

Visual Interactivity: Communication Strategy for *Labuan Bajo* Cultural Tourism Branding

I Nyoman Larry Julianto^{1*}, *I Nengah Lestawi*², *I Ketut Wardana Yasa*³, *Hasbullah*⁴

*larry_smartdesign@gmail.com

Indonesian Institute of the Arts Bali, Denpasar, Indonesia¹,
State Hindu University of I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa, Denpasar, Indonesia^{2,3},
Bumigora University, Mataram, Indonesia⁴

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has prompted the global community to turn to more interactive and accessible media to simulate future experiences. In the context of tourism, digital media is a strategic means in building the image of destinations, including in strengthening Labuan Bajo's tourism branding as a leading cultural tourism destination. However, there are still issues related to effective branding communication strategies in creating interactivity and immersive experiences for potential travelers. Research that raises the integration of local culture as the main content in interactive media to support sustainable tourism branding has also not been explored in depth. Most studies have not examined how the values of local wisdom can be packaged immersively and strategically to create destination differentiation. This study aims to analyze the branding communication strategy of Labuan Bajo cultural tourism destinations that are able to increase attractiveness through an interactive approach. The method used is descriptive qualitative with data collection techniques in the form of interviews with Mr. Hatta and Mr. Evan and literature studies. Data analysis was carried out using the theoretical approach of Aristotle's Rhetoric which emphasizes aspects of ethos, pathos, and logos in message delivery. The results of the study show that the integration of Labuan Bajo's

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local cultural elements into interactive Virtual Reality 360° media is able to create a more immersive branding communication strategy through multisensory experiences. Other findings revealed that the presentation of visual messages that lead to the concept of sustainable tourism provides differentiating value and increases the attractiveness of destinations in the eyes of tourists. The implication of this study is the importance of utilizing experience-based interactive technology in tourism branding strategies, especially in increasing local wisdom and sustainability values as destination competitiveness in the digital era.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality (VR) is a communication medium that provides a more realistic experience, provides visual appeal and provides an emotional impact on the audience (LaValle, 2023). Virtual reality (VR) in Labuan Bajo tourism is a digital innovation that allows tourists to experience the destination in an immersive manner without having to be present directly at the location (Riva et al., 2020). Through VR technology, users can explore natural beauty such as Komodo National Park, see the Komodo dragon's habitat, enjoy panoramic views of exotic islands, and watch marine tourism activities realistically in 360-degree format (Julianto, 2021). The use of VR not only serves as an interesting and interactive promotional medium, but also helps increase interest in visits, provide education about environmental conservation, and expand access for potential tourists who have limited time, cost, or mobility (Wohlgenannt et al., 2020). Thus, VR is an effective destination branding strategy in strengthening Labuan Bajo's image as one of Indonesia's leading tourism icons at the global level.

Indonesia's continuously growing tourism potential makes this sector one of the country's largest foreign exchange earners. According to (Basorudin et al., 2021), while tourism is one of the country's largest sources of foreign

exchange revenue, it actually plays a relatively small role in Regional Gross Domestic Product (RGDP). A top priority tourist destination, it boasts not only natural beauty but also cultural richness that has not been fully developed in Labuan Bajo. Cultural tourism development is still minimal, with little development of media to strengthen the branding of the Labuan Bajo tourism destination. This makes tourism in eastern Indonesia still less known worldwide. The problem is still a lack of management and infrastructure development at some tourist destinations in the Labuan Bajo area. Similarly, research (Bian et al., 2022), revealed the need for tourism sector development, specifically the need to optimize facilities and infrastructure for the Pink Beach tourist attraction. The development of a branding communication strategy will be able to build and improve the image of Labuan Bajo in the local area.

The transformation of Labuan Bajo from a small town into an international tourist destination requires a smart communication plan. Until now, promotions have mostly focused on natural beauty such as Komodo Island, but local cultural aspects are often overlooked. The visuals often featured in promotions, namely the exotic hill landscapes, have become the main icons in various tourism promotion media virtual reality 360°. Awar in his writing states that Labuan Bajo has become one of the tourist destinations in Indonesia because it has promising tourist attractions (Selastia, Citra.Arini Fitri Shara, Yuni Novita, 2025). In both local and international contexts, Labuan Bajo has become an attractive choice (Wiarti et al., 2020). The existence of Labuan Bajo as a significant tourist destination requires attractive and more engaging strategies to provide experiences for the audience.

Local customs that serve as a symbol of Labuan Bajo's branding and uphold the tourism principle. using branding communication strategies that serve as a kind of barrier for tourists. Building emotional connections with local people can be achieved through enriching content. Culture is the soul of a region, and without highlighting it, tourism loses its unique identity. According to Jerald G. and Robert, culture is a pattern of basic assumptions found and determined by a specific group because they have learned and mastered external adaptation and internal integration problems, which have worked well enough to be considered worthwhile and are therefore taught to

new members as the perceived correct way of thinking and feeling in relation to those problems (Minsih et al., 2024). This means that culture is perceived as the result of thoughts and assumptions that are perceived and agreed upon by a specific group.

The increasingly fierce competition among global tourist destinations requires Labuan Bajo to build a strong identity. Destinations like Bali and Yogyakarta have successfully used culture for branding, while Labuan Bajo is still lagging behind in this regard. The cultures present in Labuan Bajo still need to be showcased to strengthen its tourism branding. Local culture and traditions are one of the factors that enhance the natural beauty of Labuan Bajo, making it a popular tourist destination in Indonesia (Siregar, 2023). The lack of visual consistency in Labuan Bajo's promotional materials is evident in designs that lack a strong identity (Islam, 2019). However, what is the appropriate visual communication strategy to ensure that the promotion of Labuan Bajo's cultural tourism brand is strong and capable of competing with other regions.

Labuan Bajo is becoming one of the main tourism alternatives in Indonesia. Many researchers are starting to make Labuan Bajo a research subject. Some previous studies related to tourism in Labuan Bajo: A study titled "The Dynamics of Access on Tourism Development in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia" discusses the dynamics of access contested by several actors in tourism governance in Labuan Bajo (Kodir et al., 2020). This study shares similarities in that it discusses tourism in Labuan Bajo. The difference from previous research lies in the fact that effective visual communication strategies must incorporate local cultural values, appealing visual esthetics, and digital marketing approaches to reach a wider audience. This research, in that sense, focuses more on visual communication strategies that are more communicative and interactive. The relevance of this research is as a reference in building the concept of governance and promotional media for Labuan Bajo.

The research titled "The Potential and Opportunities of Tourism Entrepreneurship in Labuan Bajo" discusses the opportunities for entrepreneurs and startups to develop tourism SMEs in this area, such as culinary, transportation, accommodation, traditional crafts, and others

(Nyoko & Fanggidae, 2021). The similarity between this research and the previous one lies in the object of tourism in Labuan Bajo. The difference from the research that has been done lies in strengthening the branding of cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo. The relevance of this research to the studies used as references to strengthen the statements in the analysis.

The research titled "Adaptation and Collaboration of Local Community in the Super Priority Destination Tourism Program in Labuan Bajo" discusses the importance of collaborating with stakeholders, namely the local community, government, tourism actors (businesses), and academics. The importance of more comprehensive awareness-raising and tourism education for the local community can be achieved by encouraging the role of universities (Islahuddin et al., 2022). The similarity of this research to the research conducted at the research location. However, the difference is that the research conducted focuses more on discussing visual communication strategies in an effort to strengthen the branding of cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo.

The research titled "Strategy of Potential Development and Tourism Constraints of Labuan Bajo Tourism" discusses the many tourism potentials that can be developed into tourist attractions. All of these potentials are supported by good facilities and the branding of Labuan Bajo as a world-class tourism destination (Hendraningrum et al., 2024). The similarity of this research with that conducted at the research location. However, the difference from previous research lies in the discussion of visual communication strategies to strengthen the branding of cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo. The relevance of this research is as a reference in analyzing visual communication strategies.

The research titled "Digital-Based and Sustainable Tourism Village Development Planning in Papa Garang Village, Labuan Bajo" discusses how the development of a marine tourism village requires an approach that incorporates digital technology, which can serve as an information center containing the results of internalizing marine culture with local wisdom and infrastructure to accelerate economic growth (Setyawati, 2022). The similarity between this research and the research conducted lies in the research location.

The difference is that the research conducted focuses more on visual communication strategies as a means of strengthening the branding of tourism in Labuan Bajo.

The five studies mentioned above have not yet discussed visual communication strategies based on rhetorical theory. According to Aristotle, rhetoric is the ability to discover the available means of persuasion in any situation faced (Muslim, 2022). This means that rhetoric in visual communication needs to be studied from the perspectives of information, persuasion, and entertainment. The importance of this research is to formulate a branding communication strategy in tourism promotion. This strategy significantly strengthens more interactive visual branding. Digital technology is a campaign tool that can strengthen cultural values for the audience (Rayhan et al., 2025). The delivery of messages interactively in visual branding communication media. This research has benefits as a reinforcement of the branding image of Labuan Bajo tourism in general for tourism in Indonesia. Therefore, the main research gap lies in the absence of studies that connect visual communication strategies, digital technology, and strengthening cultural identity in the context of Labuan Bajo tourism branding in a comprehensive and applicable manner.

Research on the application of virtual reality (VR) in Labuan Bajo tourism is important because digital transformation has changed the way tourists seek information, build perceptions, and make decisions to visit. Labuan Bajo faces challenges in presenting a promotional experience that is not only informative but also immersive and memorable. Through this study, it can be studied to what extent VR technology is able to increase the attractiveness of destinations, strengthen branding image, and significantly influence tourist interest in visits. In addition, this research is also important to identify the potential of VR as a conservation educational medium, especially in introducing Komodo dragon habitat without having to increase the pressure of excessive direct visits. Thus, this study is not only academically relevant, but also has practical implications for the development of sustainable and technology-based tourism promotion strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to examine in depth the visual communication strategy based on digital technology, especially virtual reality, in strengthening the branding of cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo. The research was carried out through data collection techniques in the form of field observations, in-depth interviews with stakeholders (local governments, tourism actors, local communities, and academics), and documentation studies on the promotional media that have been used. Data analysis is carried out interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to identify the patterns, meanings, and effectiveness of the visual communication strategies applied. In addition, this research also integrates conceptual approaches related to destination branding and immersive experiences to formulate an innovative, adaptive, and sustainable visual communication strategy model in supporting the image of Labuan Bajo cultural tourism in the digital era. Visual branding communication that reinforces this method emphasizes the audience's perception and emotions (Fricillia et al., 2025). By emphasizing the message conveyed thru virtual reality media. Thru the theory of retrorika, this analysis is based on the science of communication that can entice and influence potential tourists.

The theoretical foundation of rhetoric is a person's or communicator's ability to deliver a message persuasively. This idea aligns with Aristotle's view that rhetoric is the skill of finding the appropriate means of persuasion available in any situation. Rhetoric comes from the English word "rhetoric" and is rooted in the Latin word "rhetorica," which means the art of speaking. As a science, rhetoric has rational, empirical, general, and cumulative characteristics. This function is only possessed by the art of rhetoric. There are three types of persuasive tools that a speaker can create, which are determined by the speaker's personal character (Ethos), by placing the audience within a specific framework of thinking (Pathos), and by the proof or pseudo-proof derived from the content of the speech itself (Logos) (Hanyfah et al., 2022).

Rhetoric is the art or technique of speaking or writing in a way that persuades people to think, feel, or act in a certain way. Rhetorical theory

examines how messages are created, shared, and understood to achieve specific goals, such as persuading, informing, or entertaining. Modern rhetorical theory encompasses the study of discourse analysis, digital rhetoric (such as social media), and multimodal studies (which combine text, images, and sound).

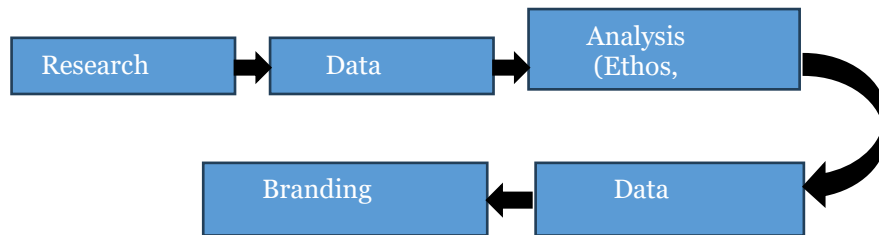


Figure 1. Procedures in research
Source: author's documentation

1. Research Object

This stage is the determination of the focus of the research, namely what will be studied specifically. The object is a visual communication strategy based on rhetorical elements (ethos, pathos, logos) in the branding of cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo. At this stage, the limitations of the problem are also determined so that the research is more directed and not widened.

2. Data Collection

This stage contains the process of collecting information relevant to the research object. The methods used usually include observation of visual media (promotional videos, VR, digital content), interviews with Mr. Evan and Mr. Hatta (government, local communities), and documentation. The goal is to acquire rich data to analyses in depth.

3. Analysis (Ethos, Pathos, Logos)

At this stage, the data that has been collected is analyzed using a rhetorical framework, namely:

Ethos: identifying elements of credibility in visuals

Pathos: looking at how visuals build the audience's emotions

Logos: assessing aspects of logic and information conveyed

This analysis aims to understand how visual messages are shaped and translated in the context of branding.

4. Data Validation

The validation stage is carried out to ensure the validity and accuracy of the data. The techniques used can be in the form of source triangulation (comparing various sources), triangulation methods (observation, interviews, documentation).

5. Branding Impact

This stage is the interpretation of the results of the analysis of the impact resulting from the visual communication strategy. These impacts can be in the form of improving the image of destinations, strengthening cultural identity, increasing tourist attractions, and emotional and immersive experiences for tourists. This stage connects the results of the analysis with the practical goals in tourism development.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research on visual communication media for cultural tourism in Labuan Bajo shows that graphic design, photography, and digital content play an important role in promoting the natural and cultural richness of the destination. The placement of cultural elements in virtual reality visuals is a strategic content for promoting tourism in Labuan Bajo. The findings of this research reveal several challenges, such as maintaining brand image consistency and adapting content for a global audience can be seen in Figure 2 below:

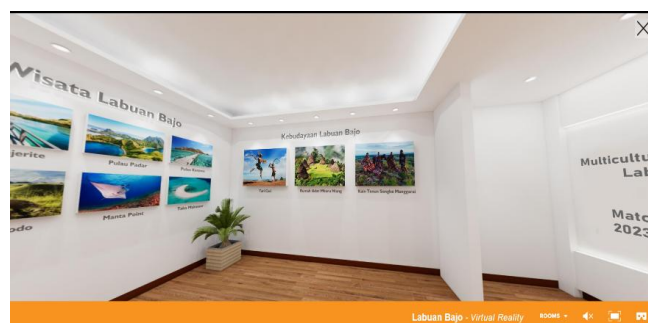


Figure 2. Virtual Reality Media for Labuan Bajo Tourism
Source: (Labuan Bajo Tourism Promotion, 2024)

The cultural image of Labuan Bajo can strengthen tourism branding, which still requires media with strong technology. Mr. Hatta emphasized in the interview the many cultures of the Labuan Bajo community. With strong cultural colors such as the Caci dance and fabrics with mana manuk motifs and black songket (Interview, November 24, 2024). In addition, the distinctive colors of Labuan Bajo, such as gold and red, can be used to promote its unique historical heritage culture.

From the cultural image above, it can be enhanced to strengthen tourism branding with interactive media from virtual reality. In delivering the message, it is able to attract the audience's attention. Thru the science of communication, interaction occurs thru the sending of messages, both logical and emotional (Julianto, 2019). Virtual reality (VR) media has messages created from ideas derived thru storytelling in visual form. The delivery of VR messages is expected to attract user experiences to be emotionally engaged. The emotional response in the audience from an attractive and beautiful visual design is largely determined by the visuals.

a. Ethos (Message Sender)

The promotional media for Labuan Bajo tourism, by incorporating culture with a touch of interactivity, depicts high-quality content. The impression created by VR 3600-based promotional media instills confidence in the audience of potential tourists to Labuan Bajo, both local and international. The use of this branding communication strategy can build the tourist destination of Labuan Bajo by strengthening its cultural image.



Figure 3. Delivery of Cultural Destination Messages in Labuan Bajo
Source: (Labuan Bajo Tourism Promotion, 2023)

Visual communication through Virtual Reality 360° media is able to hypnotize the audience of potential tourists. According to Martin Lester in Sukirno, a communication that is able to convey a message is designed with visual language and can be digested by others who observe the visual message (Maryani & Darmawan, 2024). Message delivery through visual media (Virtual Reality 360°) stimulates the sensory eyes to attract the attention of the audience of potential tourists.

A strategy to convey messages thru interactive visuals. 360-degree Virtual Reality media provides an esthetic experience for potential visitors to Labuan Bajo. This is done if the media is engaging and offers an interactive experience like Virtual Reality in promoting Labuan Bajo. Digital technologies such as virtual reality are used as a more interactive communication strategy (Iswanto, 2025). The communication strategy for branding Labuan Bajo's cultural tourism instills confidence in the audience of potential tourists.

b. Logos (logic)

The logic of Labuan Bajo's tourism promotion media provides a more engaging experience. Some tourism operators in Labuan Bajo stated that they need reasonable media.

The use of media with new technology has attracted tourists to visit Labuan Bajo. An interesting strategy to enhance the level of tourist visits to this eastern region. The experience offered by promotional media will more emotionally engage the audience and encourage them to choose to travel, according to Mr. Evan (interview, November 25, 2024).

In this case, these elements serve as enhancers of branding thru visual communication for sustainable tourism. To strengthen the

image of sustainable tourism, there needs to be community-based ecotourism that pays attention to the sustainability of Labuan Bajo's beauty (Fennell & Cooper, 2020). Such matters need to be exposed, as they are the most important part of an excellent branding image.

This logical strategy provides education as well as an immersive experience from engaging and interactive tourism promotion media such as 360-degree Virtual Reality, which can create an emotional connection with the audience. The display of sunsets and *caci* dances in VR provides a deep and lasting impression on the audience's minds (Kim & Hall, 2019). Visuals that contain interesting impressions provide reinforcement and enhance the trust and user experience for potential visitors to Labuan Bajo tourism.

c. Pathos (Emotional)

The emotional reinforcement of design in visual communication thru 360-degree virtual reality media in promoting Labuan Bajo's cultural tourism creates an impression that can have a positive impact in attracting potential tourists. This is because in the media, there are attractive cultural elements such as the *Caci* dance, which indirectly create a more immersive experience (Tussyadiah et al., 2017). With the emotional reinforcement thru visual communication, it creates an attractive offer for the audience of potential tourists who wish to visit Labuan Bajo. The audience's interest in evoking emotions leads to a change in their behavior. Emotional attachment thru visuals can lead to an increase in tourist visitors. This is in line with what (Yersüren & Özel, 2024) stated, that virtual tourism can demonstrate that users can be given the freedom to interactively explore the destination they will visit beforehand.

This effort is made to engage potential tourists immersively and remotely. Revitalization thru immersive media can provide an interesting and attractive depiction of cultural patterns. The natural beauty and culture of Labuan Bajo actually provide an esthetic experience in engaging visual communication media. The impact of this branding communication strategy indirectly evokes a sense of

tranquility and a longing to explore Labuan Bajo. This creates a positive emotional impact on the audience, encouraging them to choose Labuan Bajo as an attractive and comfortable tourist destination.

Interactivity that creates positive emotions for potential tourists to Labuan Bajo can provide an impact on regional foreign exchange and improve the local community's economy. The branding communication of Labuan Bajo's cultural tourism targets multiple senses to instill confidence in potential tourists.

CONCLUSION

Message in communication branding in immersive media such as virtual reality 360° is one of the findings of the right communication strategy for tourism. The second finding offers the concept of cultural visual display in virtual reality media 360° as an offer of the concept of sustainable tourism. This strategy makes immersive media that utilizes the power of tourism branding more on target. Tourism simulations in promotional media make this strategy more multi-sensory. This makes visual interaction that has the power to attract tourists. And it has a high level of interactivity. The interactivity that occurred from the response in the media promoting Labuan Bajo cultural tourism. The promotional media used is technology-based. By prioritizing this new communication strategy, it is even more promising for prospective tourists to choose to visit Labuan Bajo. The strategies found include multi-sensory visual communication and simulation for sustainable tourism.

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