



An Analysis of the Social Role of Tourism Ambassadors in Bali Province

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the 2022 Bali Tourism Ambassador program through the lens of Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Representation to examine how identity, culture, and tourism are constructed and communicated in contemporary Bali. As tourism remains central to Bali's economy, the involvement of youth through ambassador programs has become a strategic cultural initiative. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected via interviews, observations, and media analysis. Findings reveal that the Bali Tourism Ambassador contest functions not only as a promotional platform but also as a symbolic site for producing and reinforcing dominant narratives about the ideal Balinese youth—cultured, attractive, intelligent, and civically engaged. Through Hall's reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches, the study illustrates how cultural symbols, rituals, language, and performance converge to shape public perceptions of tourism, modernity, and local identity. Events such as quarantine, public speaking, and traditional attire are framed not merely as assessments but as ideological practices embedded in a "regime of representation." While the program succeeds in cultivating youth as cultural agents and tourism promoters, its long-term impact depends on consistent institutional support, mentorship, and integration into broader tourism development agendas. Without post-event follow-up, many of the finalists' innovative ideas risk remaining symbolic. This research contributes to understanding how youth-led initiatives can serve as mechanisms of cultural continuity, soft power, and developmental communication in tourism-centric societies.

Keywords: cultural representation, tourism ambassador, Bali youth, symbolic communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a leading sector and the backbone of Bali's economy. As the lifeblood of the island's economic structure, tourism cannot grow in isolation. It requires the active involvement of various stakeholders, including the younger generation, who are aware of the importance of promotion, cultural preservation, and high-quality tourist services. The role of youth as communicators in promoting a region is particularly crucial for government efforts. According to Kelman, as cited in Hamidi (2007), effective communication occurs when the communicator possesses ethos or credibility (expertise and trustworthiness), attractiveness, and power.¹

In line with the objectives of Law No. 10 of 2009, the Department of Culture and Tourism has developed marketing strategies by organizing events that actively engage young people.² This law invites the role of tourism ambassadors to become significant—as a bridge between local

culture, the needs of tourists, and creative promotional efforts. The primary aim of promotion is to increase sales or, more specifically, to boost the number of tourist visits. In this context, the organization of tourism ambassador pageants in various regions across Indonesia is expected to foster a generation of creative and innovative youth who can serve as promoters of their local tourism potential. Moreover, they are expected to collaborate effectively with government agencies or related institutions.

According to Satriawan (2013, p. 39), a tourism ambassador is a tourism and cultural icon selected through a structured selection process that typically involves youth or adolescents. These ambassadors function as an extension of the government in promoting regional tourism potential, with the ultimate goal of increasing both domestic and international tourist visits (Satriawan, 2013, p. 40).³ A tourism ambassador plays a highly influential role, as both expertise and trustworthiness support their credibility. Such individuals

are expected not only to represent their regions in promoting tourism potential but also to embody creativity, innovation, confidence, experience, and strong personal identity. A personable appearance complements these qualities. They are directed toward the development of a generation that is qualified, courteous, and dedicated to cultural preservation while also playing an active role in tourism promotion (Kotler, 2008).⁴

One concrete initiative to support tourism promotion in Bali is the selection of Duta Pariwisata Bali (Bali Tourism Ambassadors). This program is designed to identify young individuals who can serve as agents of change, icons of tourism promotion, and connectors between the community and the tourism industry. Held annually, the event garners significant public attention, particularly among youth eager to contribute to regional development. More than a beauty contest, the Bali Tourism Ambassador competition emphasizes participants' intellectual capabilities, personality traits,

and their commitment to sustainable tourism development. Throughout the rigorous selection process, contestants undergo quarantine, training, interviews, choreography sessions, and public speaking assessments and are tasked with creating real-world projects in the creative economy sector. Finalists are further evaluated on their public communication skills to ensure they are well-prepared to represent Bali to both domestic and international audiences. The ultimate goal is to produce dedicated and progressive tourism ambassadors who are not only active across various events and social media platforms but also capable of inspiring fellow youth to strengthen Bali's image as a cultural and sustainable tourism destination.^{5,6,7,8}

Nevertheless, challenges remain. There are still perceptions that such events serve merely symbolic or cosmetic purposes. Another persistent issue lies in ensuring that the finalists' progressive programs and ideas continue beyond the grand final night. Without adequate support from government agencies and tourism stakeholders, these initiatives risk remaining unimplemented. The 2022 Bali Tourism Ambassador selection process serves as a concrete example of efforts to recruit top youth representatives from various regencies across the island. Following a competitive selection process, 20 finalists were formally introduced to the public during a press conference. They showcased not only their physical presentation but also articulated their visions and missions, along with demonstrating concrete actions to support Bali's tourism advancement. While this event has gained routine institutional backing from both government and community sectors, one critical question remains frequently raised by the public: How effectively do tourism ambassadors represent the essence and aspirations of Bali's tourism sector?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the representation of the Bali Tourism Ambassador program in 2022. The research adopts a case study design, focusing on the implementation and public reception of the tourism

ambassador initiative as its primary object of inquiry. Data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and media analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including program organizers, selected finalists, and audience members. Additionally, media content related to the event was observed and analysed to understand how the image of the Bali tourism ambassadors was constructed and disseminated in the public sphere.

The data analysis followed four stages. First, primary data were gathered through interviews with organizers and observation of news coverage in mainstream media following the event. Second, the data were transcribed, organized, and cleaned to ensure accuracy and clarity. Third, the data were analysed using Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Representation,⁹ which provided a framework for interpreting how meaning and identity were constructed through representational practices. Finally, the findings were presented in the form of descriptive-analytical narratives to capture the nuances of meaning-making processes surrounding the Bali Tourism Ambassador program.

DISCUSSION

The Theory of Cultural Representation by Stuart Hall serves as a lens through which the role of tourism ambassadors in representing the image of Bali to the public is analysed. According to this theory, a tourism ambassador conveys the image of their region to a broader audience. They act as the "face of Bali" for both domestic and international tourists. Consequently, it is not sufficient for them to merely possess physical attractiveness—they are also expected to be intelligent, courteous, and capable of inspiring others. From a communication perspective, the role of a tourism ambassador is vital in delivering educational and constructive tourism messages, including through social media platforms.¹⁰

The Bali Tourism Ambassador program can be examined through the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's Cultural Representation Theory, which explores how meaning is created, reconstructed, and disseminated through media,

symbols, language, and social practices. Hall outlines three principal approaches within this theory—reflective, intentional, and constructionist—which offer deep insight into how this event functions not simply as a beauty contest but rather as a complex site for the production of cultural meaning.

Reflective Approach

Within this approach, representation is understood as a mirror of cultural reality. In the context of the Bali Tourism Ambassador program:

- Finalists are selected to represent the "ideal image" of Balinese youth: cultured, intelligent, and attractive.
- They wear traditional Balinese attire, speak about the philosophy of Tri Hita Karana, promote cultural values, and act as role models in adhering to health protocols.
- These elements reflect the aspirations of Balinese society to preserve Bali's image as a culturally rich, spiritual, and tradition-bound tourist destination.

The reflective approach regards representation as a direct reflection of existing reality. In the Bali Tourism Ambassador context, finalists are chosen to portray the idealized image of Balinese youth—innovative, culturally aware, physically appealing, and committed to upholding local values. Their use of traditional clothing, their understanding of Balinese cultural philosophies such as Tri Hita Karana, and their compliance with public health measures all represent the social and spiritual values deeply rooted in Balinese society. The event thus mirrors the collective desire of the community to maintain Bali's identity as a harmonious, spiritually conscious, and environmentally aware society. In this way, the finalists serve as symbolic reflections of collective cultural aspirations.^{11,12}

Intentional Approach

Here, the meaning of representation is shaped by the intent of those who produce the message.

- The organizers (for instance, Yayasan Abhyaya Parama Mavendra) construct the tourism ambassador program not merely as a beauty competition but as a medium for cultural communication,

tourism promotion, and digital education.

- By integrating elements such as training, public speaking, creative economy projects, and QRIS implementation, the organizers aim to transform the ambassadors into modern tourism promotion agents who are responsive to contemporary developments.¹³

In the intentional approach, representation is viewed as the product of deliberate intention on the part of the message creators. In this context, organizers such as Yayasan Abhyaya Parama Mavendra have consciously designed the event not solely as a beauty pageant but as a platform for cultural communication and tourism promotion. This strategy is evident in the multifaceted training provided to participants—including public speaking workshops, creative economy challenges, and digital literacy programs involving the use of QRIS. These components reveal the organizers' intent to shape tourism ambassadors into agents who represent Bali both locally and globally, particularly within the context of post-pandemic tourism recovery. In this sense, meaning is not naturally occurring but is deliberately constructed to support specific economic and cultural agendas.¹⁴

Constructionist Approach

Hall argues that meaning is produced through systems of language and culture. In this case:

- The tourism ambassador contest serves as an arena for the production of meaning regarding a contemporary “Balinese identity.”
- Symbols such as traditional attire, the use of both English and Balinese languages, cultural knowledge, and the spirit of collaboration with the government are integral components in the construction of the ideal Balinese youth.
- Practices such as quarantine, fashion shows, and Q&A sessions are not merely technical selections but also social rituals that shape the narrative of who is deemed worthy to represent Bali.

The constructionist approach emphasizes that meaning is created through social and discursive practices.

Within this framework, the Bali Tourism Ambassador contest does not merely produce ambassadors in the literal sense but also constructs a social image of what constitutes the “ideal Balinese youth.”^{15,16} Symbols such as traditional clothing, bilingual communication in English and Balinese, and discourse surrounding leadership and collaboration function as discursive tools that construct new meanings related to Balinese identity. The process of quarantine, fashion shows, and question-and-answer sessions are not simply procedural but serve as symbolic rituals that define who is considered eligible to represent Bali. Finalists are not merely individuals but representations of cultural, economic, and political values that are projected into public discourse.¹⁷

Based on Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation, the 2022 Bali Tourism Ambassador contest can be understood as a process of meaning production saturated with ideological representations of tourism, youth, and the image of Bali. Within Hall's theoretical framework, meaning is not fixed but is constructed through language, symbols, and dominant socio-cultural practices. In this context, the finalists of the Bali Tourism Ambassador contest are represented as ideal symbols of youth—intelligent, cultured, attractive, and ready to become agents of change in advancing Balinese tourism. They are selected not solely based on physical appearance but also their cultural knowledge, attitude, and communication skills. This representation constructs a dominant narrative in which “valuable” youth are those capable of becoming professional cultural and economic ambassadors for Bali, reinforcing their role in maintaining Bali's image as a world-class tourist destination.^{18,19}

Furthermore, the contest embodies a form of modernized local nationalism, wherein tourism is positioned as the core identity of Bali, and the ambassadors serve as mediums for the transmission of values such as cooperation, public ethics, and leadership. Events such as fashion shows, public speaking sessions, and adherence to health protocols function as semiotic practices that guide the audience to internalize idealized meanings of youth participation in development. In

Stuart Hall's terms, such representation falls within a “regime of representation” that dominates public discourse on who is qualified to symbolize progress and how Bali should be promoted to the world. Hence, the meaning of “tourism ambassador” is not neutral but is produced within a social structure shaped by specific interests—namely, to preserve Bali's appeal as a cultural and economic commodity in the global marketplace.

Several finalists have demonstrated exceptional potential through the programs they initiated. This illustrates that the Bali Tourism Ambassador contest is not merely a beauty pageant but rather a platform for youth empowerment in the development of tourism that is adaptive, collaborative, and grounded in local cultural values such as Tri Hita Karana. The emphasis on cultural integration and innovation reflects an effort to position youth as active agents in shaping a sustainable and inclusive tourism future.^{20,21} However, the effectiveness of their role is contingent upon post-event follow-up and institutional support. Without sustained backing from local government and relevant institutions, the ambassadors' ideas are at risk of remaining unimplemented. The Bali Tourism Ambassadors serve not only as symbolic figures but also as agents of change. They embody the spirit of Balinese youth—creative, culturally aware, and prepared to innovate. Nevertheless, much like the sash they wear, the title only gains meaning when accompanied by concrete action. Ultimately, Bali will not be judged by the glamour of its stages but by the tangible outcomes of collaboration and development driven by these ambassadors.^{22,23,24}

To ensure that this initiative does not devolve into mere spectacle, several measures must be implemented:

- A sustainable mentoring program for the selected ambassadors to support their growth and project implementation.
- Active collaboration between ambassadors, the tourism department, and industry stakeholders to integrate their roles into the broader tourism ecosystem.

- The provision of concrete opportunities that allow ambassadors to implement their ideas in real-world settings.

These steps are essential to transforming symbolic representation into impactful engagement, thereby positioning the ambassadors as meaningful contributors to Bali's cultural and economic landscape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Bali Tourism Ambassador program is a strategic site of cultural representation where identity, tradition, and youth empowerment intersect. By employing Stuart Hall's Theory of Cultural Representation, it becomes evident that this contest operates beyond superficial aesthetics. Through the reflective approach, finalists are positioned as living mirrors of Balinese cultural ideals, showcasing not only physical beauty but also a deep understanding of local values such as *Tri Hita Karana*. Their roles extend into symbolic territories where they represent societal aspirations for a harmonious, intelligent, and respectful generation. From the intentional perspective, the organizers deliberately shape the contest to promote not just tourism, but also cultural literacy, digital adaptation, and post-pandemic economic resilience. Training sessions, creative economy tasks, and language usage are not random—they are part of a planned narrative about the future of Bali. The message conveyed is that these ambassadors are products of vision, intention, and cultural curation. As such, their selection reflects more than merit—it reflects a larger discursive project about Bali's image in the global arena.

Equally important is the constructionist approach, which reveals how the contest does not simply identify ambassadors but actively constructs the social meaning of what it means to be an "ideal Balinese youth." Practices such as quarantine, public speaking, and the wearing of traditional attire are not only evaluative but also ceremonial acts embedded with ideological weight. These rituals work to define the parameters of who deserves visibility and legitimacy in representing the island. Moreover, they demonstrate how symbols and performances shape public perception and cultural identity. The Bali

Tourism Ambassador program thereby serves as a mechanism that produces and circulates a dominant narrative—one that aligns youth representation with social harmony, modernity, and cultural resilience. This process is deeply political, as it reflects how the image of Bali is curated for both internal consumption and international projection. In this regime of representation, meaning is never neutral; it is built, maintained, and legitimized through power-laden cultural practices. Thus, tourism ambassadors become more than individuals—they are symbolic vessels carrying the aspirations and ideologies of Bali as both a place and a brand.

Nevertheless, the symbolic success of the ambassadors depends heavily on tangible follow-up and institutional collaboration. The realization of their projects and the implementation of their ideas require support from local governments and tourism stakeholders. Without structured mentoring, resource allocation, and integrated collaboration, the transformative potential of these young agents may dissipate post-event. The contest itself must evolve into a platform that not only celebrates but sustains leadership and innovation. It must avoid becoming a performative exercise and instead function as a developmental pipeline for community-based tourism innovation. Finalists have already demonstrated creativity and cultural engagement—what they now require is structural facilitation. Concrete programs such as continued mentorship, policy inclusion, and community engagement opportunities must be institutionalized. Only through such systemic support can the symbolic become real and the performative transformed into progress. In doing so, the Bali Tourism Ambassador program will not only represent Bali's image—it will actively shape its future.

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