



## Nonverbal Communication of the Mandalika Tourism Village Community in Building Destination Branding

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### ABSTRACT

This article identifies the nonverbal communication of local communities in tourist villages in Lombok. Mandalika, as a Super Priority Destination, faces brand image challenges due to negative media perceptions regarding the friendliness of its people. This study aims to analyze the central role of nonverbal communication among the Sasak people in Mandalika tourist village in building *the destination brand*. Using qualitative methods, this study contrasts initial perceptions of the community as unfriendly, untidy, and possessing gestures that create an unfavorable impression with the reality of interactions on the ground. The results show that nonverbal cues – especially sincere smiles, open body language, and friendly facial expressions – are actually dominant elements in welcoming tourists. Even when language is a barrier, nonverbal communication serves as an effective bridge. These authentic cues serve as strategic assets and social capital that strongly challenge negative stereotypes and build the foundation of Mandalika's brand image as a warm and welcoming destination, ultimately shaping positive tourist experiences. The recommendation given is to provide assistance to tourism actors in super destinations to ensure non-verbal communication competency so that tourists feel comfortable and safe when traveling to Mandalika.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive global tourism landscape, a destination's ability to stand out is no longer limited to relying solely on natural beauty. Building a brand image, or *destination branding*, has become a necessity, a vital strategy for carving out a unique identity capable of attracting and retaining tourist interest (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011; Pike & Page, 2014). Recognizing this urgency, the Indonesian government has designated Mandalika as one of five Super Priority Destinations, a strategic policy aimed at accelerating tourism development to attract both domestic and international tourists (Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, 2020). This status places Mandalika at center stage, with high expectations to become not only a driving force for the regional economy but also a successful model of sustainable tourism.

However, investment in physical infrastructure alone will be insufficient if it is not balanced with the development of "social infrastructure," where hospitality and communication are the main foundations (Manaf & Puspitasari, 2019). In the context of cross-cultural tourism such as in Mandalika, where tourists from various countries meet the local Sasak community, non-verbal communication (NVC) plays a crucial role (Andrade & Dias, 2018). Far beyond words, non-verbal cues such as smiles, facial expressions, eye contact, and body language become a universal language that shapes tourists' perceptions and experiences. Hospitality, as an essential element in tourism communication ethics, is often expressed not through complex verbal exchanges, but through a sincere smile or open gesture. These non-verbal interactions ultimately create emotional connections, making tourists feel welcome, safe, and valued (Prayag, Hosany, & Odeh, 2013). The ability of tourism stakeholders to communicate effectively through these cues can significantly enhance the visitor experience, which in turn will shape a positive destination image.

However, the idealized narrative of Mandalika as a welcoming destination faces serious challenges. Some media reports paint a contrasting picture, reporting that local residents are perceived as unfriendly and even "hard to smile" (CNN Indonesia, 2022). Such reports, regardless of their accuracy, have the potential to be detrimental to the brand image being built. A negative perception, once formed, can foster discomfort and doubt in the minds of potential tourists, ultimately undermining the destination's appeal. This issue is all the more pressing given that other negative practices, such as unreasonable price hikes during MotoGP events, have been shown to "tarnish Mandalika's image" (Kompas.com, 2022), demonstrating the fragility of a destination's reputation. If the non-verbal cues of the community, the frontline of tourism, fail to convey a message of friendliness, all investments and branding efforts could be wasted.

Building on this crucial discourse, this study aims to conduct an in-depth investigation of this phenomenon. Rather than accepting media narratives at face value, this article will analyze how the authentic forms of non-verbal communication of the Mandalika Tourism Village community in their daily interactions with tourists significantly contribute to the process of building a *destination brand*. This research will specifically explore whether the non-verbal

cues displayed by the local community confirm or refute existing negative perceptions. Thus, the primary objective is to examine the role of this social capital in shaping the tourist experience, leading to a positive image and reputation, which are the core of *word-of-mouth promotion* and the foundation of a strong and sustainable destination brand (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Destination Brands and the Experience Economy*

In the modern tourism era, a destination is no longer viewed simply as a geographic location, but rather as a brand *that* must be managed strategically. A destination *brand* is the collective perception, image, and reputation formed in the minds of tourists. This brand-building effort aims to create a "positive destination image" and establish a "reputation as a friendly and welcoming tourist destination." A strong and positive image will ultimately "increase the destination's attractiveness" amidst intense global competition.

This concept aligns with the *Experience Economy theory* proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998), where contemporary tourists no longer simply purchase services, but seek out and purchase memorable and authentic experiences. Hospitality and good communication are fundamental elements that shape the "tourist experience." When tourists feel welcomed and treated well, they will enjoy their visit more, feel satisfied, and tend to return and share their positive experiences with others. This *word-of-mouth* phenomenon is one of the most effective marketing tools in building a brand, as studied in depth by Matos and Rossi (2008) in their meta-analysis. Thus, every interaction between tourists and local communities becomes a crucial moment (*moment of truth*) that contributes directly to the destination's brand equity.

### *The Central Role of Friendliness in Cross-Cultural Communication*

Hospitality is at the heart of the tourism industry. Mill (2000) defines it as the feeling of *welcome* experienced by tourists when visiting a location. It is not simply the act of providing a service, but rather an attitude that encompasses tolerance, friendliness, and consideration for the needs of others. This hospitality is key to providing a comfortable and satisfying experience for tourists. In the context of Mandalika, where there are intense encounters between tourists from various cultural backgrounds and the Sasak people, hospitality must be understood within the framework of cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural communication, as explained by experts such as Reisinger & Turner (2003), is fraught with potential misunderstandings due to differences in norms, values, and communication styles. Theories such as Ellingsworth's (1983) *Intercultural Adjustment Theory* explain how individuals adapt in communication to build relationships, while Collier and Thomas' (1988) *Cultural Identity Theory* examines how cultural identity is managed in an interaction. In this context, the hospitality displayed by local people becomes a bridge that can overcome potential cultural friction, creating a sense of mutual understanding and appreciation.

### *Non-Verbal Communication as the Foundation of Interaction*

Nonverbal communication (NVC) is a crucial component of tourism, often more powerful than verbal communication. In cross-cultural interactions where language barriers are common, NVC becomes the primary language. According to Buhalis and Law (2008), effective use of body language—including "genuine facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact"—can make local tourism operators more approachable to tourists and convey a sense of care and attention. These gestures are physical manifestations of friendliness.

Buhalis and O'Connor (2005) further detail that a friendly attitude typically includes "a smile, a warm greeting, and an open attitude toward others." A smile, for example, is a universal nonverbal cue that can instantly break down the walls of discomfort and create a positive atmosphere. This friendliness in nonverbal communication directly helps overcome cultural and language barriers, making tourists feel comfortable and safe in unfamiliar environments. Moreover, positive nonverbal interactions can create "an emotional connection between tourists and the destination." Therefore, nonverbal communication is not just a sweetener, but a strategic foundation for building positive experiences that are the core of a strong and competitive destination *brand*.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. This approach was chosen because of its ability to explore in depth and holistically complex social phenomena, namely how non-verbal communication of local communities shapes the brand image of a destination. The case study in the Mandalika area allows researchers to understand the unique context of a Super Priority Destination, where intense cultural interactions between the Sasak people and international tourists occur.

The primary focus of data collection was to capture naturally occurring *nonverbal communication phenomena*. Therefore, participant observation and in-depth interviews were specifically designed to capture various nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, smiles, eye contact, gestures, and body postures in real-life interactions between local residents and tourists.

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Data collection was carried out using several techniques:

1. In-depth interviews with informants from various groups to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences regarding communication, hospitality, and interaction in Mandalika.
2. Participatory observation where **researchers** are directly involved in observing daily interactions between tourism actors and tourists in various locations in Mandalika to obtain an authentic picture of the non-verbal communication practices that occur.

3. A simple questionnaire has been distributed to tourists, both domestic and foreign tourists, as supporting data to collect their perceptions regarding the friendliness of communication they experienced during their visit.

The sources or informants in this study were selected purposively to ensure the relevance and depth of the information. They consisted of:

1. Tourism actors include homestay owners, tour guides, restaurant staff, and other tourism industry actors who interact directly with tourists.
2. Tourists consisting of domestic and foreign tourists who are currently or have visited Mandalika and can provide testimonials regarding their interaction experiences.
3. Tourism observers or academics from the University of Mataram who have expertise in tourism were interviewed for data triangulation purposes, in order to provide a broader and more objective perspective on the phenomena being studied.
4. This research was conducted in the Mandalika area, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), in July 2024. All data collected from interviews and observations were then analyzed using coding and thematic methods to identify patterns and key themes related to the role of non-verbal communication in building destination brand image.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discussion in this study focuses on the dynamics of non-verbal communication of local communities in the Mandalika Super Priority Destination area. The object of research centers on "local communities, the majority of whom are from the Sasak tribe", who are at the forefront of interactions with tourists. This interaction is specifically observed in authentic tourist village locations such as "Rembitan Sade Village" and "Sukarara Village", where tourists can experience firsthand the life and culture of the Sasak indigenous people.

### *Chapter One: Dissecting the Myth of Unfriendliness*

The initial steps in building Mandalika's brand image faced a fundamental challenge stemming from negative media narratives. Several reports, such as one published on Detik.travel.com, specifically highlighted the issue that "Lombok is still struggling with hotel issues and is unfriendly to tourists." This perception was reinforced by stereotypes that "Lombok people find it difficult to smile" and are considered "unfriendly or unwelcoming to visitors." Such narratives are highly risky, as they can create a negative initial image in the minds of potential tourists, and they constitute a critical starting point for this field research to address.

However, findings obtained through participant observation and in-depth interviews in the field present a completely different, even diametrically opposed, reality. Research data actually shows that local people tend to be "friendly and full of smiles, despite language differences." This friendliness is not just a claim, but a real experience felt and explicitly expressed by tourists. French tourist couple Francine & Mark stated, "Lombok is beautiful, the people

are friendly. " They felt so welcomed that they want to return and recommend it to their friends.

This friendliness is strongly manifested in non-verbal communication. This friendly attitude is "reflected in their always ready to help, greet with a smile, and provide sincere service to tourists. " When language barriers arise, locals adaptably use "body language, facial expressions, and the use of simple words" to ensure communication continues. These findings prove that the "difficulty smiling" myth is not only false, but also masks the greatest social asset the Mandalika community possesses in building their destination brand image: authentic and sincere non-verbal friendliness.

#### *Second Round: Reality on the Field, Authentic Form of Non-Verbal Communication*

After dissecting the myth of unfriendliness, the next analysis focuses on the authentic forms of non-verbal communication consistently demonstrated by the Sasak people in Mandalika. Field findings reveal that these non-verbal cues are not merely complementary but are a key pillar in creating positive interactions and building a warm destination image.

### **1. Smile as the Main Bridge.**

The most striking finding in the field is the power of a smile as a bridge of communication. Contrary to stereotypes, local people tend to be "friendly and full of smiles." This is directly felt by tourists, as evidenced by Francine & Mark's testimonial, which specifically highlights the "friendliness of the Lombok people" as one of the main attractions. A smile is the first and most impactful non-verbal signal received by tourists, instantly communicating goodwill and openness. This phenomenon aligns with the concept outlined by Buhalis and O'Connor (2005), where a friendly attitude *includes* "a smile, a warm greeting, and an open attitude toward others." The genuine smiles of the Mandalika people effectively create a "feeling of welcome " as defined by Mill (2000), which is the foundation of a satisfying hospitality experience.

### **2. Body Language and Facial Expressions as Language Barrier Breakers**

In situations where language is a barrier, nonverbal communication takes over as a functional communication tool. Research has found that local communities are highly adaptive in using "body language, facial expressions, and simple words" to interact with and serve tourists. These efforts demonstrate a genuine desire to connect, rather than simply provide transactional service. This practice is a concrete application of what Buhalis and Law (2008) describe regarding the importance of using "genuine facial expressions, body movements, and eye contact" to make tourism practitioners more approachable and to convey a message of care. Thus, verbal limitations actually open up space for richer and more authentic nonverbal communication, where gestures and facial expressions become tangible evidence of goodwill.

### **3. Open Attitude and Helpful Gestures**

More than just a smile, the friendliness of the Mandalika people is reflected in consistent non-verbal behavior. Field findings highlight that this friendliness is reflected in "an attitude of always being ready to help, greeting with a smile, and providing sincere service to tourists." This proactive attitude of helping is a very powerful form of non-verbal communication, which communicates a sense of security and care. This attitude aligns with the aspects

of friendliness described by Buhalis and O'Connor (2005), namely "showing genuine concern for others, being open-minded and friendly, and being willing to help when needed. " Helpful gestures, whether in pointing directions or providing information, effectively build trust and create a comfortable environment for tourists, which ultimately becomes one of the main reasons for their return visits.

### *Chapter Three: Implications of Non-Verbal Communication for the Mandalika Brand Destination*

The authentic non-verbal communication (NVC) of the Mandalika community is more than just ordinary social interaction; it has direct and profound implications for *destination brand formation*. The analysis in this section demonstrates how these non-verbal cues serve as strategic assets in building brand image, while also highlighting how fragile that image can be when contradicted by negative communication.

#### **1. Creating Memorable Experiences and Strengthening Brand Image**

Positive non-verbal communication—such as genuine smiles and helpfulness—directly contributes to the creation of a "satisfying and memorable experience." When tourists are greeted with non-verbal hospitality, they feel "welcome and valued," a feeling that is at the heart of a positive tourism experience. This interaction transforms a visit from a mere service transaction into an authentic emotional experience. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) concept of *the Experience Economy*, where the ultimate value of a tourism offering lies in the memories it creates. The NVC exhibited by the Mandalika community is a key mechanism that transforms services into an experience that is "special and different from everyday routine."

#### **2 Contrast with Negative Communication that Damages Brands**

However, this painstakingly built brand image through non-verbal hospitality is fragile. The study also found that communication practices, both verbal and non-verbal, have contradictory and damaging effects. It found that some small-scale industry players "tend to coerce and follow tourists into purchasing and using their services." This behavior, which can be interpreted as aggressive and coercive non-verbal gestures, directly destroys the previously established "feeling of welcome" and replaces it with discomfort. Furthermore, the practice of unreasonably raising prices during the MotoGP event has been shown to "damage Mandalika's image."

This exploitative, transactional communication sends a message that contradicts hospitality, undermines trust, and has the potential to generate negative reviews that can spread quickly. This phenomenon demonstrates that to build a strong *destination brand*, consistent, positive and friendly communication across all tourism touchpoints is essential.

Based on in-depth analysis, the main findings of this study confirm that non-verbal communication (NVC)—manifested in sincere smiles, friendly gazes, open body language, and helpful gestures from the Sasak people—is not merely a complementary element, but rather a strategic asset and the most authentic and valuable social capital of Mandalika tourism. These findings directly refute the negative media narrative that labels locals as unfriendly and

unsmiling. In fact, the reality on the ground proves that NVC is a key bridge that overcomes language barriers, creates emotional connections, and instills a deep *sense of welcome in tourists*. For locals, this is a confirmation that the hospitality they display daily is the most tangible and powerful contribution to building a positive destination image. Every smile and greeting are an invaluable brand-building action, making them the most effective and credible brand ambassadors for Mandalika tourism.

The implication for stakeholders—from the government and investors to hoteliers and tour operators—is a paradigm shift. Building the Mandalika destination brand cannot rely solely on magnificent physical infrastructure, but must be grounded in protecting and strengthening this "social infrastructure" of authentic hospitality. This asset is highly fragile and can be eroded by negative communication, such as pushy behavior from some vendors or unreasonable price increases, which send an exploitative message and damage the established image. Therefore, the future of sustainable Lombok tourism lies in its ability to capitalize on this uniqueness. Marketing strategies must explicitly address this narrative of non-verbal hospitality. Training for tourism practitioners should not aim to create a rigid standard of hospitality, but rather to raise awareness of the power of their natural NVCs. In this way, Mandalika can build an authentic, quality destination brand that sells not only its natural beauty but also the warmth of human interaction.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that the non-verbal communication (NVC) displayed by the people of Mandalika Tourism Village is the most fundamental strategic and authentic asset in efforts to build a destination brand image. This finding strongly refutes the initial perception circulating in the media that portrays local people as unfriendly and difficult to smile. The reality found in the field is quite the opposite; through sincere smiles, open body language, and friendly gestures, the Sasak people consistently communicate good intentions and openness. These non-verbal cues have proven to be social capital that can transcend language and cultural barriers, and effectively create positive experiences for tourists.

Furthermore, it was emphasized that this authentic NVC serves as the foundation for building the Mandalika *destination brand* as a warm, welcoming, and culturally rich destination. This non-verbal hospitality is a key differentiator *that* uniquely positions Mandalika amidst competing destinations. While other destinations may offer similar natural beauty, the experience of being welcomed by genuine and authentic human interaction is something that cannot be easily replicated. Therefore, the non-verbal communication of the local community is not merely a supporting element, but the essence of Mandalika's brand image, promising a humane, memorable, and meaningful tourism experience.

Based on the research findings and conclusions, several practical recommendations are formulated for stakeholders to strengthen the brand image and competitiveness of Mandalika tourism in a sustainable manner.

1. **For the Tourism Office, ITDC, and Policymakers: It is strongly recommended that "Authentic Non-Verbal Hospitality"** be a key pillar and central narrative in all Mandalika promotional materials and branding strategies. Marketing efforts should not only highlight the natural beauty and magnificent infrastructure, but also actively showcase visuals and stories of warm and genuine human interactions. Promotional campaigns could include videos and photos that capture the smiles of local people, the friendly gestures of tour guides, or the intimate atmosphere of homestays. By highlighting the uniqueness of these interactions, Mandalika can build a more emotional, human, and difficult-to-replicate brand image, significantly differentiating it from competitors.
2. **For Tourism Industry and Community Players:** It is recommended to design and implement training programs for all frontline tourism players (guides, hotel staff, homestay owners, vendors, etc.). However, the focus of this training should not only be on improving foreign language skills, but more importantly, on **raising awareness of the power and positive impact of non-verbal communication**. This training does not aim to create a standard, stiff smile, but rather to empower communities with the understanding that their natural friendliness is a valuable economic asset. By recognizing how their smiles and helpfulness directly influence tourist satisfaction, positive reviews, and decisions to revisit, it is hoped that tourism players will consciously maintain and optimize this authentic asset for the benefit of all.

#### FURTHER STUDY

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations, necessitating further research to explore more deeply the nonverbal communication of the Mandalika Tourism Village community in building destination branding.

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