

Asahan Water Theme Park: Turning Digital Visibility into Visitor Footfall

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Overview

Asahan Water Theme Park (AWTP) is a regional, nature-based water theme park in Malaysia that has experienced a prolonged decline in visitor attendance following the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the park maintains an active presence across multiple social media platforms and records generally positive online engagement, physical visitation has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Internal reviews and visitor survey data suggest favorable perceptions of AWTP's destination image, perceived value, and information credibility, yet these positive perceptions have not translated into consistent visitor growth. At the same time, AWTP operates within a highly competitive leisure environment and faces significant financial, operational, and capability constraints. This case examines AWTP's strategic context, market conditions, organizational limitations, and emerging challenges in converting digital visibility into sustained visitor footfall.

Introduction

In early 2023, the management team of Asahan Water Theme Park (AWTP) gathered for what was intended to be a routine performance review. The meeting took place during a weekday morning, a period that historically would have seen steady foot traffic from school groups and families. Instead, the scene outside the meeting room reflected a different reality. The sound of flowing water from the park's signature slides echoed across sparsely occupied facilities, and several attractions remained idle despite favourable weather conditions.

The General Manager, who had overseen the park's operations since before the pandemic, viewed the stagnation as more than a temporary lag in recovery. Over the previous two years, AWTP had deliberately shifted its marketing focus toward digital platforms in response to changing consumer behaviour. Facebook, Instagram, and later TikTok became central communication channels through which the park promoted its attractions, seasonal discounts, and special events. The marketing team posted content consistently, often highlighting family-friendly activities, scenic views, and user-submitted photographs.

At first glance, the digital strategy appeared to be working. Social media posts attracted likes, comments, and occasional shares. Follower counts increased steadily, and some posts reached audiences well beyond the park's immediate geographic area. However, internal performance data told a less optimistic story. Ticket purchases, group bookings, and on-site visitation showed little improvement. By the end of 2022, total annual attendance remained below 30,000 visitors,

significantly lower than the approximately 41,000 recorded in 2019, prior to the pandemic (See Exhibit 1).

This disconnect between online visibility and offline performance became the focal point of management discussions. Some team members argued that engagement metrics were misleading and failed to capture actual consumer intent. Others questioned whether AWTP's digital content clearly communicated why potential visitors should choose the park over competing leisure options. There was also uncertainty about whether the issue lay primarily in marketing execution, visitor perceptions of value, or broader shifts in leisure consumption patterns.

Financial pressures mounted and operational costs continued to rise, the urgency of the situation became increasingly apparent. AWTP's leadership recognized that maintaining the status quo was no longer sustainable. The central question confronting the management team was no longer whether digital marketing mattered, but rather how it should be designed and prioritized.

Industry And Market Context

Malaysia's tourism sector is characterized by a diversified mix of natural attractions, cultural heritage sites, and purpose-built leisure destinations. Within this landscape, theme parks, particularly water theme parks, play an important role in supporting domestic tourism by offering accessible, family-oriented recreational experiences. The segment has traditionally benefited from Malaysia's tropical climate, strong school-holiday travel patterns, and growing demand for short-haul leisure activities. Over the past decade, the water theme park segment has become increasingly competitive. Large-scale operators such as Sunway Lagoon have strengthened their market positions by integrating water attractions with broader entertainment, retail, and hospitality offerings, allowing them to position themselves as comprehensive leisure destinations rather than stand-alone parks (Sunway Lagoon 2023)¹. Strong branding sustained promotional investment, and partnerships with travel intermediaries have further reinforced their visibility and appeal.

Smaller and regionally focused parks, by contrast, typically operate with narrower value propositions and more constrained resources. Although these parks often compete on affordability and local accessibility, they face disadvantages in brand recognition, promotional reach, and investment capacity, making their performance more sensitive to shifts in consumer preferences and competitive conditions. Research on Malaysia's theme park sector identifies promotion, service quality, pricing, and experiential value as key determinants of visitor patronage (Abdullah et al. 2021)². In the post-pandemic environment, visitors increasingly emphasize perceived value, emotional appeal, safety, and overall enjoyment rather than functional attributes alone. At the same time, digital platforms have become central to travel decision-making. Social media, online reviews, and digital content shape destination image, which strongly influences tourists' intentions. While digital channels lower barriers for smaller attractions to reach potential visitors, they also intensify competition for attention in crowded online spaces.

Following COVID-19, Malaysia's domestic tourism market began to recover, but unevenly. Larger theme parks, supported by stronger brand equity, diversified offerings, and established digital infrastructures,

¹ Sunway Lagoon. 2023. "About Sunway Lagoon." Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunway_Lagoon

² Abdullah, Dalila, K. Jayaraman, D. N. Shariff, K. A. Bahari, and N. M. Nor. 2021. "The Effects of Perceived Interactivity, Perceived Ease of Use and Perceived Usefulness on Online Hotel Booking Intention." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology* 12 (2): 213–31.

were generally better positioned to rebound. Smaller attractions, including regional water parks, experienced a more fragile recovery. Within this context, AWTP's difficulty in returning to pre-pandemic visitor levels reflects not only firm-specific challenges but also broader structural pressures facing smaller players in Malaysia's evolving tourism landscape.

Company Background: asahan Water Theme Park

Established in 2015, Asahan Water Theme Park (AWTP) was developed as a regional leisure destination targeting families, students, and organized group visitors. Positioned as an affordable alternative to large urban theme parks, AWTP selected a forested highland location in Johor to support a nature-based, relaxed leisure experience. From the outset, the park emphasized affordability and broad appeal, offering moderate water slides, children's splash areas, picnic spaces, and basic recreational facilities. Limited accommodation options, including campsites and small chalets, were introduced to attract school groups, youth organizations, and families seeking short overnight stays.

Prior to 2020, AWTP recorded steady but modest growth, driven primarily by local and regional demand, with visitation peaking during school holidays and long weekends. Word-of-mouth referrals were a key source of traffic, while marketing activities were largely offline and locally focused, relying on banners, flyers, school collaborations, and community events. Promotional efforts were mostly tactical and seasonal, centered on discounts rather than long-term brand building. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trajectory. Mandatory closures, capacity limits, and health concerns led to a sharp decline in visitation, while fixed costs such as maintenance and staffing continued. When restrictions were gradually lifted, management expected a rapid rebound supported by pent-up demand and preference for nearby outdoor destinations. Instead, recovery was slower and uneven. Although visitor numbers improved gradually, they remained below pre-pandemic levels, raising concerns about whether changes in consumer behaviour and competitive dynamics had fundamentally altered AWTP's market position. This period prompted management to reassess its assumptions about demand drivers, marketing effectiveness, and the long-term sustainability of the park's existing business model.

Shift Toward Digital Marketing

By 2021, AWTP's management began to recognize that shifts in consumer media consumption were reshaping how leisure and tourism decisions were made. Prolonged lockdowns and mobility restrictions during the pandemic had accelerated reliance on digital platforms for information seeking, entertainment, and social interaction. In response, AWTP intensified its focus on digital marketing as a primary communication channel, marking a departure from its earlier reliance on offline and community-based promotional methods. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, became central to the park's marketing efforts. These platforms were used to showcase images of water slides, family activities, promotional offers, and occasional behind-the-scenes content. Short videos and photographs were frequently posted to maintain visibility and signal operational readiness following periods of closure. As short-form video content gained popularity, TikTok was introduced as an additional channel to engage younger audiences and extend reach beyond the park's traditional customer base.

From an operational perspective, the shift to digital marketing was perceived as cost-effective and accessible. Content creation was largely managed internally, and posting schedules became more structured over time. Management observed gradual growth in follower counts and intermittent

spikes in engagement, particularly during school holidays or promotional campaigns. These indicators initially reinforced the belief that increased digital activity would translate into higher visitation. However, internal performance reviews revealed emerging concerns. Despite increased posting frequency and broader reach, digital content lacked consistency in tone and messaging. Posts tended to focus on physical facilities such as slides, pools, and park amenities rather than the experiential or emotional aspects of visiting AWTP. There was limited emphasis on storytelling, visitor journeys, or what differentiated the park from alternative leisure options. Moreover, individual posts were rarely connected into a cohesive narrative that reinforced a clear destination identity.

Management also struggled to assess the effectiveness of digital efforts beyond surface-level metrics. While likes, comments, and shares suggested visibility, there was no systematic mechanism to track how online engagement translated into inquiries, bookings, or actual visits. The absence of clear conversion indicators made it difficult to evaluate return on marketing investment or to justify reallocating resources toward digital initiatives. These challenges prompted internal debate regarding the role of digital marketing within AWTP's broader strategy. Some team members argued that visibility alone was insufficient in an increasingly crowded online environment, where consumers were exposed to competing attractions daily. Others questioned whether the park's digital content adequately conveyed value and relevance to potential visitors.

Existing research in tourism marketing underscores the importance of destination image and perceived value in shaping tourists' intention to visit, particularly in digitally mediated contexts where first impressions are formed online (Baber & Baber, 2022³). Digital platforms do not merely function as information channels; they actively influence how destinations are imagined, evaluated, and compared. Against this backdrop, AWTP's marketing team began to question whether their current digital strategy effectively communicated what the park represented, why it was worth visiting, and how it differed from competing attractions. This uncertainty marked a critical juncture in AWTP's digital transformation journey, setting the stage for deeper reflection on how digital marketing could be leveraged not only to attract attention, but also to influence decision-making and drive visitation.

Visitor Perceptions, Experience, And Value Formation

As AWTP's management sought to understand the persistent gap between digital visibility and physical visitation, attention increasingly turned toward how potential visitors perceived the park and how those perceptions were being formed. Feedback gathered through informal surveys, online comments, and internal research suggested that visitors generally viewed AWTP as enjoyable, yet not particularly distinctive. Many respondents described the park as suitable for a casual outing or a one-time visit rather than a destination that actively motivated repeat visitation. This pattern concerned management. Within the theme park context, visitor satisfaction alone is often insufficient to generate sustained demand. Research indicates that revisit intentions are more strongly influenced by perceived value, destination image, and the extent to which experiences are memorable and emotionally engaging. In AWTP's case, management began to question whether the park's digital presence was reinforcing a compelling destination image or merely communicating functional information.

Internal analysis of survey data revealed that respondents generally evaluated AWTP's social media presence positively across multiple dimensions (see Exhibit 2). Mean scores exceeded 4.0 (on a 5-point scale) for most indicators, including liveliness of posts, amount of information shared, attractiveness,

³ Baber, Rupali, and Pooja Baber. 2022. "Influence of Social Media Marketing Efforts, E-Reputation and Destination Image on Intention to Visit among Tourists: Application of S-O-R Model." *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-06-2022-0270>

quality, variety, clarity, accuracy, and credibility of information. Credibility of information recorded the highest mean score (4.46), suggesting that respondents largely trusted content published by AWTP. At the same time, certain engagement-oriented activities received lower evaluations. The use of interactive elements such as polls recorded the lowest mean score (3.43), indicating relatively limited two-way interaction between the park and its audience. While respondents could easily access AWTP's social media channels and locate information, the data suggested that engagement was predominantly passive rather than participatory.

From a managerial perspective, these findings created ambiguity. On one hand, AWTP appeared to be performing adequately in terms of providing reliable and accessible information. On the other hand, strong informational performance did not appear to be translating into heightened motivation to visit. This raised the possibility that content quality alone was not sufficient; how information was framed and emotionally positioned might be equally important.

Survey results related to destination image further complicated the picture (Exhibit 3). Respondents expressed strong agreement that AWTP had a good reputation (mean = 4.45) and would offer exciting (mean = 4.47), pleasant (mean = 4.45), and relaxing (mean = 4.47) experiences. These findings suggested that, at a general level, the park was viewed positively. However, respondents reported lower agreement with the statement that they had great knowledge about facilities provided by AWTP (mean = 3.78). While not negative, this relatively lower score indicated incomplete awareness regarding the breadth and specifics of the park's offerings. Management interpreted this as a potential gap between general impressions and detailed understanding. This distinction mattered. A positive but vague destination image may generate curiosity, but insufficient clarity about what exactly visitors will experience could limit conversion from interest to action. In AWTP's case, management began to consider whether their digital content created favorable impressions without providing enough concrete see-know-feel cues to support decision-making.

Respondents also expressed strong agreement that travelling to AWTP was worth the price (mean = 4.30), offered good value for money (mean = 4.32), and met their travel needs (mean = 4.30). These results indicated that affordability remained a meaningful strength for the park. However, the statement "compared to other destinations, travelling to AWTP is a good deal" recorded a slightly lower mean score (4.26), suggesting that while AWTP was perceived as good value, it was not necessarily seen as clearly superior to alternatives (Exhibit 4). For management, this nuance was important. AWTP's historical positioning centered heavily on affordability. Yet the data suggested that value alone was no longer a decisive differentiator. Competing attractions appeared to offer comparable perceived value, potentially diminishing AWTP's relative attractiveness.

Measures of visit intention were generally positive (Exhibit 5). Respondents indicated agreement that they intended to visit AWTP soon (mean = 4.27) and would choose AWTP as a destination for their next holiday (mean = 4.23). However, the statement "I will likely visit AWTP in the next month" recorded the lowest mean score (4.04), implying that while intentions existed, they were not necessarily immediate. This distinction between future-oriented intention and short-term action became a focal point for management discussions. It suggested that AWTP occupied a favourable mental position among potential visitors yet lacked sufficient urgency or emotional pull to trigger immediate decisions.

Correlation analysis provided additional insights into how different perceptual dimensions related to visit intention. Destination image exhibited the strongest positive association with tourist visit intention ($r = 0.717$), followed by perceived value ($r = 0.668$) and social media marketing ($r = 0.565$). All relationships were statistically significant. These patterns suggested that while social media activity

mattered, it was not the most influential driver of intention. Instead, how AWTP was perceived as a destination and how valuable the experience was believed to be appeared more central to shaping visitors' willingness to visit. Multiple regression analysis reinforced this interpretation. Destination image emerged as the most influential predictor of visit intention ($\beta = 0.503$), followed by perceived value ($\beta = 0.330$). Social media marketing, in contrast, displayed a small and non-significant coefficient.

From a managerial standpoint, this finding did not imply that social media was unimportant. Rather, it suggested that social media functioned primarily as an enabling channel—a vehicle through which destination image and perceived value were communicated—rather than as a direct driver of visitation on its own. These findings intensified internal debate. One perspective held that AWTP should prioritize enhancing the on-site experience, investing in facilities and services that could strengthen destination image organically. Another perspective argued that perceptions were being underleveraged, and that more strategic digital storytelling could better communicate the park's experiential value without large capital expenditure. The central uncertainty remained unresolved: Was AWTP's challenge fundamentally a product experience problem, a communication problem, or a misalignment between the two?

Operational And Resource Constraints

AWTP's strategic choices were shaped not only by market conditions but also by persistent operational and resource constraints. Unlike large theme park operators with access to corporate-level capital and centralized marketing support, AWTP functioned as a stand-alone operation with a lean organizational structure and limited financial flexibility. A substantial share of its annual budget was committed to fixed costs such as utilities, ride maintenance, safety compliance, and basic staffing, leaving relatively little room for discretionary marketing spending.

Digital marketing activities were largely handled by existing staff whose primary responsibilities extended beyond marketing. The park did not employ a dedicated digital analytics specialist, and content decisions were guided mainly by experience and informal observation rather than systematic data analysis. As a result, digital efforts tended to focus on maintaining an online presence rather than executing clearly articulated campaigns tied to specific objectives. These constraints influenced how management evaluated potential initiatives. Paid advertising, influencer collaborations, and professional content production were recognized as potentially valuable but carried financial risk. Leadership lacked reliable evidence regarding expected returns, and previous small-scale paid promotions had delivered mixed outcomes. Consequently, most decisions favoured incremental, low-cost actions.

Seasonality further complicated planning. Visitor numbers peaked during school holidays and festive periods but dropped sharply during off-peak months, creating cash flow volatility. During low-demand periods, management prioritized cost control, limiting the ability to commit to sustained marketing investments. AWTP needed to improve marketing effectiveness but could not afford large-scale experimentation. Any strategy adopted would therefore need to be cost-conscious, scalable, and capable of generating impact primarily through better use of existing resources. These conditions created a persistent tension. On one hand, leadership recognized that meaningful change in digital marketing effectiveness might require investment and capability building. On the other hand, AWTP's financial position demanded caution. Any strategy adopted would need to be scalable, cost-conscious, and resilient to demand fluctuations. These constraints forced management to confront a fundamental question: Could AWTP achieve meaningful improvements in visitor footfall primarily through better

utilization of existing resources, or would progress require incremental investment despite financial uncertainty?

Competitive Environment

As domestic tourism recovered, competitive pressures within Malaysia's leisure and theme park sector intensified. Larger attractions adapted quickly to evolving consumer behaviour by investing in both physical infrastructure and digitally integrated marketing systems. These operators increasingly leveraged online advertising, influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and collaborations with travel platforms to expand reach and shape visitor expectations. Many large parks also pursued cross-channel integration, linking social media, booking systems, mobile platforms, and loyalty programs to create seamless customer journeys and to track conversion performance rather than engagement alone. Such capabilities enabled them to optimize marketing spend and reinforce brand visibility, particularly among digitally oriented travellers.

Smaller attractions such as AWTP lacked comparable financial and technological resources. Management recognized that competing directly with major parks in terms of scale, marketing intensity, or digital sophistication was unrealistic. Larger competitors could outspend AWTP, deploy advanced analytics tools, and form partnerships that extended beyond regional markets. At the same time, AWTP's leadership believed the park possessed potentially differentiating attributes, including its nature-based setting, affordability, and family orientation. However, translating these attributes into competitive advantage required more than passive social media presence. As competition increasingly shifted toward digitally mediated storytelling and experiential branding, AWTP faced rivals that were actively shaping consumer perceptions well before potential visitors made travel decisions.

The competitive challenge, therefore, was not simply to increase visibility, but to establish relative distinctiveness within a crowded digital landscape. This raised fundamental questions for management about whether AWTP could carve out a defensible niche through sharper positioning and narrative differentiation, or whether it would need to pursue selective investments in new experiences, partnerships, or promotional channels to remain competitive. Thus, the competitive challenge was not simply one of visibility, but of relative visibility within a crowded digital field where larger rivals had already captured significant mindshare. This realization raised new questions within AWTP's leadership: Could the park carve out a distinctive niche by amplifying its nature-based and family-friendly identity? Or would it need to invest in new experiences and partnerships to claim competitive parity? And how might digital channels be leveraged strategically—not just as communication tools, but as platforms for constructing and reinforcing meaningful destination narratives?

The Decision Point

By late 2023, AWTP's leadership found itself at a strategic crossroads. Months of internal reviews, performance monitoring, and discussion had clarified one central reality: the park's digital presence was visible, but not sufficiently persuasive. Awareness alone was not translating into consistent visitation, and incremental adjustments to posting frequency or content formats had produced limited impact. The management team agreed that continuing with the existing approach was unlikely to reverse the downward trend in visitor numbers. Yet there was no consensus on what form a meaningful strategic shift should take.

One group within the team argued that AWTP's primary challenge lay in how the park was being portrayed online. While posts accurately described facilities and promotions, they rarely conveyed what it felt like to spend a day at AWTP. From this perspective, the park's digital narrative needed to

be fundamentally repositioned—away from operational features and toward experiential value. Supporters of this view believed that strengthening destination image through storytelling, visitor journeys, and emotional cues could reshape perceptions without requiring major capital investment. A second group contended that AWTP’s visibility problem was not solely organic in nature. They pointed to the aggressive digital tactics employed by larger competitors, including paid advertising, influencer collaborations, and algorithm-optimized campaigns. Without some level of selective paid promotion, AWTP risked remaining overshadowed regardless of content quality. However, concerns persisted regarding the affordability and risk of such investments, particularly given limited evidence of predictable returns.

A third perspective focused on the on-site experience itself. Proponents argued that no amount of digital messaging could compensate for a product that lacked novelty or memorability. They maintained those incremental enhancements—such as new attractions, improved amenities, or themed experiences—could generate stronger word-of-mouth, stimulate user-generated content, and organically improve digital visibility. This view, however, implied capital expenditures that would place additional strain on already constrained budgets. Finally, several managers emphasized the need to reconsider how success was being measured. Engagement metrics such as likes and shares provided signals of visibility but offered little insight into behavioural outcomes. Without clearer conversion indicators such as inquiry rates, booking sources, or promotional code usage, management struggled to evaluate which initiatives created tangible value. Advocates of this view argued that AWTP should first build a more disciplined performance measurement system before committing to major strategic shifts. Each option carried distinct implications for resource allocation, risk exposure, and organizational capability. Importantly, none could be pursued comprehensively under existing financial and staffing constraints. Management would need to make deliberate trade-offs. As the year-end planning cycle approached, the General Manager posed a final question to the team. Given AWTP’s competitive position, resource limitations, and market realities, which strategic direction should be prioritized to convert digital visibility into sustained visitor footfall and why? The answer would shape not only AWTP’s digital marketing approach, but also its broader trajectory as a regional leisure destination.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1

Annual Visitor Attendance (2019–2022)

Year	Estimated Visitors
2019	~41,000
2020	Substantial decline (COVID-19 closures)
2021	Partial recovery
2022	<30,000

Source: AWTP internal records.

Exhibit 2

Visitor Perceptions of AWTP’s Social Media Presence (5-point scale)

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Credibility of information	4.46
Accuracy of information	4.43
Clarity of information	4.34
Attractiveness of information	4.27
Variety of information	4.24
Quality of information	4.22
Ease of access to social media	4.26
Ease of finding information	4.19
Liveliness of posts	4.14
Frequency of interaction	3.97
Number of likes and comments	3.72
Use of polls / interactive tools	3.43

N = 148 respondents.

Exhibit 3

Visitor Perceptions of AWTP Destination Image (5-point scale)

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean</u>
AWTP will offer exciting experience	4.47
AWTP will offer relaxing experience	4.47
AWTP will offer pleasant experience	4.45

AWTP has good reputation 4.45
 Great knowledge about AWTP facilities 3.78
 N = 148 respondents.

Exhibit 4

Visitor Perceptions of Value (5-point scale)

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Travelling to AWTP offers good value for money	4.32
Travelling to AWTP is worth the price	4.30
Travelling to AWTP meets my travel needs	4.30
Compared to other destinations, AWTP is a good deal	4.26

N = 148 respondents.

Exhibit 5

Tourist Visit Intention (5-point scale)

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean</u>
I intend to visit AWTP in the near future	4.27
I would choose AWTP for my next holiday	4.23
I would prefer AWTP over similar destinations	4.18
I will likely visit AWTP in the next month	4.04

N = 148 respondents.

Exhibit 6

Management’s Summary of Internal and External Factors (AWTP)

Strengths	Weaknesses
Culturally rich and nature-based setting	Limited brand awareness outside surrounding districts
Affordable admission pricing	No integrated digital marketing strategy
Family-friendly and disability-friendly facilities	Absence of website and online booking system
Integrated water park, camping, and outdoor activities	Capacity limitations during peak periods
Guest-friendly food and beverage policy	Remote location and weak public transport access
Strong local recognition	

	Limited skilled marketing and technical manpower
Opportunities	Threats
Collaboration with content creators and influencers Joint promotions with local businesses and tourism partners Community engagement programs Seasonal events and themed activities Interactive online community development	Negative online reviews Competition from nearby attractions Economic downturns and force majeure events Weather-related operational disruptions Changing entertainment and travel trends Highly seasonal demand patterns