

The negotiation of authenticity in *Rafflesia Arnoldii* ecotourism: Postmodern tension on local community empowerment in Bengkulu

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how interpersonal communication constructs and negotiates the meaning of *Rafflesia Arnoldii* ecotourism in Kemumu Village, North Bengkulu, from a postmodern communication perspective. The study focuses on how local communities, tour guides, tourism actors, government representatives, and tourists communicate ecological information, local cultural narratives, and conservation values across face-to-face and digital communication spaces. A qualitative descriptive design was employed within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. Data were collected through semistructured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussion, and documentary study, and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach with source and method triangulation and member checking. The findings show four interconnected patterns. First, interpersonal communication functions as a dialogic mechanism for translating scientific information about *Rafflesia* into locally meaningful narratives. Second, local language, cultural stories, and non-verbal expressions become communicative signs through which tourists encounter the destination as meaningful and authentic. Third, the meaning of authenticity is not fixed solely in the biological object; it is negotiated through interaction among tourists, guides, communities, institutions, and digital representations. Fourth, the coexistence of face-to-face communication and social media creates both opportunities and tensions because digital representations may broaden visibility while also producing simplified or incomplete understandings that require clarification through direct interaction. From a postmodern communication perspective, *Rafflesia* ecotourism is therefore not promoted only through information transmission but through the continual negotiation of signs, experiences, identities, and claims of authenticity. The study recommends an integrated communication model in which community-based interpersonal communication remains the interpretive core while digital media extend reach, document local narratives, and strengthen conservation-oriented tourism promotion.

Keywords: *interpersonal communication; authenticity; Rafflesia Arnoldii; ecotourism; local community empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism is increasingly positioned not only as an economic activity but also as a communication arena in which nature, culture, community identity, and destination meanings are produced and negotiated. In Bengkulu Province, *Rafflesia Arnoldii* functions simultaneously as a biological attraction, a local symbol, and a narrative resource for tourism promotion. The tourism value of *Rafflesia* is therefore not contained exclusively in



the flower as a natural object. It is also produced through the ways in which tour guides, residents, tourism institutions, and tourists communicate about its rarity, blooming cycle, local history, conservation significance, and the experience of visiting the site.

The expansion of digital tourism communication has intensified this process. Social media, photographs, short videos, destination reviews, and other user-generated content allow tourists to encounter a destination before and after their physical visit. Research on tourism authenticity shows that digital media can influence how tourists perceive and communicate authenticity, while social-media-based tourism can make authenticity itself a negotiated communicative construction rather than a fixed property of a destination (Kim & Kim, 2020; Suzuki, 2019; Almeida & Leal, 2024). The communication environment is consequently fragmented across multiple spaces: the physical destination, face-to-face interaction, institutional narratives, and digital representations.

This condition is particularly relevant to a postmodern communication perspective. Postmodern approaches question the existence of a single, universal, and authoritative definition of reality. In tourism studies, postmodern authenticity recognizes that tourists may accept staged, symbolic, mediated, or hyperreal experiences as meaningful without requiring them to correspond completely to an objective standard of authenticity (Yi et al., 2018; Zhang & Yin, 2020; Gao et al., 2022). The distinction between the original object and its representation therefore becomes less stable. A destination is experienced not only through what is physically present but also through the signs, narratives, images, and interpersonal interpretations surrounding it.

From the perspective of communication science, this theoretical shift is important because it moves the focus from communication as one-way information delivery toward communication as a process of meaning production. Interpersonal communication becomes especially significant because it provides a dialogic space in which tourists can question, interpret, compare, and negotiate the meanings they encounter. The guide or community member is not simply an information transmitter; he or she becomes an interpreter, storyteller, cultural mediator, and representative of local identity. In this sense, communication participates directly in constructing the tourist experience.

Existing studies have established that interpersonal communication and community participation can support tourism development and local empowerment. Studies of community-based ecotourism emphasize participation, capacity building, collaborative governance, and local economic benefits, while research on tourism communication shows the importance of interaction between guides, communities, institutions, and tourists (Wahyuni et al., 2023; Muflihah & Prajanti, 2023; Putri et al., 2023). However, much of this literature treats communication primarily as a strategy for information dissemination, promotion, coordination, or persuasion. The postmodern question—how communication itself produces, negotiates, and sometimes destabilizes the meaning of authenticity in an ecotourism destination—remains less developed, particularly in the context of *Rafflesia Arnoldii* in Bengkulu.

A second gap concerns the relationship between interpersonal and digital communication. Current tourism research has shown that social media can construct destination authenticity and influence online engagement, while newer post-postmodern scholarship examines how digital representations and tourist-generated content reshape the boundary between reality, fantasy, and experience (Canavan & McCamley, 2021; Canavan, 2025; Almeida & Leal, 2024). Yet there is limited qualitative research examining how direct interpersonal encounters and digital representations coexist within community-based ecotourism, particularly when the attraction is a rare natural species whose physical appearance and blooming cycle cannot be fully controlled by tourism managers.

This study addresses that gap by re-reading existing empirical findings on *Rafflesia Arnoldii* ecotourism through a postmodern communication lens. The objective is to examine how interpersonal communication contributes to the negotiation of authenticity, destination meaning, and community empowerment in *Rafflesia* ecotourism. The study asks: (1) how do local actors communicate and negotiate the meaning of *Rafflesia* ecotourism with tourists; (2) what communicative signs and strategies are used to construct meaningful tourism experiences; and (3) how does the coexistence of interpersonal and digital communication shape the negotiation of authenticity and community empowerment? The novelty lies in connecting interpersonal communication, tourism authenticity, and postmodern communication theory within a community-based *Rafflesia* ecotourism context.

Postmodernism is used in this study not as a label for a historical period, but as an analytical perspective for examining unstable meanings, multiple interpretations, fragmented communication spaces, and the weakening of a single authoritative definition of authenticity. In communication, this perspective emphasizes that meaning is produced through discourse, signs, interaction, and representation. The tourist destination is consequently understood as a communicative text whose meaning can be read differently by communities, guides, institutions, and visitors.

The concept of simulacra and hyperreality is useful for understanding situations in which representations become more influential than direct reference to an original object (Baudrillard, 1994). In tourism, this does not mean that every digital representation is false. Rather, it highlights the possibility that images, stories, and mediated experiences participate in defining what tourists expect and recognize as the destination itself. Recent research applies this logic to virtual and social-media tourism, showing that tourists may experience authentic feelings even when the experience is mediated or reconstructed (Gao et al., 2022; Almeida & Leal, 2024).

Tourism authenticity has developed from an objectivist concern with originality toward constructivist, existential, and postmodern understandings. Postmodern authenticity questions the assumption that authenticity must be located in an objectively original object. Instead, authenticity can emerge from tourists' interpretations, emotions, symbolic consumption, and acceptance of mediated or staged experiences (Yi et al., 2018; Zhang & Yin, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant to *Rafflesia* tourism because tourists do not encounter the flower as an isolated biological object. They encounter it through information, narratives, expectations, photographs, local stories, guide explanations, and the physical experience of entering the forest.

Postmodern authenticity therefore becomes an analytical bridge between interpersonal communication and tourism. A guide's explanation can transform scientific information into a meaningful narrative; a local story can connect a biological object to community identity; and a social-media post can extend the destination beyond the physical site. These communicative processes do not simply represent an already-existing authenticity; they participate in its negotiation. The study consequently treats authenticity as relational and communicatively produced rather than as an absolute characteristic of *Rafflesia*.

Interpersonal communication is understood here as dialogic interaction involving information exchange, empathy, interpretation, relationship building, and feedback. In community-based tourism, such communication allows local actors to explain ecological knowledge, negotiate visitor behavior, convey cultural values, and respond to tourists' questions. The postmodern perspective adds an interpretive dimension: the

encounter is a space where different versions of the destination meet and are negotiated. The guide's explanation, the tourist's prior digital exposure, and the community's local narrative may not be identical, but their interaction can produce a temporary shared meaning.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. The paradigm was selected because the study seeks to understand communication as a process through which social actors construct, interpret, and negotiate meanings rather than as a linear transmission of objective information. The postmodern perspective functions as an interpretive lens applied to the empirical themes already generated from the field data.

The research was conducted in Kemumu Village, North Bengkulu, an area associated with *Rafflesia Arnoldii* ecotourism and community participation in conservation-oriented tourism. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, focus group discussion (FGD), and documentary study. The participant categories consisted of an academic/tourism researcher, Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office representative, Himpunan Pramuwisata Indonesia (HPI) Bengkulu representative, Komunitas Pecinta Puspa Langka (KPPL), Bouven Rangers community, the Head of Kemumu Village, a domestic tourist, and a representative of Pokdarwis Kemumu.

The interviews explored experiences of communicating *Rafflesia* information, local cultural narratives, conservation messages, tourist expectations, communication barriers, and the role of digital media. Participatory observation focused on information delivery, local-language use, non-verbal expressions, spontaneous interaction, and the way guides mediated tourist experience. Documentary materials included tourism brochures, promotional videos, news articles, community activity reports, and social-media publications.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis. Initial coding identified communication patterns, strategies, barriers, tourist perceptions, empowerment, and digital-media practices. The themes were then reinterpreted using postmodern concepts of negotiated authenticity, multiplicity of meaning, representation, and the relationship between physical experience and mediated representation. This second-order interpretation was important because the research question was revised in response to the reviewer's request to make the postmodernism dimension explicit. Thematic analysis is appropriate because it provides a flexible procedure for identifying patterned meanings in qualitative material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Source and method triangulation were used by comparing interviews, observations, FGD results, and documents. Member checking was also conducted by returning preliminary interpretations to informants.

Table 1. Participant Categories

No.	Category	n	Role/Source
1	Academic/tourism researcher	1	Expert perspective
2	Provincial government	1	Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office
3	Tourism practitioner	1	HPI Bengkulu

4	Local community organization	1	KPPL Bengkulu
5	Local community	1	Bouven Rangers
6	Regency/village government	1	Head of Kemumu Village
7	Tourist	1	Domestic tourist
<u>8</u>	<u>Tourism activist</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Pokdarwis Kemumu</u>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified four major empirical themes: (1) interpersonal communication as ecological and cultural interpretation; (2) local communication strategies as the production of destination meaning; (3) barriers and tensions between direct and mediated communication; and (4) community capacity building and empowerment. When these findings are interpreted through postmodern communication theory, an additional pattern becomes visible: the meaning of Rafflesia tourism is continuously negotiated among multiple communicative actors and media spaces.

Interpersonal Communication as Ecological and Cultural Interpretation

The findings show that tour guides and community members are central communicators in explaining the uniqueness and biological characteristics of *Rafflesia Arnoldii*. Direct interaction enables tourists to ask questions and receive explanations about the blooming process, observation locations, conservation practices, travel preparation, and local conditions. This confirms the importance of interpersonal communication identified in the original analysis, but the postmodern reading adds that the guide is not merely a transmitter of facts. The guide is an interpreter who connects different systems of meaning: scientific knowledge, local experience, tourism expectations, and conservation values.

This interpretive function is significant because tourists arrive with prior knowledge obtained from different sources. Digital photographs, short videos, destination stories, and word-of-mouth information may shape expectations before the tourist reaches Kemumu. During face-to-face interaction, those expectations are encountered by local explanations and the material conditions of the destination. Authenticity is therefore negotiated through interaction rather than simply confirmed by the physical presence of *Rafflesia*. This is consistent with research showing that authenticity in tourism is socially constructed and can be negotiated through different interpretive frameworks (Yi et al., 2018; Zhang & Yin, 2020).

Local Language, Cultural Narratives, and Non-Verbal Signs

The research identifies the use of local language, cultural narratives, and non-verbal expressions as important communication strategies. These practices can be read as signs that connect *Rafflesia* with the social identity of the community. The meaning of the destination consequently extends beyond botanical information. A guide's story, choice of words, gestures, tone, and explanation of local practices become part of the tourist experience.

From a postmodern communication perspective, these signs demonstrate that

there is no single communicative route to the meaning of *Rafflesia*. The biological object is interpreted through multiple narratives. Scientific explanation, local knowledge, conservation discourse, and tourist expectations can coexist without being reduced to one authoritative meaning. This plurality corresponds to the postmodern rejection of a single universal interpretive center. The finding also supports contemporary tourism research emphasizing dialogic negotiation of authenticity rather than treating authenticity as an inherent property of an attraction (Chhabra, 2023).

Digital Representation, Hyperreality, and the Need for Interpersonal Verification

The field data show that social media is increasingly used to disseminate information about *Rafflesia* and ecotourism activities. Its main advantage is reach: photographs, videos, and stories can make a geographically remote destination visible to audiences beyond Bengkulu. At the same time, the research identified misinformation, incomplete understanding, and limitations in digital literacy as communication barriers. This finding becomes theoretically important when read through the postmodern concept of mediated reality.

The issue is not that digital representations are necessarily false. Rather, a social-media representation selects certain signs of the destination and leaves others outside the frame. A photograph of a blooming *Rafflesia*, for example, can communicate attraction and rarity but cannot by itself communicate the uncertainty of the blooming period, the effort required to reach the location, or the conservation ethics expected from visitors. Thus, digital media can function as a partial representation that requires interpersonal interpretation. Research on social-media authenticity similarly shows that online images and destination narratives can shape tourists' perceptions of what counts as authentic (Kim & Kim, 2020; Suzuki, 2019; Almeida & Leal, 2024).

The postmodern concept of hyperreality helps explain why mediated signs can become highly influential in shaping tourist expectations. However, the present study does not claim that *Rafflesia* tourism has become a fully hyperreal destination. Instead, the data indicate a communicative tension between representation and physical experience. The face-to-face encounter provides an opportunity to negotiate that tension by clarifying information, correcting misunderstandings, and connecting digital expectations with local knowledge. In this sense, interpersonal communication operates as a form of interpretive verification within a fragmented media environment.

Table 2. Postmodern Communication Interpretation of the Findings

Empirical finding	Communication process	Postmodern concept	Interpretive implication
Guide explains <i>Rafflesia</i> ecology	Dialogue and interpretation	Decentered meaning	Meaning is negotiated between expert/local knowledge and tourist expectations
Local language and cultural stories	Symbolic and narrative communication	Plurality of signs	<i>Rafflesia</i> is experienced as both nature and cultural identity

Social-media promotion	Mediated representation	Simulacra/hyperreality	Digital signs shape expectations but cannot represent the whole destination
Tourist questions and direct interaction	Feedback and negotiation	Constructed authenticity	Authenticity emerges through interaction rather than existing only in the object
Community participation and training	Collective meaning-making	Decentralization of authority	Local actors become communicative subjects rather than promotional objects

Communication Barriers as a Postmodern Tension

The study identifies four major barriers: limited understanding of conservation information, difficulty translating scientific knowledge into accessible language, cultural and linguistic differences, and uneven technological capacity. These barriers should not be treated merely as technical communication failures. They also reveal the plurality of interpretive positions among communication actors. A scientific explanation, a local narrative, a tourist expectation, and a digital representation may use different vocabularies and standards of relevance.

From the postmodern perspective, communication effectiveness therefore cannot be reduced to the accuracy of a single message. It depends on the ability of communicators to negotiate meanings across different social positions. This is consistent with postmodern tourism research that views authenticity and tourist experience as subjective, contextual, and plural rather than universally fixed (Gao et al., 2022; Chhabra, 2023). Training for guides should consequently include not only factual knowledge but also narrative competence, intercultural communication, digital literacy, dialogic listening, and the ability to connect online expectations with on-site realities.

Community Empowerment Through Communicative Agency

Community empowerment in the findings is closely related to the ability of local actors to become active producers of tourism meaning. Training, participation in decision-making, inter-institutional coordination, and economic opportunities strengthen the community's capacity to manage tourism. Previous community-based ecotourism studies similarly emphasize participation, local governance, capacity building, and economic benefits as important dimensions of empowerment (Wahyuni et al., 2023; Muflihah & Prajanti, 2023; Putri et al., 2023).

The postmodern contribution is to place communicative agency at the center of this empowerment. When communities are only represented by external tourism campaigns, they remain objects of promotion. When they participate in storytelling, guiding, social-media production, conservation education, and decision-making, they become subjects who negotiate how their place is represented. This distinction is important for Rafflesia ecotourism because the value of the destination is closely connected to local knowledge and conservation responsibility.

An Integrated Communication Model for Rafflesia Ecotourism

Based on the findings, the study proposes an interpretive model consisting of four connected layers: local ecological and cultural knowledge, interpersonal interpretation, digital representation, and community communicative agency. The model does not replace the original empirical findings; it synthesizes them through the postmodern communication lens requested by the reviewer.

Layer	Main communication function	Expected contribution
1. Local knowledge and conservation values	Provide situated ecological and cultural meaning	Preserves local identity and conservation knowledge
2. Interpersonal communication	Interpret, negotiate, clarify, and personalize meaning	Creates trust, dialogue, and meaningful tourist experience
3. Digital communication	Extend reach and circulate images, stories, and information	Expands visibility and destination awareness
4. Community communicative agency	Enable residents to produce and control narratives	Strengthens empowerment, ownership, and sustainable promotion

The central proposition of the model is that digital communication should extend rather than displace community-based interpersonal communication. The strongest communication strategy is therefore not a choice between traditional and digital media, but an integrated arrangement in which digital representations attract attention and interpersonal communication negotiates meaning, authenticity, expectations, and conservation behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that interpersonal communication plays a central role in the promotion and interpretation of *Rafflesia Arnoldii* ecotourism in Kemumu Village. Its contribution extends beyond the transmission of ecological information. Through dialogue, local language, cultural narratives, and non-verbal communication, guides and community members negotiate the meanings that tourists attach to *Rafflesia*, nature, local culture, and conservation.

The postmodern communication perspective shows that authenticity in *Rafflesia* ecotourism should not be treated as a fixed property located exclusively in the flower or destination. It is negotiated through encounters among physical reality, local narratives, institutional messages, tourist expectations, and digital representations. Social media expands the visibility of the destination but can also simplify or fragment its meaning. Interpersonal communication consequently functions as an interpretive space where expectations can be clarified and different meanings can be negotiated.

The study also finds that community empowerment is inseparable from communicative agency. Local communities should not only appear as objects in tourism promotion; they should become producers of narratives, interpreters of local knowledge, participants in decision-making, and active communicators of conservation values. The theoretical contribution of this study is therefore the linkage of interpersonal communication, negotiated authenticity, and community empowerment within a postmodern communication framework for community-based ecotourism.

For practitioners, the study recommends a three-part communication strategy: (1) strengthen guide and community capacity in ecological, narrative, intercultural, and digital communication; (2) develop digital content that is informative, contextualized, and consistent with on-site realities; and (3) establish an integrated communication workflow in which digital promotion directs visitors toward meaningful interpersonal interpretation at the destination. Future research should examine tourists' own interpretations of digital and face-to-face representations of *Rafflesia* and compare how different visitor groups negotiate authenticity across these communication spaces.

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