

Communication Strategies of Tourism Awareness Groups in Improving the Image of a Stigmatized Tourism Area: A Case Study of Songgoriti

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Abstract

Tourism does not solely depend on natural potential and supporting facilities, but also on the perception of the image ingrained in the wider community. The Songgoriti tourist destination is faced with significant obstacles due to the deeply rooted negative stigma, particularly related to covert prostitution practices in the villa area. The stigma affects tourists' perceptions, alters the composition of visitors, and threatens the socio-economic sustainability of the local community. This research aims to analyze the communication strategies implemented by the Songgokerto Tourism Awareness Group to restore the negative image of the Songgoriti tourist area. The approach used is descriptive qualitative, with data collection thru in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The selection of informants was purposive, including Pokdarwis managers, local residents, and the Batu City Tourism Office. The research findings indicate that the communication strategy of Pokdarwis emphasizes a community-based approach that prioritizes concrete improvement actions, particularly enhancing service quality and the culture of local hospitality. Image recovery does not rely on symbolic promotion, but rather on stable tourist experiences and word-of-mouth communication. This approach gradually builds credibility, trust, and social legitimacy for the local community. This research strengthens the argument that restoring the image of a stigmatized tourist destination requires continuous, contextual, and long-term community restorative communication.

Keywords : *Communication Strategy; Destination Image; Tourist Awareness Group; Social Stigma; Community-Based Communication;*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a strategic sector that significantly contributes to the economic and social advancement of society. The success of a tourist destination does not only depend on natural beauty or supporting infrastructure but also on the image embedded in the minds of the public and tourists. The image of a destination plays a vital role in shaping visit decisions, trust levels, and the sustainability of tourism. Thus, destination image management becomes an essential element in the development of the tourism sector. However, not all tourist destinations have a positive image (Govers et al., 2007; Hartanto et al., 2022). Several areas experience negative stigma due to social, environmental, and security issues circulating in society, such as negative narratives in the media, covert prostitution practices, and lack of government intervention. This stigmatization has the potential to suppress tourist interest, hinder investment, and harm the welfare of the local community. The Songgoriti tourist destination is among the areas facing image challenges due to certain stigmas in society, particularly the practice of prostitution in villas. This stigma affects tourists' perceptions and the dynamics of local tourism (Arifin, 2020).

Previous research has extensively discussed communication strategies in tourism development, such as the establishment of Pokdarwis and community participation by local governments, as well as participatory communication of Pokdarwis in promoting local tourism (Purwanti, 2019). Other studies focus on post-conflict or disaster image recovery (Umam et al., 2022). However, there is still a research gap regarding community communication strategies for destinations with a negative image due to long-term social stigma, such as prostitution or moral deviations in local tourist areas. This research fills that gap by examining the communication strategies of the Songgokerto Tourism Awareness Group to improve the image of the stigmatized tourist destination in Songgoriti thru a case study approach.

The Tourism Awareness Group functions as the driving force of the local community in the development of community-based tourism (Febriyanti & Wispandono, 2022). Thru various communication activities, Pokdarwis builds awareness, involvement, and support from the community toward tourism. An effective communication strategy can change the negative narrative attached to tourist destinations, not just by conveying information, but also by building meaning, trust, and

relationships with various stakeholders (Eky et al., 2022). Therefore, Pokdarwis Songgokerto plays a strategic role in managing communication and revitalizing the area's image thru promotion, social interaction, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

This research aims to explore the processes, forms, and implications of the communication strategies used by Pokdarwis to restore the image of Songgoriti. This approach facilitates a deep understanding of the dynamics of local-level communication, while also emphasizing the role of the community in managing the destination's image (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Darwish & Burns, 2019). The results of this research are anticipated to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the field of tourism communication. Theoretically, this study expands the understanding of community communication strategies in stigmatized tourist destinations. Practically, the findings can serve as a guideline for Pokdarwis and tourism stakeholders in formulating optimal communication strategies. Thus, community-based sustainable tourism development can be achieved more effectively.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research applies a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explain the communication strategies of Pokdarwis Songgokerto in an effort to improve the negative image of the Songgoriti tourist area. Data were collected thru in-depth interviews with the management of Pokdarwis Songgokerto, such as the chairman, members, local community, and the Batu City Tourism Office, supplemented by field observations and related document analysis. The selection of informants was purposive, including key and supporting informants based on their comprehensive knowledge of the image improvement communication process. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively, including data reduction to focus on relevant elements, presentation of data in narratives, tables, or thematic matrices, and drawing conclusions thru pattern verification. The validity of the data is ensured thru source and method triangulation, member checks, extended research time, and peer debriefing to achieve a high level of credibility (Sugiyono, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The image of the Songgoriti tourist area is still attached to a strong negative perception in the public social space. Songgoriti is more commonly known as a villa area associated with covert prostitution activities, so this stigma does not only appear sporadically but has been entrenched and socially reproduced over a long period. This perception shapes the way the public comprehensively understands Songgoriti, often obscuring the area's true potential and character. As a result, this negative image functions as a symbolic identity that dominates the representation of Songgoriti beyond its region. The stigma attached to Songgoriti is not neutral; rather, it carries significant social and economic consequences. This area is experiencing a shift in tourist segmentation, where visits are increasingly dominated by young people, while family tourists tend to avoid the area and choose other destinations. This pattern shows that the image of the destination acts as a mechanism of social selection that influences who feels "worthy" or "safe" to visit. Thus, the issue of image not only affects the number of visits but also the type of tourist experiences that develop in the area.

The dominance of non-family tourists reinforces the existing stigma. As Songgoriti is visited less frequently by family tourists, the area becomes increasingly difficult to perceive as a family-friendly tourist destination. This condition shows a reciprocal relationship between image and tourism practices, where perception influences behavior, and behavior ultimately reinforces perception. In this context, the negative image of Songgoriti can be understood as a self-reinforcing social construct, thus requiring interventions that are not merely symbolic. Facing these conditions, Pokdarwis Songgokerto views image improvement as the main prerequisite for the sustainability of tourism in the area (Raharjo et al., 2022; Rina Armeniza Aziz et al., 2024). The strategic orientation developed is not directed at directly denying the stigma, but rather at efforts to build a new meaning regarding Songgoriti. The main goal is to change the way this area is perceived, so that it is once again seen as a suitable, comfortable, and relevant tourist destination in line with the region's tourism development vision. With this approach, image improvement is positioned as a process of reconstructing social meaning, not just an increase in promotional exposure.

The communication approach implemented by Pokdarwis is grassroots and rooted in the daily practices of the community. This strategy is realized through the improvement of tourism service quality, especially through hospitality training for the community managing villas and supporting tourism services. The focus on service indicates that communication is not understood as a one-way message delivery activity, but rather as an experience built through direct interactions between the community and tourists. When the service becomes friendlier, more professional, and consistent, the tourist experience also changes, and this change in experience contributes to the formation of a new perception of the area. The expected change in perception is not built through symbolic claims or promotional slogans, but rather through organic word-of-mouth communication. This strategy positions tourists as secondary communication actors who spread their experiences to their social networks. Thus, communication occurs through social mechanisms that are more credible than formal promotion, as it is based on real experiences. This approach shows that Pokdarwis utilizes the logic of social communication, where trust is built through interpersonal relationships, not just through institutions. Efforts to improve the image are also being made by shifting the narrative about the causes of the stigma attached to Songgoriti. This area is not positioned as a space that is inherently problematic, but rather as a region affected by the behavior of certain individuals. By distinguishing between the identity of the area and personal actions, this strategy aims to avoid negative generalizations about the entire community. This reframing is important because collective stigma not only harms the destination but also undermines the social dignity of the communities that live in and depend on the area.

If analyzed through the framework of Image Restoration Theory, the communication strategy of Pokdarwis shows a dominance of the corrective action approach. Image improvement is carried out through tangible changes in social practices, particularly in the aspects of service and management of tourism interactions. These corrective actions aim to improve the conditions that have long reinforced negative perceptions. Additionally, there is also an element of mortification that appears implicitly, in the form of an acknowledgment that social issues have occurred in the area and need to be collectively addressed. The combination of corrective actions and a reflective attitude strengthens the credibility of the communication strategy being implemented. Credibility is a key element in the recovery of the image of a stigmatized destination. Without alignment between message and action, communication efforts risk being perceived as mere image-making. In the context of Songgoriti, credibility is built through the consistency of social practices that can be directly observed by tourists and the community. This shows that restorative communication cannot be separated from the behavioral changes and social structures that support it (Firgiardiansyah & Andrian, 2023).

The communication strategy of Pokdarwis also reflects the principle of Community-Based Communication, where the local community becomes an integral part of the change process. Although strategic planning is still largely carried out by the core of Pokdarwis, the implementation of activities involves the community extensively. This involvement is driven by the high economic dependence of the residents on the tourism sector, as reflected in the presence of more than 300 houses functioning as villas. This dependence fosters a strong sense of ownership over the area and encourages active participation in efforts to improve its image. This sense of ownership serves as social capital that strengthens the legitimacy of the communication strategy. The community does not view image improvement as an external agenda, but rather as a shared necessity to maintain the economic and social sustainability of the area. Community support for the Pokdarwis communication strategy is relatively strong and active, where residents consciously strive to convey to outsiders that Songgoriti is not as bad as imagined. This social consensus shows that community-based communication can build a collective understanding that serves as an important foundation in image recovery (Hanafy, 2023; Marković, 2024).

However, the process of improving Songgoriti's image is not without various structural obstacles. One of the main obstacles is the limited government support, particularly regarding the management of strategic tourist attractions in the area. Several important tourist assets, such as hot springs and temple sites, are still administratively under the authority of Malang Regency. This condition is a result of the historical formation of Batu City, which was previously part of Malang Regency, so the asset transfer process has not been fully completed. The limitations of authority restrict the intervention space of the Batu City Government and Pokdarwis in developing the tourism potential of Songgoriti in an integrated

manner. As a result, the communication strategy implemented relies more on community initiatives and improvements in non-physical aspects, such as services and social interactions. This shows that community communication often has to operate under non-ideal structural conditions, requiring flexibility and continuous adaptation. Awareness of these structural limitations shapes a realistic attitude in implementing communication strategies (Benoit, 2000). Image improvement is understood as a long-term process that cannot be achieved instantly. The approach taken is adaptive and pragmatic, adjusting to the available resources without showing signs of frustration. This attitude reflects an understanding that changing public perception requires time, consistency, and patience in building trust.

Compared to previous research, these findings align with studies that emphasize the importance of the local community's role in the development of community-based tourism. Various studies show that community involvement can enhance the sustainability of tourism and the quality of the tourist experience. However, this research expands that perspective by positioning community communication as the primary instrument in the recovery of the image of destinations experiencing long-term social stigma (Rozi et al., 2023). Unlike destination promotion or branding approaches that are oriented toward quick results, the case of Songgoriti shows that improving the image due to moral stigma requires a communication process that is social and gradual. Perception changes do not occur thru short campaigns, but rather thru the accumulation of tourist experiences and consistent social interactions. This difference shows that the effectiveness of communication strategies highly depends on the characteristics of the image problem faced by the destination.

These findings also indicate that community-based communication has a strong moral dimension in the context of stigmatized destinations. Image improvement is not only related to enhancing tourist attraction but also to efforts to restore the social dignity of the local community. In this context, communication serves as a space for negotiating meaning between a troubled past and the envisioned future. This process demands the active involvement of the community as subjects of change, not merely as objects of policy. Thus, the results and discussion show that the communication strategy of Pokdarwis Songgokerto functions as a social process that integrates real actions, community participation, and structural awareness in the recovery of the destination's image. Communication not only builds a positive perception in the eyes of the public but also strengthens the identity and social legitimacy of the local community. These findings affirm that improving the image of stigmatized destinations requires sustainable, contextual, and long-term socially-oriented community-based restorative communication.

CONCLUSION

The negative image of the Songgoriti tourist area is a social construct that has become entrenched and influences the direction of tourism development and the social position of the local community. The stigma attached not only limits the segmentation of tourists but also shapes social relations and the legitimacy of the area as a tourist destination. This condition emphasizes that the improvement of Songgoriti's image cannot be achieved thru conventional promotional approaches, but rather requires a communication strategy that can respond to the social and moral complexities underlying the stigma. The communication strategy implemented by the Songgokerto Tourism Awareness Group demonstrates that community-based communication focused on real actions and the enhancement of social interaction quality plays an important role in the process of restoring the destination's image. Thru service improvements, strengthening hospitality practices, and consistency in tourist experiences, communication acts as a restorative process that integrates behavioral changes and moral commitments. This approach strengthens the credibility of the message and builds social legitimacy at the community level, although the results unfold gradually and in the long term.

Based on these findings, this research recommends that efforts to improve the image of stigmatized destinations be carried out thru the sustainable strengthening of community communication capacity, particularly in the form of enhancing service quality and local community participation as key actors. In addition, clearer policy support and cross-regional coordination between local governments are needed to enable integrated tourism potential management. Further research is recommended to examine the long-term dynamics of community communication and to combine qualitative approaches with quantitative data to measure changes in public perception more comprehensively.

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