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## Resilient Coastal Communities of Bontang Kuala: The Role of Digital Communication Strategy in Post-Crisis Recovery

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### Abstract

*This study explores the role of digital communication strategies in strengthening the resilience and post-crisis recovery of coastal communities, with a specific focus on Bontang Kuala, a floating settlement in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and a case study design, the research examines how localized digital practices support socio-economic adaptation in a vulnerable coastal setting. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and secondary sources, then analyzed thematically using NVivo. Findings reveal that digital platforms particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have become crucial tools for coordination, economic revitalization, and social solidarity during recovery periods. Community-led digital initiatives, such as online tourism campaigns and crowdfunding, demonstrated the potential of digital media to enhance collective action and restore livelihoods. However, digital inequality persists due to uneven access, literacy gaps, and connectivity limitations, particularly among older fishermen and women entrepreneurs. The study concludes that digital communication functions not merely as a technological solution but as a social mechanism fostering collaborative resilience and adaptive learning. The results offer theoretical contributions to digital resilience communication and practical implications for inclusive digital transformation policies in coastal regions.*

*Keywords: Coastal Resilience, Digital Communication, Post-Crisis Recovery, Bontang Kuala, Community Adaptation*

### 1. Introduction

Coastal communities represent some of the most dynamic yet vulnerable socio-ecological systems worldwide. Situated at the interface between land and sea, they depend heavily on natural resources, fisheries, and tourism for their livelihoods. This dependence exposes them to multiple stressors, including natural disasters such as tsunamis, floods, and coastal erosion, as well as anthropogenic crises like pandemics and climate change (Aliffianto & Andrianto, 2022; Apriyanti et al., 2022). These communities not only face physical threats but also socio-economic fragility, as disruptions to tourism and marine resource exploitation can quickly destabilize income structures and community cohesion. Consequently, enhancing the resilience of coastal communities their capacity to anticipate, absorb, adapt, and recover from crises has become a crucial development priority. In this context, digital communication strategies play a transformative role in supporting adaptive capacities, facilitating coordination, and enabling sustainable post-crisis recovery (Avraham, 2021; Dhar & Bose, 2022).

Crises often expose deep-rooted weaknesses in communication systems that undermine effective recovery. Traditional communication channels typically dependent on interpersonal meetings, local gatherings, or analog broadcasting are often disrupted or inadequate in rapidly evolving emergency situations (Camilleri, 2021; Liu et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how communication breakdowns delayed the dissemination of critical information on health protocols, social aid, and livelihood restoration, particularly in peripheral coastal regions (DeFilippis et al., 2022). In such contexts, digital transformation has emerged as an essential pathway for resilience. Digital platforms ranging from social media and mobile applications to integrated information systems enable faster, broader, and more interactive communication flows (Brockhaus et al., 2023; Evitha et al., 2023). These tools not only facilitate real-time coordination but also foster trust, inclusiveness, and participatory engagement between communities, governments, and supporting institutions (Kumar & Upadhyay, 2025).

Recent literature highlights the strategic role of digital communication in organizational and community resilience, especially during recovery from large-scale crises. Ketter and Avraham (2021) demonstrated how digital marketing and communication campaigns helped tourism destinations restore traveler confidence during the pandemic. Similarly, Camilleri (2021) argued that dialogic communication through digital platforms sustains stakeholder trust and reputation management in times of uncertainty. In Indonesia, Apriyanti et al. (2022) examined the recovery of the Ponggok Tourism Village, where coordinated digital outreach accelerated community-based tourism revival. Together, these studies affirm that digital communication serves as a strategic rather than purely technical instrument in post-crisis adaptation. Nevertheless, most of the existing research focuses on organizational and destination-level responses, leaving community-level dynamics especially among coastal populations relatively underexplored (Lacarcel & Huete, 2023; Mbatha, 2023).

The growing body of work on digital communication management suggests that digitalization fosters more inclusive, data-driven governance models for crisis recovery (Evitha et al., 2023; Mahmud, 2023). Brockhaus et al. (2023) conceptualized “CommTech” to describe how digital infrastructures reshape institutional communication ecosystems, enhancing transparency and agility. Despite these advancements, the empirical understanding of how such strategies contribute to grassroots resilience remains limited, particularly in peripheral or resource-dependent communities. For instance, while Mbatha (2023) analyzed digital recovery strategies among tourism enterprises, few studies have addressed their implementation within coastal societies, where digital literacy and infrastructure remain uneven. This constitutes a major research gap, as it remains uncertain whether digital transformation can genuinely empower coastal communities or inadvertently reinforce digital inequality.

From a resilience-building perspective, communication serves not only as an informational mechanism but also as a means to restore social capital and collective identity. Dhar and Bose (2022) showed that strategic digital communication can reduce uncertainty and enhance citizens’ sense of agency during crisis recovery. Similarly, Pascual-Fraile et al. (2024) and Yang et al. (2024) observed that online communication strategies significantly contribute to reshaping destination images and mobilizing coordinated recovery actions after crises. These insights suggest that when adapted to local contexts, digital communication could strengthen participatory recovery among coastal communities—where information sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and digital storytelling become vital components of resilience (Priyowidodo et al., 2021; Rouquette & Chauzal-Larguier, 2024). Moreover, this approach aligns with the blue economy and sustainable development frameworks, which emphasize digital innovation as a driver of inclusive and efficient crisis management (Tiago et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2022).

However, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain in the literature. First, although numerous studies examine digital communication within corporate and urban contexts (Sklar, 2021; García-Orosa, 2022), the community-based dimension particularly in small coastal societies remains insufficiently investigated. Second, there is limited theorization of how local culture, social norms, and digital adaptation interact in shaping communication resilience (Dias et al., 2022; Rivas-De-Roca et al., 2021). Third, existing models tend to overemphasize the technological aspects of digital transformation, while overlooking the socio-communicative processes that determine whether digital systems truly empower local actors. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding how digital communication can become both a strategic and social catalyst in post-crisis recovery.

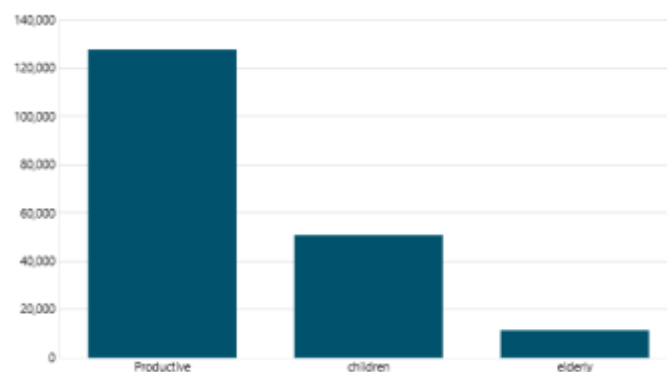


Figure 1. Population of Bontang City by Group Category (2023 Data)

In Indonesia, a particularly relevant case is found in the coastal community of Bontang Kuala, located in Bontang City, East Kalimantan. This village represents a unique floating settlement that has gradually transformed from a

traditional fishing base into a vibrant community-based ecotourism destination. Covering approximately 627 hectares ( $\approx 5.67 \text{ km}^2$ ), Bontang Kuala is home to around 6,910 residents as of 2022 (Universitas Muhammadiyah Palangkaraya Journal, 2023). Approximately 95% of its population are fishermen or seaweed cultivators, while others manage homestays, culinary services, and small-scale tourism enterprises. Administratively, the area consists of 20 neighborhood units (Rukun Tetangga) 11 located offshore and 9 on land forming a distinctive socio-spatial pattern with an average density of about 708 persons per  $\text{km}^2$  (FISIP UNMUL Journal, 2023).

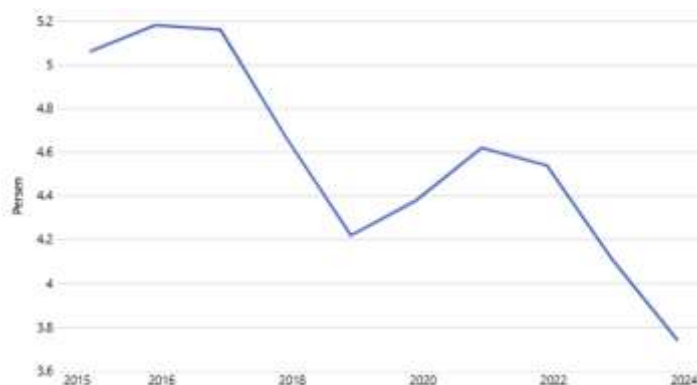


Figure 2. Poverty Rate Statistics in Bontang City, 2015-2024

At the broader municipal level, Bontang City had a population of 187,450 in 2023, with 67.21% (127,670 people) in the productive age group (15–59 years), 26.77% classified as children (0–14 years), and 6.02% as elderly (over 60 years) (BPS Bontang, 2024). The city's Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 1.48% over the last five years indicates stable demographic expansion, while the poverty rate declined from 5.06% to 3.74% between 2014 and 2024 one of the lowest among East Kalimantan's coastal regions (BPS, 2024). This demographic profile suggests a relatively young and economically active population, forming a solid foundation for adopting digital-based resilience strategies and community innovation.

Within this socioeconomic context, residents of Bontang Kuala have increasingly embraced digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp community groups to promote ecotourism, coordinate local governance, and share environmental alerts (Kompas, 2023). These online networks have become vital tools for collective adaptation and recovery, especially after environmental disturbances and economic downturns. The emergence of such digital communication practices demonstrates how localized technological adoption can reinforce social cohesion and economic resilience. Nevertheless, challenges persist, particularly regarding digital literacy gaps among elderly fishermen and women micro-entrepreneurs. As such, Bontang Kuala offers an empirically rich setting to analyze how digital communication strategies can enhance post-crisis recovery and long-term resilience in Indonesia's coastal communities.

Despite the proliferation of research on digital transformation and crisis communication, few empirical studies have examined how digital communication strategies are locally implemented in coastal communities, especially in the Global South. Most existing frameworks emphasize institutional communication and top-down recovery programs, with limited attention to community-level digital adaptation (Rouquette and Chauzal-Larguier, 2024). Furthermore, there is still a lack of integrative understanding of how digital media use contributes to social capital rebuilding, information equity, and collective resilience after crises (Bergman and Kelly, 2021; Rivas-De-Roca et al., 2021). This study addresses that gap by focusing on how coastal communities, particularly in Bontang Kuala, leverage digital communication platforms as tools for coordination, empowerment, and sustainable recovery in the aftermath of crisis.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze the role of digital communication strategies in enhancing resilience and facilitating recovery among coastal communities in post-crisis contexts. This research contributes theoretically by advancing the discourse on digital resilience communication, emphasizing community-driven approaches in the digital transformation of marginalized coastal societies. Practically, the findings are expected to inform policymakers, NGOs, and local leaders in designing inclusive digital strategies that promote equitable access, participatory communication, and sustainable recovery in Indonesia's coastal regions..

## 2. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with a case study approach to investigate how digital communication strategies contribute to post-crisis recovery and coastal community resilience, focusing on Bontang Kuala, a floating settlement located in Bontang City, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing contextual meaning, community perspectives, and lived experiences in the process of digital adaptation amid socio-ecological vulnerabilities. Bontang Kuala, covering approximately 627 hectares and home to around 6,910 residents, represents a microcosm of transformation from traditional, fishery-based livelihoods to a digitally connected community making it an ideal site to explore communication-based resilience.

Data were collected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, involving five key informants: a community leader, a fisherman, a female entrepreneur, a young digital volunteer, and a local tourism manager. The relatively small number of informants was chosen to ensure depth of information rather than quantity. According to Patton (2002), in qualitative research, the number of participants is not determined statistically but rather by how much rich, relevant, and detailed information they can provide regarding the studied phenomenon (information-rich cases). This aligns with Creswell (2013), who notes that 3–10 informants are sufficient for achieving in-depth understanding in case studies, as long as data saturation is reached.

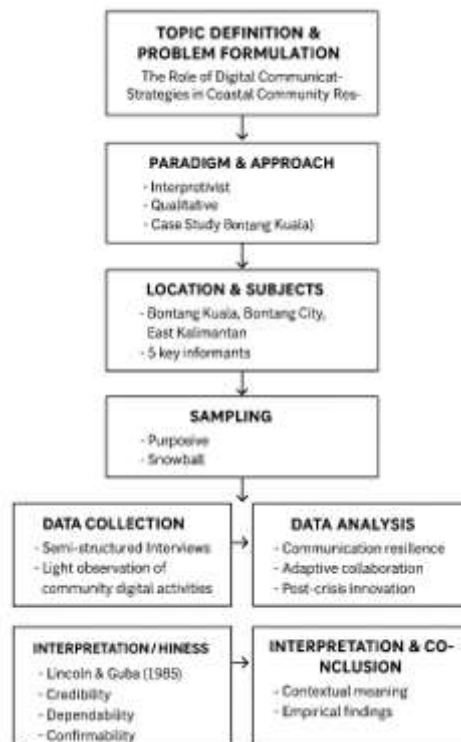


Figure 3. Research Methods

Therefore, five informants were considered representative for illustrating the contextual dynamics of digital communication in Bontang Kuala. Fieldwork was conducted in October 2025 over five days, using short semi-structured interviews focused on informants' experiences, perceptions, and communication strategies in navigating social and economic changes. Additionally, light observations of community digital activities were carried out to understand patterns of local interaction and information exchange. Secondary data from government reports, Bontang City development statistics, and online media were also utilized to enrich the contextual understanding of digital engagement among residents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the aid of NVivo software, to identify emerging themes related to communication resilience, adaptive collaboration, and post-crisis innovation. Methodological rigor was maintained following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria, which include:

1. Credibility through member checking (validation with informants),
2. Dependability through an audit trail (documenting the research process),
3. Confirmability through triangulation (comparing multiple data sources), and
4. Transferability by providing a rich, detailed description of the local context.

Through this comprehensive methodological framework, the study aims to produce empirical insights into how digital communication strengthens collective recovery, social capital restoration, and sustainable adaptation within coastal communities facing socio-economic uncertainties and environmental risks.

### 3. Results and Discussions

The results of this study are presented thematically based on field interviews and observations conducted in Bontang Kuala. Three major themes emerged, reflecting how digital communication strategies supported post-crisis recovery and community resilience: (1) digital adaptation and access, (2) collaborative recovery and empowerment, and (3) challenges and digital inequality.

#### Digital Adaptation and Access

Informants reported that digital communication platforms became essential tools for coordination, particularly after the 2020–2022 pandemic and periodic coastal flooding. The transition from offline to online communication was evident among younger residents and local entrepreneurs. Observation revealed that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most frequently used channels for sharing information about tourism, community meetings, and environmental alerts.

Table 1. Digital Media Utilization in Bontang Kuala (2025)

Platform Used	Percentage of Respondents Using Regularly	Primary Function
WhatsApp	92%	Coordination, information exchange
Facebook	76%	Promotion, community updates
Instagram	48%	Tourism marketing, digital storytelling
YouTube	22%	Environmental awareness videos
Local Website / Blog	18%	Official information and tourism content

Observation indicated that WhatsApp groups became the de facto communication backbone, enabling rapid information flow during emergencies. As the community leader stated, “In times of crisis, we don’t wait for formal meetings everyone updates each other instantly through the group.” This adaptive behavior reflects the emergence of community-based “CommTech ecosystems” described by Brockhaus et al. (2023), where informal digital networks supplement limited institutional infrastructure. These findings suggest a steady transition toward digitally mediated communication practices that increased both transparency and responsiveness across social groups.

#### Collaborative Recovery and Empowerment

Digital communication not only facilitated coordination but also empowered local entrepreneurs and tourism actors to recover economically. Through online promotion, homestay and seafood business owners reached wider audiences. The female entrepreneur informant explained that “sales doubled after we learned to post and tag locations on Instagram; now even visitors from Samarinda book in advance.”

Table 2. Examples of Digital-Based Recovery Initiatives (2023–2025)

Initiative / Activity	Digital Platform Used	Key Outcome
“Visit Bontang Kuala” Tourism Campaign	Facebook & Instagram	+35% increase in domestic tourist visits
Fishermen Aid Coordination (2024 Flood)	WhatsApp Group	100+ volunteers mobilized in 24 hours
“Seafood for Solidarity” Crowdfunding	WhatsApp Broadcast	IDR 47 million raised in 3 days
Digital Skills Workshop (by youth team)	Zoom / Google Meet	50 participants trained in digital literacy

These collaborative digital actions revitalized social solidarity and community trust. Observation showed how youth volunteers provided informal training for older residents on online selling and e-payment apps, reinforcing inclusive adaptation. Such patterns are consistent with Apriyanti et al. (2022) and Avraham (2021), who argue that dialogic digital engagement fosters social cohesion and accelerates destination image restoration after crises.

### Challenges and Digital Inequality

Despite notable progress, disparities remain in digital access and literacy. Informants identified several recurring barriers: unstable internet connectivity in offshore zones, limited smartphone ownership among older fishermen, and insufficient digital skills among women micro-entrepreneurs.

Table 3. Reported Barriers to Digital Communication Use

Type of Barrier	Frequency Mentioned by Informants	Illustrative Example or Quote
Internet Connectivity Issues	4/5 informants	“Sometimes connection drops during video calls.”
Digital Literacy Gap	3/5 informants	“Older fishermen still prefer word-of-mouth information.”
Device or Cost Limitations	2/5 informants	“Many still share one phone per family.”
Information Misinformation	2/5 informants	“Rumors spread quickly before being verified.”

Observation revealed that while younger generations adapted quickly, older and economically marginalized groups struggled to sustain engagement. This reflects persistent digital inequality identified in global recovery research (Dias et al., 2022; Mbatha, 2023). Nevertheless, gradual improvements were noted as community-driven learning continued. As one digital volunteer summarized, “Every crisis teaches something new; people who couldn’t use WhatsApp before can now send updates or photos of damage.”

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence of how digital communication strategies contribute to the resilience and post-crisis recovery of coastal communities. The discussion below synthesizes these results with prior literature, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications across three analytical dimensions: (1) digital transformation as a social adaptation process, (2) digital communication as a catalyst for collaborative resilience, and (3) structural barriers shaping digital inequality and sustainability challenges.

### Digital Transformation as a Process of Social Adaptation

The increased adoption of digital platforms in Bontang Kuala illustrates how communities in peripheral maritime areas can reconfigure communication ecosystems in response to crisis-induced disruptions. Similar to the findings of DeFilippis et al. (2022) and Brockhaus et al. (2023), the study shows that digitalization is not merely a technological upgrade but a social adaptation mechanism. In Bontang Kuala, residents utilized WhatsApp and Facebook to bridge spatial divides between offshore and onshore settlements.

These practices echo the “CommTech” concept proposed by Brockhaus et al. (2023) where informal, community-driven digital infrastructures enhance collective responsiveness and transparency. While Avraham (2021) and Ketter & Avraham (2021) focused on digital strategies at the destination level, the case of Bontang Kuala demonstrates similar dynamics occurring at the grassroots level, led by local actors rather than formal institutions. This bottom-up adaptation reveals that even limited digital infrastructure can facilitate real-time coordination and emotional connection, aligning with Camilleri (2021) who emphasizes dialogic communication as a resilience tool in crisis contexts.

### Digital Communication as a Catalyst for Collaborative Resilience

The results indicate that digital platforms especially social media played a pivotal role in reinforcing community solidarity and local entrepreneurship during recovery. This supports Apriyanti et al. (2022) and Dias et al. (2022), who argue that post-crisis digital engagement transforms individuals from passive victims into active co-creators of recovery narratives. In Bontang Kuala, initiatives such as “Visit Bontang Kuala” and “Seafood for Solidarity”

exemplify how digital storytelling and online crowdfunding not only restored livelihoods but also strengthened social capital. This corresponds with the idea of “digital participation” discussed by Evitha et al. (2023), where inclusive communication systems enhance participatory governance and equitable recovery.

Moreover, the emergence of youth-led digital literacy programs illustrates the formation of new social roles in community resilience ecosystems. As Mahmud (2023) highlights, ICT-enabled engagement allows citizens to co-produce recovery outcomes with government and civil institutions. The integration of digital marketing for tourism recovery further parallels Tiago et al. (2021) and Yang et al. (2024), confirming that digital communication is integral to maintaining destination visibility, rebuilding reputation, and sustaining economic momentum after crisis.

However, the Bontang Kuala experience extends this understanding by demonstrating hybrid resilience—where traditional gotong royong (mutual aid) values are mediated through digital communication. This sociocultural synthesis enriches the digital resilience framework proposed by Dhar & Bose (2022) and Pascual-Fraile et al. (2024), which predominantly emphasize institutional or market-based strategies.

### **Digital Inequality and Structural Barriers**

Despite significant progress, digital communication’s potential remains constrained by persistent inequality. The study confirms that access to devices, stable connectivity, and digital literacy are unevenly distributed, particularly among older fishermen and low-income women. This pattern mirrors global findings by Mbatha (2023) and Rivas-De-Roca et al. (2021), who underline how digital transformation may inadvertently reproduce social exclusion if not accompanied by inclusive policies and capacity-building.

The limited internet coverage in offshore areas of Bontang Kuala demonstrates the infrastructural gap typical of small island or floating communities (see Lacarcel & Huete, 2023). Furthermore, misinformation incidents reported by informants reflect the communication distortions described by Liu et al. (2021) and Sklar (2021), indicating that increased connectivity without media literacy may generate new vulnerabilities.

To address these gaps, local initiatives such as peer-to-peer learning, youth mentoring, and small-scale digital inclusion projects have proven vital. These align with the inclusive communication framework suggested by Evitha et al. (2023) and Hassan et al. (2022), emphasizing that equitable access and participatory engagement are essential for sustainable recovery.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study expands the concept of digital resilience communication by situating it within a coastal socio-ecological context. Unlike prior studies focused on tourism industries or government campaigns (e.g., Kumar & Upadhyay, 2025; Mahmud, 2023), the findings highlight community-driven digital transformation as a distinct mode of adaptation in peripheral societies.

Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers and NGOs seeking to design inclusive digital recovery programs. Training modules that integrate digital literacy with local culture, support for affordable connectivity infrastructure, and participatory digital platforms could accelerate both social and economic resilience.

The Bontang Kuala case underscores that resilience is not achieved solely through technology but through communicative empowerment the capacity of communities to create, share, and manage digital narratives collectively. This synthesis of local wisdom and digital innovation may serve as a model for other Indonesian coastal regions pursuing blue economy and sustainable tourism agendas.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that digital communication strategies play a crucial role in strengthening the resilience of coastal communities in post-crisis recovery contexts. The case of Bontang Kuala demonstrates that the integration of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram has transformed traditional communication patterns into adaptive systems that support coordination, economic recovery, and social solidarity. Digital communication enables communities to disseminate information rapidly, mobilize collective action, and sustain

local livelihoods, particularly in tourism and small-scale fisheries. The findings also reveal that digital adaptation is not purely technological but deeply social driven by mutual learning, community participation, and cultural values such as gotong royong. However, digital inequality remains a critical barrier, particularly for older residents and low-income groups who face limitations in access, literacy, and connectivity. Addressing these disparities requires continuous local innovation and policy support to ensure inclusive and equitable digital transformation. The practical implication of this study is that resilience-building programs in coastal regions should incorporate community-based digital literacy initiatives, youth-driven digital facilitation, and accessible communication infrastructure. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of digital transformation on community governance and environmental sustainability, as well as comparative studies across different coastal settings in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

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