



# Interpersonal Communication Strategies of Tour Leader in Enhancing Tourist Loyalty

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## Abstract

The development of the Indonesian tourism industry encourages the importance of improving service quality, especially through the strategic role of tour leaders in building effective interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication characterized by empathy, openness, and active participation is key to creating a tourism experience that is not only informative, but also emotional, and significantly impacts tourist loyalty. This study aims to identify and analyze interpersonal communication strategies implemented by tour leaders in increasing customer loyalty, as well as providing practical recommendations for improving communication competencies in accordance with customer-oriented tourism industry standards. The method used is a literature study (library research) with a qualitative approach, which examines more than 30 scientific literature from indexed journals and relevant academic publications for the period 2019–2024. The analysis was carried out thematically through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study show that successful interpersonal communication strategies include verbal approaches (such as storytelling and friendly language), nonverbal (facial expressions, eye contact, positive gestures), and relational (personal attention and empathy). Tour leaders who are able to create emotional closeness with tourists have been shown to increase customer engagement and encourage long-term loyalty. Recommendations in this study include empathy training, stress management, field simulations, and the creation of a digital curriculum based on customer experience to form sustainable communication competencies.



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## INTRODUCTION

The development of the Indonesian tourism industry has experienced a significant increase in the last decade, driving various innovations in services and interactions with tourists (Rochmansyah & Adhrianti, 2021). One important element in the success of tourism services is the ability of tour leaders to build effective interpersonal communication with tourists (Iskandar &

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Halim, 2020). Communication that is personal, empathetic, and responsive can create a memorable travel experience and increase customer satisfaction (Fath, 2023; Suak et al., 2023).

Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging information, feelings, and meaning between two or more individuals directly and personally. In this context, communication includes not only words (verbal), but also body language, facial expressions, and voice intonation (nonverbal), which overall create a shared understanding between individuals. Effective interpersonal communication is characterized by openness, empathy, mutual trust, and the ability to listen actively. According to Prasetyo and Anwar (2021), interpersonal communication is also the foundation of transformational leadership because it is able to create emotional connections and positive influences on others (Prasetyo & Anwar, 2021).

In today's digital development, interpersonal communication is not only limited to face-to-face interactions but also occurs virtually. A study by Widiyanti and Nurchayati (2023) highlighted how K-pop fans build close friendships through digital platforms while maintaining elements of emotional closeness and mutual understanding (Mukti et al., n.d.). In the health sector, research by Iskandar and Halim (2020) showed that the quality of interpersonal communication between nursing staff and patients has a significant influence on the level of service satisfaction (Iskandar & Halim, 2020). Overall, interpersonal communication plays an important role in various aspects of life, including family, organizations, education, and public services.

Interpersonal communication in the context of tourism is not just about conveying technical information, but also fostering emotional bonds between tour leaders and tourists. In a study by Prasetyo and Anwar (2021), it is explained that the success of interpersonal communication is greatly influenced by trust, openness, and warmth of communication. This is also reinforced by research by Isminadzila et al. (2020) which states that a good personal relationship between tour guides and participants is a determining factor in forming customer loyalty (Isminadzila et al., 2020).

Tour leaders who are able to use interpersonal communication strategies well will be more effective in creating a conducive, cooperative atmosphere, and are able to handle complaints with empathy and solutions (Al Husain, 2020; PAMUNGKAS, 2023). This situation is very important in building long-term loyalty to travel agency services. The success of tour leaders in establishing interpersonal communication can even influence tourists' decisions to return to using the same service on the next occasion (Widyaningrum et al., 2023).

Thus, the background of this study is not only based on the importance of the role of communication in the tourism sector, but also on the need to evaluate the interpersonal communication strategies used by tour leaders, which are often not adjusted to the dynamics of customer needs and the values of superior services (Aryshinta et al., n.d.; Witri & Pratiwi, 2019). This condition indicates a gap between the expected service standards and the implementation in the field that is not yet optimal.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to formulate an effective interpersonal communication strategy as an integral part of experience-based and loyalty-based tourism services. Without humanistic and adaptive communication, efforts to increase customer loyalty will be difficult to achieve sustainably (Anggraeni & Wihardja, 2020).

Several previous studies have examined the role of communication in tourism, but not many have specifically highlighted the interpersonal communication strategies of tour leaders and their direct relationship to tourist loyalty. For example, a study by Rochmansyah & Adhrianti (2022) revealed that many tour leaders have not mastered the concept of interpersonal communication adequately, resulting in low levels of tourist engagement with the travel service.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the interpersonal communication strategies used by tour leaders to increase tourist loyalty. This study also aims to provide data-based

recommendations to improve the communication competency of tour leaders so that they are able to provide optimal service according to customer-oriented tourism industry standards.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study type (library research), which aims to examine in depth the concept and practice of interpersonal communication strategies carried out by tour leaders in increasing tourist loyalty. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore theories, empirical findings, and interpretations that have been discussed in various scientific literature, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Zed, 2018).

The data sources in this study consist of secondary data obtained from various scientific publications such as national and international journal articles, tourism communication textbooks, conference proceedings, and relevant previous research results. The literature used was selected based on relevance to the topic, the academic reputation of the publisher, and the last five years (2019–2024) to ensure the actuality of the information (Khatibah, 2011). Some of the main sources come from trusted scientific platforms such as ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and SAGE Journals.

Data collection techniques were carried out through systematic searches of scientific articles and documents using keywords such as interpersonal communication, tour leaders, tourist loyalty, and tourism service strategies. This technique was complemented by an initial coding process based on research topics and subthemes. The selected articles were selected through a screening process of abstracts, methodological suitability, and source eligibility based on journal indexing and theoretical contributions (Booth et al., 2003).

The data analysis method used in this study was thematic content analysis. The analysis was carried out by identifying, grouping, and interpreting themes that emerged from the literature, such as dimensions of interpersonal communication (empathy, openness, equality), the role of tour leaders in the tourism experience, and indicators of customer loyalty. This process was carried out through three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2019). The researcher also applied literature triangulation as an effort to increase data validity, namely by comparing various sources in a similar context.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, the author conducted a systematic search of scientific literature that discusses tour leader interpersonal communication strategies in increasing tourist loyalty. From the results of the review of more than 30 articles, 10 articles were strictly selected based on the criteria of topic relevance, publication quality (indexed journals), and recency (2019–2024). The following table summarizes the main findings of the ten articles, which are the basis for the literature analysis of this study.

**Table 1.** Literature Review

No	Author	Title	Research Focus
1	Tsaur, Yang & Tsai (2021)	Tour leader likeability and tourist citizenship behaviours	Interpersonal skills enhance tourists' perceived value and voluntary behavior.
2	Chiang & Chen (2014)	Impression management techniques of tour leaders	Impression management techniques are important in shaping tourist relationships and loyalty.

3	Tsaur & Ku (2019)	Tour leaders' emotional intelligence and tourists' consequences	Tour leader's emotional intelligence drives tourist satisfaction and commitment.
4	Yen et al. (2018)	Brand and tour leader attachment	Emotional bond with tour leader plays a major role in tourist loyalty intention.
5	Wong & Lee (2012)	Leadership through service	Tour leader's leadership style influences tourist satisfaction and retention.
6	Tsaur & Teng (2022)	Charismatic tour-guiding	Charismatic leadership drives tourist loyalty and engagement.
7	Mardiansyah (2025)	Leadership communication in community-based tourism	Effective interpersonal communication is needed in community-based tourism.
8	Al Jahwari et al. (2016)	Evaluating communication competency of tour guides	Interpersonal communication competency is crucial to loyalty and tourism experience.
9	Chang et al. (2022)	Emotional display rules and job stress in tour guiding	Emotional control and work pressure moderate the quality of interpersonal communication.
10	Wiranti (2023)	Interpersonal communication and customer loyalty: Travel Agency Case Study	Effective communication between tour leader and customer has a significant impact on loyalty.

Literature studies on tour leader interpersonal communication strategies in increasing tourist loyalty show that the relationship between tour leaders and tour participants is not only functional, but also emotional and psychological. The ten selected articles shown in the previous table reveal that the effectiveness of tour leaders is not only measured by managerial or technical skills, but also by the quality of interpersonal communication built during the trip. The following description illustrates how each study makes theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of the topic.

The article by Tsaur, Yang, and Tsai (2021) emphasizes that likeability or fascination with tour leaders greatly influences tourist citizenship behaviors, namely behaviors outside of formal expectations carried out by tourists such as helping fellow tour participants or providing positive feedback to the company. The warm, empathetic, and communicative interpersonal qualities of tour leaders strengthen tourists' perceptions of the value of their experiences, which then have an impact on long-term loyalty. This study highlights the importance of strategies for building personal closeness through attentive and sensitive communication to the social dynamics in tour groups (Tsaur et al., 2021).

Research by Chiang and Chen (2014) shows how impression management or impression management techniques carried out by tour leaders can shape positive perceptions from tourists towards the overall service. The authors state that nonverbal communication strategies such as smiling, eye contact, and positive expressions can create an impression of professionalism and friendliness, which strengthens the overall image of the tour company. In this context, loyalty is not only attached to the individual (tour leader) but also translates into loyalty to the brand and the tour company (Chiang & Chen, 2014).

Tsaur and Ku (2019) explore the emotional dimension of interpersonal communication more deeply by highlighting the role of emotional intelligence in tour leaders. They found that tour leaders who are able to understand and respond appropriately to participants' emotions can form deep emotional connections, thereby increasing satisfaction, trust, and the likelihood of reusing the services of the same company. This study reinforces the idea that effective interpersonal

communication not only conveys information, but also touches on the emotional and affective aspects of tourists (Tsaor & Ku, 2019).

Furthermore, Yen et al. (2018) introduced the concept of attachment or attachment as an important mediating variable in the relationship between tour leaders and tourist loyalty. They show that emotional attachments built through memorable, honest, and supportive interactions strengthen tourists' intentions to continue using the same service and recommend it to others. This study is important because it touches on the psychological dimension of loyalty that is often overlooked in more transactional approaches (Yen et al., 2018).

In the article by Wong and Lee (2012), the focus is on service-oriented leadership. They classify tour leaders' leadership styles into three dimensions: task-focused, relationship-focused, and situational competence. It was found that tour leaders who are able to adapt flexibly in dynamic situations and maintain positive interpersonal communication are able to increase customer satisfaction and retention. This underscores the importance of contextual communication competence and openness in establishing meaningful interactions (Wong & Lee, 2012).

Tsaor and Teng (2022) provide a unique perspective by integrating charismatic leadership theory. In the tourism context, a tour leader's charisma is demonstrated through the way they motivate, build enthusiasm, and create a tour atmosphere full of positive energy. This charisma is manifested through inspiring verbal communication and convincing body language. This study shows that the elements of interpersonal communication are not only informative but also performative (Teng & Tsaor, 2022).

In the local context, Mardiansyah (2025) highlighted the importance of leadership communication in community-based tourism management in Indonesia. This study highlights how tour leaders as an extension of the local community need to develop empathetic, dialogue-based, and participatory communication to create a sense of belonging from tourists to the destination. This approach broadens the meaning of loyalty from loyalty to services to loyalty to the destination itself (Mardiansyah, 2025).

Al Jahwari et al. (2016) in a study on communication competence showed that indicators such as language adaptability, interpersonal inclusion, and assertiveness are the main components in building quality relationships. Assessment of communication competence is not only based on speaking skills, but also on the ability to adapt to the diverse characteristics of tourists. This research is very relevant in the era of tourism globalization where the diversity of tourists is a challenge in itself (Sulaiman Al Jahwari et al., 2016).

Research by Chang et al. (2022) touches on the important issue of job stress and how it moderates the effectiveness of interpersonal communication. Tour leaders who experience high stress tend to experience degradation in the quality of their communication, which has a negative impact on the perception of service from tourists. Thus, managing emotions and stress becomes an integral part of interpersonal communication training in the tourism industry (Chang et al., 2022).

Finally, Wiranti (2023) through a case study at an Indonesian travel agency, shows directly how quality interpersonal communication, such as personal greetings, quick responses to complaints, and persuasive approaches, can build long-term relationships between customers and tour leaders. This confirms that loyalty is not only based on general service quality, but also on the personal communication experience felt by customers (Wiranti, 2023).

Overall, the literature that has been reviewed shows that effective interpersonal communication between tour leaders and tourists has a significant effect on satisfaction, perceived value, emotional attachment, and ultimately tourist loyalty. The most effective approach is one that combines empathy, adaptability, and open two-way communication. Personalized, charismatic, and relationship-based communication strategies have proven to be key levers in creating sustainable



relationships between tourists and tour service providers. These findings confirm that interpersonal communication training should be a core element in human resource development in the tourism sector.

## **Discussion**

### **Analysis of Interpersonal Communication Strategies Used by Tour Leaders**

In the practice of tour guiding, interpersonal communication not only functions as a means of conveying information, but also becomes a relational foundation that underlies the emotional experience of tourists. The interpersonal communication strategy applied by the tour leader consists of an integration of verbal, nonverbal, and relational techniques that synergistically form an impressive and personal service image.

Verbally, an effective tour leader uses a friendly, familiar, and easily understood language style for tourists from various backgrounds. The sentences are not only informative, but also build emotional closeness. For example, by inserting contextual humor or light questions, the interaction feels more humanistic. In addition, storytelling skills are a crucial aspect - tour leaders who are able to weave interesting narratives about local history or culture succeed in creating experiences that are not only informative, but also imaginative and emotionally memorable (Kapa et al., 2022).

From the nonverbal side, the power of facial expressions, eye contact, and open body language play a major role in building a sense of security and openness in tourists. Eye contact and a sincere smile are often the earliest indicators of professionalism and warmth of service. Research by Tsaor and Teng (2017) shows that nonverbal signals like these have a big impact on forming first impressions that determine loyalty from the start of the trip.

Relational strategies complement this approach by adding a personal touch. Tour leaders who remember tourists' names, ask how they are, or pay special attention when problems occur can create deeper emotional connections. This is where the concept of emotional bonding plays a big role. This personal relationship creates a sense of being "heard" and "appreciated" which is the seed of long-term tourist loyalty (Shi et al., 2023).

In a field study conducted by Asmin (2022), interpersonal communication between tour leaders and tourists is not only seen as a means of conveying information, but has become a strategic instrument in building trust and loyalty (Asmin, 2022). This study focuses on cultural tourism activities in Toraja, South Sulawesi, and provides a real portrait of how communication strategies carried out by tour leaders can create deep emotional bonds between tour guides and participants.

Tour leaders in this context are not only tasked with explaining tourist attractions, but also act as cultural mediators who bring together the diverse backgrounds of tourists with local values. In practice, the tour leader uses local Toraja terms and regional greetings when welcoming and interacting with tourists. The use of local language creates a warmer and more authentic atmosphere, so that tourists feel welcomed not only professionally, but also personally and culturally.

During the activity, the communication built is not one-way. Tour leaders actively encourage tourist involvement through question and answer sessions and open discussions. This provides space for tourists to feel heard and contribute, not just as passive spectators of the travel narrative. This approach strengthens interpersonal relationships and expands the meaning of the tourism experience itself.

In a real-life incident during a tour, extreme weather suddenly disrupted the planned itinerary. An elderly tour participant seemed to have difficulty following the field activities due to heavy rain that made the route slippery and difficult to pass. Realizing this, the tour leader quickly made the decision to change the route. However, what was special was not only the speed of his response, but also the way he conveyed the decision. He not only informed but also explained the

reasons for the change honestly, proposed several alternatives, and asked for the opinions of the tour participants before the final decision was made.

This action reflects two important things in interpersonal communication strategies: transparency and participation. By involving tour participants in the decision-making process, the tour leader demonstrated mutual respect and built a sense of ownership of the experience being undertaken. The impact was very noticeable: tour participants felt more appreciated, had more trust in the tour leader, and most importantly, continued to enjoy the experience despite the sudden change. This positive emotional experience is what then becomes the seed of long-term loyalty.

The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that empathetic, participatory, and local value-based interpersonal communication is not merely a complement to tourism services, but rather the essence of customer-oriented guiding practice.

### **The Role of Communication Strategy in Increasing Tourist Loyalty**

In the world of tourism, tourist loyalty is not solely shaped by the destinations they visit or the quality of the accommodation they stay in. Instead, the factor that often becomes the main determinant is how they are treated during the trip—and in this case, interpersonal communication between tour leaders and tour participants plays a central and irreplaceable role. The interactions built throughout the trip are not transactional, but rather social relationships that can shape long-term perceptions of the tourism service provider.

Research by Cheng, Chen, and Yen (2017) shows that trust is a key element that mediates the relationship between interpersonal communication and tourist loyalty. When a tour leader is able to build a sense of security, transparency, and warmth in communication, tourists will develop a sense of trust in the guide and in the service system as a whole. This trust grows not only because of technical skills, but because tourists feel that their needs and feelings are genuinely cared for.

Furthermore, tourists who feel appreciated and heard tend to have stronger emotional experiences. Not only do they enjoy the beauty of nature or cultural richness, they also feel personally involved in the travel process itself. Empathetic communication, through active listening and delivering information in a positive tone, often leaves a lasting impression that makes tourists want to repeat the experience with the same tour leader.

This is evidenced by a study by Yen et al. (2018), which showed that emotional attachment between tourists and tour leaders can be a strong predictor of post-trip behavior, including the desire to recommend the tour to others and the intention to use the same service again. Loyalty is no longer seen as a rational thing based on price or facilities, but rather as an affective bond born from high-quality interpersonal relationships.

An interesting case occurred in a package tour program to Taiwan, analyzed by Yen and Chen. During the trip, a tour leader named Mei Lin faced a group of tourists from various Southeast Asian countries. She realized that there were differences in expectations and cultural habits among the participants. Rather than giving rigid instructions, Mei Lin used a narrative approach and cultural humor to bridge these differences. She listened patiently to participants' complaints about the weather and food, and every evening she took the time to ask each participant one by one about their impressions of the day. These small actions created an atmosphere of high involvement and personal attention. As a result, at the end of the trip, almost all participants wrote positive reviews and expressed a desire to join another tour led by the same tour leader.

From this case, we can see that emotional experiences formed through human communication have a long-term impact on tourist loyalty. Tour leaders who are able to create a sense of connection through empathy and appreciation for each tourist's unique experience become a strategic asset in the highly competitive tourism industry.

**Table 2.** Data-Based Recommendations for Improving Tour Leader Communication Competencies

Development Area		Recommendation	Objective
Interpersonal Communication Training		Regular training in active listening techniques, empathetic communication, and conflict management	Improve the ability to respond to emotional needs of tourists
Service Standard Certification		Adoption of customer experience-based service standards from the hospitality industry	Ensure consistency of communication and service
Field Simulation and Role Play		Using simulations of difficult communication situations (e.g. angry or confused tourists)	Prepare tour leaders to face real conditions
Customer Feedback and Evaluation		Post-trip questionnaires or live reviews to assess tour leader communication aspects	Provide direct data for continuous improvement and development
Digital Training Curriculum		Online modules for self-study on cross-country communication cultures	Support communication with foreign tourists

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that interpersonal communication strategies implemented by tour leaders play a central role in increasing tourist loyalty. Communication that emphasizes empathy, two-way engagement, and responsiveness to the emotional needs of tour participants has been proven to be able to create relationships that are not only functional but also affective. Tour leaders who are able to build emotional bonds and provide memorable communication experiences will create added value in tourism services that have a long-term impact on tourists' decisions to return to use similar services.

Structured training interventions are needed for tour leaders to improve interpersonal communication skills, including strengthening active listening, empathetic conflict management, and flexibility in cross-cultural communication. In addition, tour service providers are advised to integrate interpersonal competency indicators into the tour leader performance evaluation system. Field simulations and digital training modules based on real scenarios need to be developed so that interpersonal skills are not only theoretical, but also applicable and internalized.

This study has limitations in the scope of sources that only come from literature reviews without primary data from the field. This condition limits the exploration of actual communication dynamics in a local or multicultural context. In addition, because it does not use a quantitative or observational approach, the findings in this study cannot be generalized widely in the population of tourists and tour leaders throughout Indonesia. Future studies are suggested to use a mixed-method approach involving in-depth interviews, direct observation, and customer surveys so that understanding of interpersonal communication strategies can be measured more comprehensively. Research can also be focused on specific tourism segments such as religious tourism, ecotourism, or educational tourism, to see the extent to which the role of interpersonal communication differs in each context.

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