

## **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF MISCOMMUNICATION PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY FOREIGNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Miscommunication problems and culture shocks are significant challenges faced by foreign visitors during their visits to Lombok. The encounter between Western people and indigenous Lombok people may present numerous communication barriers and instances of culture shock. This qualitative research aims to explore the complex miscommunication problems occurring within such an encounter. Five foreign visitors participated in this study. These participants took part in the study voluntarily. Employing a qualitative approach, researchers seek to reveal the underlying factors that contribute to miscommunication and their impact on intercultural interactions. To obtain the data for the study, the researchers employed in-depth interviews and participant observations to gather rich data from Western visitors. Through thematic analysis, patterns and themes emergent from the data were identified. This provided insights into the nature and dynamics of miscommunication. The findings suggest that miscommunication between Western visitors and local communities stemmed from diverse sources, including differences in perception, confusion due to language barriers, and variances in cultural norms, gestures, and etiquettes. Implication of the findings is provided.*

*Keywords: Miscommunication, Barriers, Culture Shock*

### **ABSTRAK**

Masalah miskomunikasi dan kejutan budaya merupakan tantangan signifikan yang dihadapi pengunjung asing selama berkunjung ke Lombok. Pertemuan antara masyarakat Barat dan masyarakat adat Lombok dapat menimbulkan banyak hambatan komunikasi dan kejutan budaya. Penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi masalah miskomunikasi kompleks yang terjadi dalam pertemuan tersebut. Lima pengunjung asing berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Para peserta ini mengambil bagian dalam penelitian secara sukarela. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, para peneliti berupaya mengungkap faktor-faktor mendasar yang berkontribusi terhadap miskomunikasi dan dampaknya terhadap interaksi antarbudaya. Untuk memperoleh data penelitian, para peneliti menggunakan wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipan untuk mengumpulkan banyak data dari pengunjung Barat. Melalui analisis tematik, pola dan tema yang muncul dari data diidentifikasi. Hal ini memberikan wawasan tentang sifat dan dinamika miskomunikasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa miskomunikasi antara pengunjung Barat dan komunitas lokal berasal dari berbagai sumber, termasuk perbedaan persepsi, kebingungan karena kendala bahasa, dan perbedaan dalam norma budaya, gerak tubuh, dan etiket. Implikasi dari temuan disediakan.

Kata Kunci: Miscommunication, Barriers, Culture Shock

## **A. Introduction**

Lombok is a well-known tourist destination in Indonesia, with both natural and cultural heritage. It has many unique features, such as beautiful views of nature, delicious cuisines, and a wide range of cultural activities. Some popular attractions in Lombok include the Gili Islands, traditional Sasak villages, and Mount Rinjani. Tourists often visit these places in their vibrant underwater world for diving, beautiful cultural legacy, and opportunities for trekking and surfing. Lombok's popularity as a tourist destination has been steadily increasing over the years, attracting visitors from all around the world. In this way, Lombok is a popular place for guests from inside and outside Indonesia. Regardless of such natural and culturally beautiful attractions, overseas tourists who come to Lombok might encounter problems when they communicate with the local people. Such problems occur because of the different ways of interacting, behaving, and communicating with each other.

There are several common miscommunications between foreign visitors and local people in Lombok. These include language barriers,

cultural differences, and a lack of understanding of local customs and traditions (Mancini-Cross et al., 2009). Language barriers can often lead to misunderstanding and unintentional offenses. Miscommunication occurs when foreign visitors are unable to effectively communicate their needs or understand the instructions given to them. For example, a simple misunderstanding of directions could result in tourists getting lost or not receiving the help they need. It is therefore important for both parties to develop a mutual understanding in order to bridge these communication gaps. By addressing these barriers, foreign visitors and locals can enhance their overall experiences and avoid potential conflicts.

The present study employs the theory of high-context and low-context cultures (Hall, 1989). Intercultural communication theory explores the communication processes between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Hall identifies high-context cultures as those where communication is based on body language and shared information, while low-context cultures use clear words for direct

and understood messages. High-context cultures are better at maintaining ties due to their emphasis on social unity and group cohesion, while low-context societies value clear communication. High-context cultures facilitate better understanding and connection among people within the same culture due to shared cultural norms, values, and assumptions, allowing for intuitive understanding of each other's intentions and meanings. This can lead to more harmonious relationships and smoother interactions within the group. On the other hand, low-context cultures may prioritize efficiency and clarity in communication, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or conflicts among people coming from high-context cultures (Özdemir-Çağatay & Küllü-Sülü, 2013). Thus, understanding a culture's context orientation can help explain miscommunication and guide strategies for clearer interactions.

In short, high-context cultures rely heavily on nonverbal cues, implied messages, and context to communicate, whereas low-context cultures depend more on explicit verbal expressions. As such, it is

important for individuals from different cultural backgrounds to be aware of these differences to navigate communication effectively and build strong relationships. Misunderstandings can easily arise when individuals from high- and low-context cultures interact, as they may interpret communication signals differently. Thus, by being mindful of these cultural differences, individuals can bridge this gap and foster a better understanding of their interactions. By recognizing and respecting the communication styles of others, individuals can bridge the gap between high- and low-context cultures and foster better understanding and collaboration.

Intercultural miscommunication is a pervasive issue that arises when individuals from different cultural backgrounds fail to understand each other because of divergent communication norms, values, or languages (Croucher et al., 2015). Intercultural problems emerge when individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds interact, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and challenges primarily because of differing cultural norms, values, beliefs, and communication styles.

Intercultural communication barriers can occur when visitors interact with local people for a variety of reasons similar to those encountered in intercultural situations worldwide. These barriers usually stem from differences in language, cultural norms, non-verbal communication, and preconceived stereotypes or prejudices (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). For example, a visitor may unintentionally offend a local by not understanding the appropriate way to greet someone or by misinterpreting a gesture or facial expression. This can lead to tension and miscommunication between the two parties, thereby hindering effective communication and relationship building. This example indicates that, in addition to language and non-verbal communication, different cultural norms can also cause misunderstandings. It is important for individuals to be aware of these barriers and actively work to overcome them to foster positive and productive interactions in intercultural situations.

Regarding cultural norms, Lombok's local customs are predominantly influenced by the Islamic religion. They may differ from

what visitors are accustomed to. For instance, norms related to gender roles and ways of communication may be stricter or more conservative than those in other cultures (Cahyaningtyas et al. 2022). Visitors who are unaware or insensitive to these norms risk causing offenses or creating awkward situations. Therefore, it is crucial for visitors to educate themselves about the cultural norms and practices of Lombok before interacting with locals. By showing respect and understanding these differences, individuals can build stronger relationships and avoid misunderstandings during their time in Lombok. Non-verbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, body language, and personal space, vary between cultures. In Lombok, gestures that foreign tourists find harmless may be considered rude or offensive by locals. For instance, the "OK" hand gesture, commonly used in Western cultures to signify approval, can be interpreted as a sign of zero in Lombok. It is important for visitors to be mindful of these cultural differences to ensure positive interactions with the local community. Additionally, expectations regarding

eye contact, physical contact, and body language during interactions can lead to misunderstandings. Similarly, locals may have their own stereotypes regarding visitors. This can lead to biased behavior and prevent authentic understanding. From this standpoint, it can be inferred that people involved in intercultural encounters often face challenges owing to differences in cultural expectations and communication styles.

According to Hall's theory, intercultural miscommunication can occur because of (1) differences in the implicitness and/or explicitness of communication methods. When individuals from high-context cultures communicate with those from low-context cultures, high-context individuals may leave much unsaid, expecting others to infer meaning. Low-context individuals, however, might miss these cues and expect more explicit information, leading to misunderstanding. Further, the use of (2) verbal and non-verbal cues can be the source of misinterpretations when non-verbal cues are not recognized or understood differently (Patterson et al., 2023). For example, silence in a high-context culture may

convey meaning, whereas in low-context cultures, it might be seen as discomfort or a lack of response. Another source of miscommunication is the use of (3) indirect and/or direct communication. In high-context cultures, communicators often employ indirectness to maintain harmony and save face. Conversely, in low-context cultures, communicators who tend to be more direct may view this as evasive or lacking transparency. Relationships and communication are the fourth source of miscommunication. People in high-context cultures place importance on long-term relationships and the social hierarchy in communication. This has an impact on the strong use of conversational norms and expected behaviors. On the other hand, visitors or communicators from low-context cultures might be inadvertently offset by not following these customs. Finally, differences in the use of time concepts could be a source of communication problems. Conceptual differences in the use of time, such as the preference for a polychronic time system in high-context cultures over a monochronic approach in low-context cultures, can also lead to

miscommunication (Hall, 1989) as it affects punctuality. For example, punctuality may be viewed as less important in Indonesia than in Western culture. This can lead to misunderstanding and frustration when scheduling meetings or appointments. Additionally, the use of indirect communication styles in Indonesia, such as avoiding confrontation or saying "yes" to avoid conflict, can also create challenges for individuals from low-context cultures.

Intercultural miscommunication in Indonesia has been the subject of several studies owing to the nation's diverse cultural and ethnic compositions. Several researchers, such as Yuniarti et al.. (2019), Dewi and Arifuddin (2021), Pinariya and Sutjipto (2021), Safi et al. (2022) Mailin et.al (2023) conducted research on intercultural miscommunications. Their studies exposed the communication barriers experienced by both Indonesians and foreigners due to cultural differences. This highlights the importance of cross-cultural training and awareness in diverse environments to foster better understanding among people from different cultural backgrounds.

Understanding the various barriers and problems in intercultural communication clearly and comprehensively is a bridge towards the realization of effective intercultural communication. Thus, by promoting cultural sensitivity, communication effectiveness and overall productivity in multicultural settings can be enhanced. This evidence is supported by further studies that indicate that the recognition and accommodation of intercultural differences can lessen miscommunication and improve interpersonal relationships in multi-ethnic places (Arifin, 2021; Riyanto et al., 2023). With this in mind, the present study aims to describe patterns of miscommunication experienced by foreign visitors visiting Lombok Island and how they coped with such experiences.

## **B. Research Method**

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative approach, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (2014). This qualitative approach aimed to explore the intercultural communication experiences of five visitors in Lombok, Indonesia. The researcher adopted a case study

research design to understand the study phenomenon. The case study design allows for a detailed examination of individual experiences and interactions, providing rich data for analysis (Patton, 2002). By focusing on specific cases within the broader context of intercultural communication, the researcher was able to uncover unique insights and patterns that might not have been apparent through other research methods.

The findings are expected to provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that arise in intercultural interactions between foreign visitors and the locals of Lombok. These findings are also expected to shed light on effective strategies for improving communication across cultural boundaries. Understanding these experiences can inform the development of training programs and policies that promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in the global workplace. To conduct the study, the researcher employed a case study, focusing on in-depth exploration through semi-structured interviews and direct observations. The researcher also analyzed cultural

differences in communication styles and behaviors as well as the impact of language barriers on interactions. By examining these factors, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on intercultural communication and provides practical recommendations for individuals and organizations seeking to navigate diverse cultural contexts effectively.

Five visitors who had travelled to Lombok for the first time were recruited. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants could provide rich insights into their intercultural experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data from these participants. The interviews were conducted in their hotels, in a non-threatening atmosphere, where the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, using an interview guide with open-ended questions to explore each participant's intercultural communication experiences. These questions allowed participants to express their thoughts on language barriers, non-verbal communication cues, cultural norms, and any

misunderstandings they encountered. The interviews lasted 45–50 minutes. The researcher asked the participants for permission to audio-record.

Observations were made to complement these interviews. This was done to provide contextual and nonverbal cues. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of visitors' intercultural communication experiences at the research site. Observational data were used to capture additional details that might not have been verbally expressed during the interviews (Kawulich, 2005). This was expected to enrich the overall analysis. Field notes were taken to record visitor behavior, cultural interactions, and the atmosphere of these encounters. The observations were non-intrusive to ensure the natural behavior of the subjects. The combination of interviews, observations, and field notes allowed for a multifaceted approach for gathering data on intercultural communication experiences. This holistic method aimed to provide a thorough examination of visitor interactions at a research site. Overall, the variety of data collection methods utilized in this study helped

obtain a comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication dynamics in the research setting. By incorporating various perspectives and observations, a more nuanced analysis was possible, enhancing the depth of the insights gained from the study.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The analysis was initiated by transcribing audio recordings gathered from the field. Thematic analysis was used to identify the patterns and themes in the data. The initial coding began by dissecting the data into meaningful units of analysis, and these codes were then grouped into potential themes. The researcher then conducted a process of constant comparison to refine themes and ensure their accuracy. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the data and provides a solid foundation for drawing conclusions and implications for future research on intercultural communication. Each theme was defined and named after continued analysis and refinement. Clear definitions were developed to ensure that each theme captured the



essence of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, the researcher identified patterns and connections between the themes, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexities of intercultural communication. This systematic approach enhanced the rigour and validity of the study's findings, contributing to a more robust understanding of the subject matter.

## **C. Findings and Discussion**

### **C.1. Findings**

The patterns of miscommunication experienced by foreign visitors on Lombok Island showed similarities among the study participants. Based on the interviews with five participants, all participants experienced miscommunication. The study found that three main miscommunication problems occurred with all participants during their visits to Lombok: (1) differences in perception, (2) confusion due to language barriers, and (3) variances in cultural norms, gestures, and etiquettes.

Regarding the first problem, JL stated, *"I once experienced being escorted by a tour guide. He was unable to speak English well. I*

*wanted him to explain some of the rules of one of the tourist attractions I visited, but he explained something else. I felt very confused and frustrated."* Not much different from JL, HT stated, *"I often experience miscommunication during visits to Lombok, especially with traders who do not speak English very well. This really makes me confused and experience miscommunication."*

Likewise, BR explained that he had experienced miscommunication because his message was not completely understood. "Two days ago, when I attempted to visit a tourist attraction in Central Lombok, I found myself unable to access my mobile phone signal. As a result, I was unsure about the route to take. When I arrived at a crossroads, I stopped my motorcycle and approached a group of young men who were likely to hang out. I inquired, 'Could anyone speak English?.' One of them responded by nodding his head. Furthermore, I asked him to show me how to reach that location. However, the young man's response was confusing and really difficult to comprehend." Two other foreign tourists expressed similar sentiments, indicating that

they had experienced miscommunication. JL recalled, "I once ordered orange juice, but the lady in the food stall gave me lime juice. I said orange juice and she insisted it was orange juice." In the same vein, HT recalled the time when she handed money using left hand, as she thought it was okay to use both hands in her culture. Later, she felt embarrassed when the tour guide explained that it was impolite to hand in something using left hand because the left hand was considered unclean. These findings suggest that cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and confusion, highlighting the importance of cross-cultural communication and awareness when traveling. It is therefore crucial for both tourists and locals to be open-minded and respectful of each other's customs and traditions to avoid such situations in the future.

Second, miscommunication occurred because of language barriers. The current study found that language barriers frequently led to miscommunication among tourists and locals in Lombok. This issue is particularly prevalent in interactions involving complex or nuanced

information. All participants reported difficulties expressing their needs, understanding directions, and engaging in meaningful interactions due to language differences. These participants experienced communication problems because of language barriers. For example, DB remarked, "Very few people speak English fluently. It required a lot of patience, often resorting to gestures to convey what I needed." Similarly, JL commented, "Sometimes, I have got to simply point or use basic hand signals to get the message across" and the rest of the participants made similar comments. They contended that it was necessary to learn Indonesian to deal with such barriers. These findings highlight the importance of learning Indonesian to facilitate effective communication between visitors and locals. Furthermore, they highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability when interacting with individuals from different linguistic backgrounds.

The third type of miscommunication appeared in the data due to variances in cultural norms, gestures, and etiquette. The data showed that almost all

participants experienced some level of confusion or misunderstanding when interpreting nonverbal cues from individuals of different cultural backgrounds. This highlights the importance of considering cultural differences when communicating with others to avoid misinterpretations. In this regard, HT shared her personal experience, "Instead of shaking hands with people of the opposite sex, women often place their hands together in front of their chests." BR added, "Women, especially, dress quite conservatively, covering their heads, shoulders, and knees." As regards etiquettes, DB shared his thoughts, "In Western cultures, people might stand quite close during conversations, but in Lombok, there was a noticeable preference to have more distant space, especially when we communicate with people of different sex" Similar experience was shared by JL. She explained, 'I saw it was common for the locals to eat with their right hand only. I'm relying on the guidance of locals to understand unwritten social norms.'" All experiences shared by participants indicate that cultural differences in dress, physical proximity, and eating customs are important when

encountering the locals of Lombok. Understanding and respecting these differences can lead to more meaningful interactions with locals and a deeper appreciation of culture.

To cope with communication barriers, participants shared a common approach; that is, employing many different approaches that could help them deal with communication difficulties. This included using visual aids, gestures, and simplified language to ensure that everyone understood each other effectively. In this regard, DB stated, "I use non-verbal communication like gestures and facial expressions to bridge any language gaps." Likewise, JL expressed her thoughts, "I always ask for clarification if I don't understand something." When I travelled to Lombok last year, I used a translator app on my phone. It helped me communicate with local people in Lombok, especially when I want to buy food, ask for directions, and even buy things at the local shops." BR shared similar ideas, "I brought a pocket-sized translator device with offline capabilities. This helps me communicate with the locals when I am in areas with poor internet connections, such as Rinjani

Mountain." The same remark was made by JL, "I found that using translation apps on my phone was definitely helpful." These findings suggest that technology has facilitated communication with the locals. This allows visitors to overcome language barriers and engage more effectively with local people.

## **C.2. Discussion**

visitors to Lombok Island often experience miscommunication during their visits. The study identified three main issues: (a) differences in perception; (b) confusion due to language barriers; and (c) variances in cultural norms, gestures, and etiquettes. To cope with communication difficulties, participants used a variety of approaches to lessen miscommunication, that is, by employing non-verbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions. They also used translator apps on their phones to communicate with locals, especially when traveling with poor Internet connections. A pocket-sized translator device with offline capabilities helped them communicate with locals in areas with

poor internet connections. Overall, this study highlights the importance of understanding and addressing communication barriers on Lombok Island. By employing various approaches and utilizing nonverbal communication, tourists can better navigate complex and often challenging cultural backgrounds.

The research findings highlight the importance of fostering a cross-cultural understanding between the local population and foreign visitors in Lombok, as indicated by Mancini-Cross et al. (2009). According to these authors, intercultural miscommunication occurs when two individuals from different cultural backgrounds experience language barriers. Intercultural miscommunication occurs when individuals from two different cultural backgrounds cannot comprehend and interpret the meaning conveyed by each other. This study suggests that it is necessary to develop a communication model that requires structuring messages to effectively prevent miscommunication. The study also revealed that differences in communication norms, values, and language etiquettes caused miscommunication and

misunderstanding. This finding is in line with previous research conducted by Croucher et al. (2015), Özdemir-Çağatay & Küllü-Sülü, (2013) Cahyaningtyas et al., (2022) Patterson et al., (2023); Yuniarti et al.. (2019); Dewi & Arifuddin (2021); Pinariya & Sutjipto (2021); Safi et al. (2022); and Mailin et.al (2023).

#### **D. Conclusion**

The study concludes that foreign visitors visiting Lombok Island often experience miscommunication due to differences in perception, confusion due to language barriers, and variances in cultural norms, gestures, and etiquettes. These issues can lead to misunderstandings and confusion, emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural communication and awareness. Language barriers can make it difficult for tourists to express their needs, understand directions, and engage in meaningful interactions. Participants also reported difficulties in interpreting nonverbal cues from different cultural backgrounds, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptability. To cope with communication difficulties, participants used visual tools,

gestures, and simplified language to bridge language gaps. Technology has also been found to facilitate communication with locals, allowing visitors to overcome language barriers and engage more effectively with locals. Overall, understanding and respecting cultural differences can lead to more meaningful interactions and a deeper appreciation of culture in Lombok.

This study suggests that developing communication channels between local residents and foreigners is crucial to assist foreign visitors in overcoming language barriers. The different languages and communication styles of the people of Lombok can be a challenge for foreign visitors. Difficulties in communicating with locals or in understanding local customs can worsen the state of miscommunication. The current study implies that bridging the gap between locals and foreigners through effective communication strategies is essential for promoting cultural understanding and enhancing the overall experience for both parties. Addressing language barriers and cultural differences can lead to more positive interactions and mutual

respect between residents and visitors in Lombok. Based on the findings discussed above, it can be concluded that the issues of miscommunication and cultural shock that occur in Kuta Mandalika ecotourism can be effectively addressed using technology. The use of technology applications has been shown to reduce miscommunication problems.

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