview, 2026). This evidence corresponds with the thesis finding that information about Malaya Beach is obtained predominantly through personal recommendations rather than through planned and sustained promotional media. The management implication is, consequently, to establish and maintain an official digital communication channel that showcases the destination's natural scenery, bird diversity, and boat-ride experience, with clear, regularly updated information.

The third implication concerns the relationship and sequencing of facility improvement and promotion. The coding evidence shows that tourists simultaneously recognize the strength of the natural attraction and identify weaknesses in facilities. In contrast, the promotion-related coding shows that destination awareness remains dependent on word of mouth. The thesis further indicates that 45% of informants had visited twice despite criticism of the facilities, suggesting that the natural attraction continues to generate interest. In contrast, facility limitations remain part of the visitor experience. Taken together, these findings support a coordinated management approach in which basic facility maintenance is strengthened while digital promotion is developed progressively. This approach reduces the risk of creating a gap between the image conveyed by promotional content and the conditions visitors experience, and it links the destination's existing natural appeal to improvements in the overall tourism experience.

5. CONCLUSION

The natural attraction of Malaya Beach is perceived positively by tourists, as it offers a tourism experience supported by beautiful coastal scenery, a relatively natural environment, and a well-preserved coastal ecosystem, making it the dominant factor influencing tourists' decisions to visit. However, this positive assessment is not matched by an equally positive assessment of the tourism facilities; the availability of supporting facilities is perceived as not yet keeping pace with the destination's natural potential, reflecting a gap between tourism potential and the quality of supporting amenities.

The promotion of Malaya Beach is perceived as not yet fulfilling its tourism communication function optimally; information about the destination is obtained primarily through personal recommendations rather than through planned, sustained promotional media. This limitation in promotion is not due to a lack of quality in the tourist attraction itself, but rather reflects that efforts to introduce the destination and build its image among prospective tourists have not been optimal, thereby limiting the destination's ability to reach a wider tourism market.

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