

The Exoticism of the Film Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts as an Introduction to Sumba Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to examine the role of the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2017) in promoting Sumba tourism by analyzing how visual elements, dialogue, and cultural representations construct an image of exoticism and authenticity associated with Sumba Island, East Nusa Tenggara. **Method:** The research employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on three levels of meaning – denotation, connotation, and myth. Data were collected through in-depth scene observation, documentation, and supporting literature on tourism and film studies. **Results:** The findings reveal that the film highlights distinctive cultural and natural features of Sumba, including Sandalwood horses, the Tanarara savanna hills, the local language, and traditional transportation. These elements not only emphasize cultural identity but also create an imaginative narrative of exoticism that strengthens the destination's appeal and positions Sumba as a unique cultural tourism site. **Novelty:** This research contributes to the understanding of film as an indirect yet powerful medium for tourism promotion, offering insights into how cinematic representation can shape destination branding and suggesting a collaborative role for government, tourism stakeholders, and filmmakers in cultural-based tourism development.

INTRODUCTION

Film, as a form of art, has the ability to reach social groups and convey messages effectively. Film, as an audio-visual medium, has an extraordinary emotional effect and popularity. In this context, film serves as the primary medium to provide the audience with a portrayal of the narrative, aesthetics, and locations depicted. As one of the forms of art and mass media, film not only represents stories but also carries the cultural and geographical identities that form its background [1]. Film often becomes an indirect promotional tool capable of enhancing the tourism appeal of a region.

Tourism activity has become a universal phenomenon that is of interest to various circles. In Indonesia, the tourism sector has experienced rapid growth and has become an integral part of the community's lifestyle. According to a report from The World Travel & Tourism Council, Indonesia is recognized as the country with the fastest tourism growth among G20 members [2]. According to Mari Elka Pangestu, the former Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, the increasingly popular cultural tourism trend is a golden opportunity for Indonesia. By integrating culturally-based creative economy into the tourism sector, we can stimulate national economic growth, especially for small and medium enterprises [3].

Tourism promotion is an important strategy in enhancing the attractiveness of a destination and attracting the interest of tourists. In the context of the film 'Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts,' tourism promotion can be seen as an effort to leverage cultural

elements and landscapes to draw the attention of visitors. Research shows that effective promotion, including the enhancement of destination image, has a significant impact on tourists' interest [4]. In addition, the use of digital media in tourism promotion has also proven to enhance the visibility and appeal of destinations, especially in the post-pandemic era[5]. Thus, this film not only functions as a work of art but also as a promotional tool that can increase tourist visits to the locations featured, as well as contribute to the recovery of the tourism sector's economy [6]

The main actors involved in the tourism promotion strategy through film media are the government, particularly the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, which serves as both the policymaker and the provider of promotional programs and infrastructure support that enhance the attractiveness of destinations. At the local level, tourism managers contribute by providing facilities, packaging cultural attractions, and involving the community in delivering the best experiences for tourists. Meanwhile, film industry players, such as directors, producers, and creative teams, play an important role in representing the potential of destinations through engaging narratives and visual aesthetics. The synergy between the government, tourism managers, and film industry practitioners is a key factor in building effective promotional strategies, with film serving as a creative medium that unites the interests of various stakeholders to strengthen the image of destinations at both national and international levels [7].

The development of the tourism sector from 2017 to 2019 shows that East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) has great tourism potential. During this period, more aggressive promotion and infrastructure improvements in NTT resulted in an increase in the number of visitors [8]. According to research, various tourist attractions, including natural beauty and the richness of local culture, have attracted tourists both domestically and internationally [9]. In addition, the experience of tourists has improved thanks to consistent tourism management and local community participation in the development of tourist destinations [10]. NTT can continue to be a popular tourist destination in Indonesia by using social media and creative marketing strategies [11]

Indonesia is known for its diverse tourist destinations that showcase natural beauty, a rich cultural heritage, and unique local characteristics recognized by the world. One of the destinations that is starting to attract international attention is Sumba Island, East Nusa Tenggara, which became the filming location for the movie *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* [12]. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the number

of tourists visiting Sumba has continued to increase from 4,658 visits in 2017, to 5,475 visits in 2018, and reaching 8,214 visits in 2019 [13].

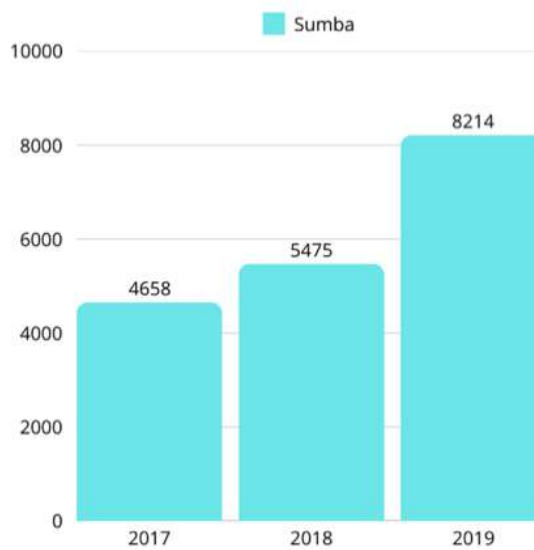


Figure 1. Tourist data in Sumba.

Source: Processed by the researcher

This growth reflects the increasing appeal of Sumba as a prime tourist destination in Indonesia [14]. This growth is inseparable from creative tourism promotion efforts, including through film media [15]. The film "*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*" (2017) not only received acclaim in the international film scene but also showcased the natural beauty of Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, which has the potential to attract tourists to visit. The exotic portrayal in this film can serve as an effective promotion for Indonesia's tourist destinations, in line with the increase in foreign tourist visits during that period [1].

Sumba, an island in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, is famous for its stunning natural beauty and extraordinary cultural heritage. With an area of 10,710 km², this island offers a variety of breathtaking landscapes, from green hills to pristine white sandy beaches. However, Sumba's tourism potential has yet to be maximally developed. The cultural diversity of Sumba is reflected in the customs and ceremonies of the local people. The Pasola ceremony, a traditional war ritual conducted as part of the harvest season celebrations, is one of the famous traditions. In addition, the traditional Sumba house with its distinctive high roof, known as *Uma Mbatangu*, has become an iconic traditional architecture that attracts tourists. Sumba's nature is also truly captivating. Weekuri Lake, a lagoon with clear water surrounded by coral cliffs, and Lapopu Waterfall, which offers a stunning view of tiered waterfalls, are some popular places to visit. Beaches like Nihiwatu and Walakiri attract tourists who want to enjoy the beauty of the sea and white sand. Sumba is a 'hidden gem' with a lot of tourism potential, but it is less promoted compared to other places in Indonesia. This makes it a 'hidden

gem' that offers an authentic tourism experience that has not been exploited by the masses [2].

The Indonesian film '*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*', released in 2017 and directed by Mouly Surya, tells the story of a widow named Marlina, played by Marsha Timothy. Marlina faces a series of tragedies and takes bold actions to seek justice for herself. The film's narrative is divided into four acts, each depicting a stage in Marlina's journey: robbery, journey, confession, and birth. This story structure deepens Marlina's character and shows how she transforms from victim to empowered individual. The film has a strong plot and showcases the natural beauty of Sumba in East Nusa Tenggara. The depiction of Sumba's beautiful landscapes helps to attract tourists to Sumba. '*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*' has received international recognition after screening at several film festivals, including Directors' Fortnight at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. This film has also received numerous awards, showcasing its quality and significant impact on the film industry. Overall, this film not only tells a profound narrative about the struggles of a woman but also serves as a good tool to promote the beauty of nature and the culture of Sumba to audiences around the world [16].

In a study conducted by Annisa Mulia Surezky and Rocky Prasetyo Jati (2023) titled "The Representation of Sumba Culture in the Film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*," they used Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis to explore how Sumba culture is represented in the film. The research findings indicate that the film depicts aspects of Sumba culture, including traditional death ceremonies, art, and headhunting traditions. This cultural representation is evident in elements such as tombstones, woven fabric, and Mamuli, with the film emphasizing the cultural roots of Sumba despite modern influences. Another research conducted by Dzikri Maulana Amirullah, Arthur S. Nalan, and Sukmawati Saleh (2022) in the article "Exoticism in the Film *Life for Death* by Tino Saroengallo as a Representation of Rambu Solo Ceremony" discusses how the Rambu Solo ritual is presented in Tino Saroengallo's documentary film. This analysis connects the portrayal of Saroengallo's father's death with postcolonial theory, indicating that the ritual, although viewed as exotic, carries strong social and cultural meanings. Additionally, the study "*Marlina The Murderer in Four Acts: Morality in Film According to Semiotic Analysis*" (2024) explores the moral themes in the film through semiotic analysis, revealing key ethical aspects such as courage, responsibility, and resistance to injustice, reflecting the values of society. Research by Willionel Dhimas Fernando, Reiza D. Dienaputra, and Edwin Rizal (2022) titled "Let's Go to Bandung: Symbols of Promoting Bandung's Tourism Destinations in the Film '*Dilan 1990*'" examines how the film *Dilan 1990* represents Bandung tourism.. Using qualitative methods and semiotics theory, the research results show that this film promotes Bandung through rational appeal (nature, batagor, Warung Bi Eem), emotional appeal (historical places), and moral appeal (symbols of violence). This study highlights the role of film as an effective promotional tool to attract tourists to Bandung. Finally, a study on the representation of tourism in Yogyakarta in the film "*Ada Apa Dengan Cinta? 2*" (2016) by I.A. Etsa Pracintya and colleagues analyzes how the cultural and natural landmarks of the city are used to

promote tourism. This research emphasizes the importance of rational, emotional, and moral appeal embedded in the portrayal of Yogyakarta in the film, which contributes to the promotion of the city's tourism.

This research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. According to Barthes' semiotics, there are three layers of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal or descriptive meaning of a sign, while connotation refers to the cultural and emotional relationships attached to the sign. Myth is the highest layer of ideology, reflected in signs and often reinforcing the dominant values within a culture. This film constructs the image of Sumba's tourism by highlighting exotic local aspects through the appeal of cultural tourism and the use of visual media that creates emotional perceptions. The hidden meanings behind the representations of exoticism are revealed through the analysis of Barthes' three layers of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth [17].

This research aims to analyze how visual and cultural elements in the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* are used to promote exoticism as a marketing strategy for Indonesia's cultural and natural destinations.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research on the exotism of the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* as a tourism promotion media uses a qualitative approach with a semiotic study based on Roland Barthes. The main data analyzed includes scenes, dialogues, visuals, and cinematic elements that highlight the beauty of nature, culture, and the life of the Sumba people depicted in the film. The data collection process was carried out through observation and documentation, by watching the film in depth and noting the elements that are relevant to the research objectives [18].

The analysis was conducted by identifying signs in the film, which were then interpreted through three levels of meaning, namely denotation and connotation, to reveal the myths or ideologies that support exoticism as a tourist attraction. The researcher also utilized supporting literature, such as academic articles, film reviews, and references related to tourism, to enrich the analysis and ensure the validity of the interpretations. The purpose of this research is to gain a deep understanding of how fictional films can be used as an effective tool to promote tourism by showcasing exoticism [19].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

To review how the visual and cultural elements in the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* are used to promote exoticism as a marketing strategy, the researcher outlines the study by using a table for each scene with a semiotic analysis by Roland Barthes. Here is an excerpt of the scenes or images from the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*.



Figure 2. The language “Sa su tau, sa su lihat”

Denotation	A woman is speaking with the yellow truck driver from the open wooden vehicle, with the text 'Sa su tahu, sa su lihat' in the local dialect.
Connotation	In this image, the connotation reflects the life of the Sumba people who still live traditionally, with limited access to transportation and simple social conditions.
Myth	Exoticism emerges through the myths about the hospitality of the local people and their simple way of life. This becomes an attraction for tourists who want to experience the warmth of human interactions in a rural environment.

The Sumba language has exotic potential that is an attraction in itself for tourists. In the context of culture, the local language as a medium of communication reflects the identity and traditions of the Sumba people, which are rich in historical and cultural values. In this observation, the expression 'Sa su tahu, sa su lihat' illustrates how the Sumba people interact with their environment and each other through simple yet meaningful language. This shows that their social interactions are still pure and traditional, which can attract tourists seeking authentic experiences [20].

Sumba looks amazing because of the local language used by the people. Studies show that visitors are often interested in authentic experiences that involve direct interaction with the local community, allowing them to feel the hospitality and simplicity of the community's life. Tourism activities that use the local language not only enhance the visitors' experience, but also play an important role in the preservation of culture. This is important because cultural tourism often becomes the main attraction for those who want to learn about and experience cultures different from their own backgrounds [21].

One factor that makes tourism in Sumba interesting is the myth about the hospitality of its people. Tourists to Sumba are not only attracted to its natural scenery, but they are also looking for opportunities to interact more closely with the people there.

Familiarity with the people around you and the ability to speak with them in their own language can enhance the atmosphere and make visitors feel welcomed. As a result, an increase in the attractiveness of tourism can be achieved through the development and promotion of the Sumbanese language as part of tourism [22].



Figure 3. Marlina Riding a Horse

Denotation	Marlina is riding a horse on a rural road with the sea in the background, surrounded by open natural scenery with trees and a bright sky.
Connotation	This image depicts freedom, tranquility, and the relationship between humans and nature. The horse symbolizes tradition or a way of life that still endures amidst modernity.
Myth	The exoticism here emerges through the romanticization of rural life that is far from modernity. This creates an image of 'authenticity' that is often sought by urban tourists as an escape from city life.

The Sumba horse is an important part of the social and cultural life of the community. In the Marapu tradition, horses or "ndara" are considered equivalent to the spirits of ancestors and represent sacred values. Its uniqueness attracts tourists who want to see the unique relationship between humans and animals in the context of a unique culture. If you want to see wild Sumba horses in their natural habitat, the Puru Kampera Savanna is the best place to do so, especially during the dry season. Watching the horses run across the savanna amidst the beautiful nature of Sumba provides a stunning visual experience and a rare photography opportunity [23].

An interesting tourist attraction is the Pasola Tradition, a horseback riding festival that involves symbolic fighting. This cultural ceremony offers an extraordinary view for tourists and provides a deep insight into the culture of Sumba. They can also witness the dramatic movements of the horses and the agility of the riders. As a symbol of freedom and a simple lifestyle that remains relevant in the modern era, the characteristics of the

horses have a unique appeal. This aligns with the previously mentioned myth of exoticism, where urban tourists seek 'authenticity' and escape from city life by riding horses in the natural surroundings of Sumba [22].

Tourists interested in conservation and biodiversity are drawn to the presence of the Sandelwood horse, which is an indigenous horse breed of Sumba. The preservation program for these horses can provide education for tourists and support local conservation efforts. The allure of Sumba horse tourism lies not only in the natural beauty and horseback riding experiences but also in the unique cultural values, traditions, and human-nature relationships. This creates a comprehensive tourism experience that combines elements of nature, culture, and adventure that are hard to find elsewhere [24].



Figure 4. Savanna Hills (Tanarara Hill)

Denotation	A small paved road cuts through the dry hills that are not much covered with trees.
Connotation	This road illustrates Marlina's physical journey through the vast landscape and reflects her search for self-identity and emotional struggle within herself.
Myth	Exoticism is created through the myth of a 'wild' nature that is pure and untouched. This scenery attracts tourists seeking an authentic experience in the great outdoors, far from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Bukit Tanarara is depicted in the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* as a stunning landscape, with vast savannahs and nearby hills that form a beautiful pattern of unity. The color changes of the savannah during the rainy season to green in the wet season and brown in the dry season add to the aesthetic appeal of the place. With this visualization, Sumba looks extraordinary and unique. The myth of the 'wild nature' of Bukit Tanarara is another reason why this hill is so breathtaking. These hills are portrayed as the backdrop for Marlina's journey full of struggles in the film. The hills reflect the strength and peace that exists naturally in Sumba. The empty and dry landscape gives an

authentic impression of rural life that is not modern, attracting tourists from the city looking for an escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life [25].

To promote tourism, the film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* makes use of Bukit Tanarara. The film has increased the popularity of East Sumba both domestically and internationally by showcasing its natural beauty. This is in line with the trend of film-based tourism, where filming locations are transformed into new tourist attractions for visitors. East Sumba is becoming increasingly recognized as an exotic tourist destination thanks to the beauty of Bukit Tanarara. Bukit Tanarara, along with other places such as beaches and traditional villages, reinforces people's belief about Sumba as the 'Land of 1000 Hills' rich with natural beauty and culture. The film *Marlina* serves as a tool that helps the public to discover the tourism potential [20].



Figure 5. Getting on the Truck

Denotation	A group of residents wearing traditional Sumba clothing is in a wooden truck with two horses.
Connotation	Traditional clothing and simple vehicles create a strong impression of local culture. The presence of horses reinforces the image of a humble and unique rural life.
Myth	Exoticism emerges through the myths about the hospitality of the local people and their simple way of life. This becomes an attraction for tourists who want to experience the warmth of human interactions in a rural environment.

In Sumba, wooden trucks, also known as "Biskaju" or "Oto Kayu", are trucks made of wood used for transporting people and goods. With a roof made of planks or tin, simple wooden benches without backrests in the back of the truck, and a design that reflects the simplicity and practicality of the local community. By using wooden trucks, tourists can enjoy a traditional atmosphere during the journey. They can also enjoy music throughout the long journey, providing an experience that they have never encountered with other modern transportation methods [26].

The simple yet vibrant life of the rural community of Sumba is represented by wooden trucks. Tourists can see how these vehicles play an important role in the daily lives of the local people and how they reflect a traditional transportation culture that remains alive in the modern era. The wooden trucks, with their unique wooden material and traditional design, often serve as interesting photography spots for tourists. Furthermore, these vehicles have become icons of local culture, enhancing the appeal of Sumba's culture-based tourism [27].



Figure 6. Bringing a human head

Denotation	This image shows two women standing in the middle of a vast hilly landscape. The woman on the right is dressed in traditional clothing, holding a machete and a decapitated human head – a symbol of violence. On the other hand, the woman on the left is wearing simple clothes with an enlarged belly, indicating that she is pregnant. The vast savannah background depicts the typical landscape of Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara.
Connotation	The savanna landscape depicts the dry region in eastern Indonesia, particularly Sumba, due to its unique topography. Traditional clothing reflects the authentic rural life of Indonesia, far from the modern world. Headless figures and machetes depict violence, revenge, and the struggle for life, which are the main themes of the film.
Myth	The myth of 'exotic Eastern Indonesia' comes from the many yellowish savanna hills. This wet and humid landscape is a philosophical tale about a remote area that is 'untouched by modernity'. The scene where two women walk down a far road, one of them (Marlina) carrying a human head, creates a myth of struggle against patriarchy. The image of Marlina, wearing a red sarong and wielding a weapon of murder, becomes a

	representation of resistance against the conventional myth of women as victims.
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The headhunting tradition in Sumba, although no longer practiced literally, has a uniqueness that attracts tourists. This tradition reflects the history and culture of the Sumba people and is an important part of the cultural tourism narrative. The Marapu belief, a local animistic tradition that honors ancestors and has a spiritual connection with nature, is closely linked to the headhunting tradition of Sumba. Head hunting was once performed as part of rituals to demonstrate bravery, express revenge, or enhance social status [28].

In films like *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, the headhunting tradition is depicted as part of the social and cultural struggle. This portrayal transforms the tradition into a story of resistance against injustice, attracting tourists to learn about its cultural context. Visits to traditional villages or cultural museums in Sumba provide tourists with the opportunity to learn about the history of this tradition. Additionally, the story of how headhunting has evolved into a symbol of peace and social collaboration offers a new perspective on the development of local culture. Despite the fact that the headhunting tradition is no longer practiced, its ritual aspects can still be found in festivals like Pasola, where the principles of bravery and community unity are celebrated through a symbolic war game using horses [29].

Tourists are often attracted to stories about the 'Exotic East Indonesia', which narrate the lives of rural people who uphold ancient customs. Part of this appeal is the headhunting tradition, which offers a unique experience to understand the lives of indigenous communities far from modernity [30].

Discussion

The film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* serves as a powerful medium for promoting tourism in Sumba by strategically portraying the island's unique culture, traditions, and landscapes. Through a semiotic analysis using Roland Barthes' theory, this study revealed how the film's visual elements, dialogues, and cultural symbols contribute to constructing an image of Sumba as an exotic and authentic destination. The depiction of Sumba's natural beauty, such as the vast savannas and pristine beaches, alongside cultural elements like the local language and traditional transportation, enhances the destination's appeal. These representations evoke a sense of "exoticism" that aligns with tourists' desire for authentic, untouched experiences.

The use of symbols such as the Sumba horses, traditional clothing, and the headhunting myth all contribute to the myth-making process of portraying Sumba as a remote and culturally rich destination. The film's focus on Marlina's journey through these landscapes not only reflects her personal struggle but also metaphorically invites

viewers to experience the authenticity of rural Sumba. The myth of 'untouched nature' further reinforces the attraction for those seeking an escape from modern, urban life, thus positioning Sumba as a sanctuary for cultural exploration and relaxation.

Moreover, the film acts as an indirect promotional tool, aligning with the concept of film-induced tourism (FIT), where cinematic portrayals directly influence the desire to visit real-life locations featured in films. This research highlights the potential for films like *Marlina* to serve as innovative marketing strategies that promote lesser-known destinations like Sumba. By leveraging the visual aesthetics and cultural authenticity showcased in the film, tourism stakeholders can build a stronger narrative around Sumba, enhancing its appeal to both domestic and international travelers. The synergy between film and tourism can significantly contribute to the region's economic growth, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery phase.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study demonstrates that *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* effectively uses visual and cultural elements of Sumba to promote the island as an exotic and authentic tourism destination. Through a semiotic analysis, it highlights how the film's portrayal of Sumba's natural beauty and local culture successfully evokes emotional and symbolic responses from viewers, thus enhancing the destination's appeal.

Implication : The research underscores the potential of films as powerful, indirect promotional tools in the tourism industry, offering an innovative approach to destination branding. It suggests that filmmakers, in collaboration with tourism stakeholders, can play a significant role in shaping and enhancing the image of local tourist destinations.

Limitation : However, this study is limited by its focus on a single film and may not fully represent the broader impact of cinema on tourism promotion across different genres or regions. **Future Research :** Future studies could expand on this by exploring other films or media formats and their influence on tourism, particularly in regions with distinct cultural identities, to further develop a framework for creative economy-based tourism promotion.

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