

Ethical Communication in Tourist Guiding: The Role of Right Speech in Enhancing Visitor Experience

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Abstract: As global tourism places increasing emphasis on ethical practices and meaningful visitor engagement, the role of communication in tourist guiding has become more critical than ever. This study investigates the application of *Right Speech*, a core principle of Buddhist ethics, as a framework for enhancing communication practices among tour guides. Employing a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with licensed tourist guides and international visitors across culturally significant destinations in Vietnam. Findings reveal that guides who adopt the principles of Right Speech—truthfulness, kindness, non-harm, and mindful speech—are perceived as more trustworthy, respectful, and emotionally attuned. Such communication not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also fosters deeper intercultural understanding and contributes to a more authentic and ethical tourism experience. By integrating Buddhist ethical discourse with practical guiding behavior, this study expands the discourse on sustainable and responsible tourism. The findings advocate for the inclusion of ethics-based communication modules in guide training curricula and underscore the transformative potential of mindful speech in shaping service quality. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of such training and examine its applicability across diverse cultural and religious tourism contexts.

Keywords: *Right Speech, Tourist Guiding, Ethical Communication, Mindful Tourism.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Communication plays a foundational role in tourist guiding, shaping how visitors perceive cultural heritage, engage emotionally with destinations, and evaluate overall service quality (Cohen, 1985; Ap & Wong, 2001). Tour guides serve as more than conveyors of information; they act as cultural intermediaries who mediate the relationship between tourists and host communities (Weiler & Black, 2015). As global tourism increasingly prioritizes ethics, inclusivity, and sustainability, the communicative behavior of guides has become central to enabling responsible and meaningful travel experiences (Fennell, 2018; UNWTO, 2022).

Despite growing scholarly attention to professional standards in tour guiding, much of the literature remains focused on service performance, customer satisfaction, and compliance with behavioral codes (Black & Weiler, 2010; Mak et al., 2011). Relatively little is known about the moral foundations of guiding communication specifically, how ethical speech is shaped by cultural values and philosophical

traditions. In Buddhist-influenced contexts such as Vietnam, the principle of *Right Speech* offers a culturally grounded yet academically underexplored framework for examining ethical communication (Harvey, 2000; Reisinger & Turner, 2003).

This study positions *Right Speech*, a core element of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhist ethics, as both a normative lens and a practical communication model for tourist guiding. Grounded in four key principles—truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness, and non-harm (Keown, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Right Speech aligns with contemporary imperatives in sustainable and mindful tourism (Walters & Jepson, 2019). Through a qualitative investigation conducted in culturally significant destinations in Vietnam, this research explores how tour guides interpret and apply these ethical speech principles and how international visitors perceive the outcomes.

➤ *Research Objective*

This study explores how the principles of *Right Speech* are enacted in guide–visitor communication and how they influence visitor perceptions of trust, satisfaction, and cultural sensitivity.

➤ *Research Questions*

- *To Address this Objective, the Study is Guided by the following Research Questions:*
- ✓ **RQ1:** How do licensed tour guides in Vietnam understand and interpret the ethical principles of *Right Speech*?
- ✓ **RQ2:** In what ways are the four components of Right Speech truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness, and non-harm manifested in guide visitor communication?
- ✓ **RQ3:** How do international visitors perceive and respond to ethical communication practices grounded in Right Speech during guided tours?
- ✓ **RQ4:** What implications does the integration of Buddhist ethical discourse have for professional training, service quality, and intercultural sensitivity in tourist guiding?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *The Role of Communication in Tourist Guiding*

Communication is widely recognized as the cornerstone of effective tour guiding, functioning not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a transformative tool that shapes tourist perception, emotional engagement, and destination image (Cohen, 1985; Ap & Wong, 2001). Tour guides act as cultural mediators, and their verbal and non-verbal interactions significantly influence visitor satisfaction, cultural appreciation, and the perceived authenticity of experiences (Mak et al., 2011; Wang & Morais, 2014; Wang et al., 2021). Accordingly, communication in guiding extends beyond factual accuracy to encompass emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to engage with culturally diverse audiences (Huang et al., 2010; Potočnik Topler et al., 2017).

➤ *Ethical Dimensions of tour Guiding*

The advancement of sustainable and responsible tourism has foregrounded ethical concerns within guiding practice (Fennell, 2020). Ethical guiding transcends adherence to codes of conduct and involves the moral framing of narratives, respectful representation of host communities, and the avoidance of misrepresentation, cultural stereotyping, or exploitation (Black & Weiler, 2010; Weiler & Black, 2015). However, empirical scholarship remains limited in its treatment of the ethical depth of communication. Most studies focus on observable behaviors or compliance metrics, while the internalization of ethical values particularly those rooted in cultural or philosophical

systems remains largely unexplored (Moscardo & Pearce, 2007; Türkmen, 2023).

➤ *Buddhist Ethics and Right speech*

Buddhist ethical frameworks offer a culturally situated and philosophically robust foundation for understanding communication in tourism contexts. *Right Speech (Sammā Vācā)*, a core component of the Noble Eightfold Path, advocates speaking truthfully, kindly, usefully, and in ways that avoid causing harm whether through lies, harshness, gossip, or divisive language (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). While these principles are spiritual in origin, they have contemporary relevance in domains such as ethical leadership, mindfulness-based training, and values-driven service delivery (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Purser & Loy, 2013). In Buddhist-influenced destinations like Vietnam, Right Speech presents both an ethical ideal and a practical framework for culturally sensitive guiding.

➤ *Right speech and Visitor Experience*

Visitor experience is a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and sensory engagement with a destination (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Studies suggest that communication perceived as authentic, compassionate, and culturally respectful enhances emotional satisfaction, knowledge retention, and overall visitor well-being (Chhabra, 2010; Walters & Jepson, 2019). Research on interpretive guiding affirms that emotionally resonant speech fosters memorable experiences (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Shegaw, 2018). Conversely, insensitive or unethical speech can create discomfort, misunderstandings, or reputational damage (Zhang & Chow, 2004). *Right Speech*, by promoting non-harm, intentionality, and mindful expression, may enhance both the quality of interpretation and the ethical climate of the visitor experience.

➤ *Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution*

While the importance of both ethical behavior and effective communication in tourist guiding is well-established, limited research has examined how culturally embedded ethical philosophies such as *Right Speech* can be operationalized in guiding practice and assessed in terms of visitor outcomes. This study addresses that gap by proposing *Right Speech* as a normative and behavioral framework for ethical communication in tourism. It contributes to scholarly discourse on mindful tourism, virtue ethics, and the integration of Asian philosophical traditions into global sustainability frameworks (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Walters & Jepson, 2019).

Based on this synthesis, the study proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrating how the four principles of *Right Speech* - *truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness, and non-harm* can be translated into guiding behaviors that foster trust, satisfaction, and intercultural understanding among tourists.

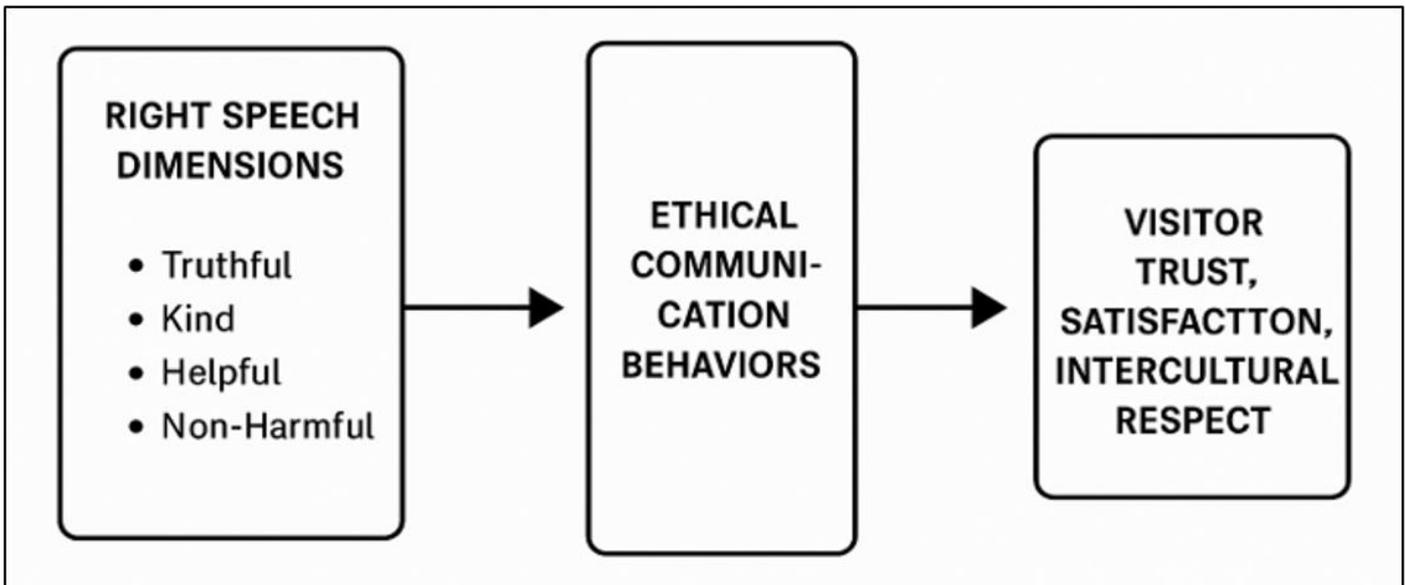


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework of Ethical Communication in Tourist Guiding based on Right Speech

➤ *A Professionally Formatted Visual Should follow here, Showing:*

- **Input:** Right Speech dimensions (*Truthful, Kind, Helpful, Non-Harmful*)
- **Process:** Ethical Communication Behaviors
- **Output:** Visitor trust, Satisfaction, Intercultural respect

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

This study employs a qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring the nuanced, subjective, and context-specific experiences of both tour guides and international visitors. The primary aim is to investigate how ethical communication particularly the application of *Right Speech* is interpreted, practiced, and evaluated in real-world guiding contexts. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning through lived experience and cultural interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

➤ *Research Context*

Vietnam provides a highly relevant setting for this inquiry, given its rich Buddhist heritage and dynamic tourism growth. Fieldwork was conducted in three key destinations representing a spectrum of guiding contexts:

- *Hue city*- known for its imperial legacy and Buddhist temples, offering heritage-based interpretive guiding.
- *Hoi An Ancient town* - a UNESCO-recognized cultural landscape that blends tangible and intangible heritage.
- *Ho Chi Minh City* - a cosmopolitan hub reflecting urban, modern, and international. tourist engagement.

These sites collectively provide a diverse contextual backdrop to examine the intersection of Buddhist ethics and professional guiding practices.

➤ *Participant Selection*

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select participants capable of offering in-depth and contextually relevant perspectives (Patton, 2015). The final sample consisted of:

- 15 licensed tour guides with a minimum of five years of professional experience and training from nationally or internationally accredited institutions.
- 20 international tourists from varied cultural and spiritual backgrounds who had recently participated in guided tours in Vietnam.

Participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, nationality, and religious/spiritual orientation. All participants provided informed consent before data collection.

➤ *Data Collection*

Data were collected over a six-month period (October 2024 – March 2025) using multiple qualitative methods to enable triangulation:

- Semi-structured interviews (30–60 minutes) with guides and tourists, exploring perceptions of communication quality, ethical speech, and emotional resonance.
- Field observations during 10 live guided tours, with systematic note-taking focused on both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies.
- Document analysis of official tour guide training manuals, codes of conduct, and ethics guidelines issued by Vietnamese tourism authorities.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit reflections corresponding to the four dimensions of *Right Speech*: truthfulness, helpfulness, kindness, and non-harm.

➤ *Data analysis*

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process employed both deductive and inductive coding strategies:

- Deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework of Right Speech.
- Inductive codes emerged organically from the data, capturing emergent insights related to emotional resonance, visitor trust, and guide authenticity.

To guide and structure the thematic analysis, a *Right Speech Communication Scale* (RSCS) was developed, rooted in the four canonical dimensions of Buddhist ethical speech. While existing tools for assessing tour guide communication primarily emphasize informational accuracy and visitor satisfaction, they often overlook the ethical and interpersonal dimensions of guide behavior. The RSCS was designed to address this gap by incorporating culturally grounded communication principles, specifically those informed by Buddhist ethics. This approach enables a more holistic evaluation of communication quality, particularly in contexts where ethical speech significantly shapes visitor experience and intercultural understanding.

Table 1 Appendix A: Right Speech Communication Scale (RSCS) Sample Items and Coding Guide

Dimension	Sample RSCS Item
Truthfulness	“The guide provided accurate, verifiable information.”
Kindness	“The guide used warm and respectful language.”
Helpfulness	“The guide tailored explanations to tourist interests.”
Non-harm	“The guide avoided sarcasm, stereotyping, or culturally insensitive humor.”

Each dimension was associated with observable communicative behaviors and speech patterns. The RSCS served both as a coding guide and as an interpretive lens for evaluating ethical aspects of guide communication. It enabled the identification of recurring themes and facilitated cross-case comparison. The scale was refined iteratively during analysis to enhance fit and clarity.

Thematic coding was conducted using NVivo 14 software. To ensure reliability, 25% of the transcripts were double-coded by a second researcher, resulting in a Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of 0.78, indicating substantial inter-coder agreement.

Note: A complete version of the RSCS with full items is provided in Appendix A.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the EDIC Institute (Institute for

Educational Development and International Cooperation) prior to the commencement of fieldwork. All participants received a detailed explanation of the study’s objectives, procedures, and their rights including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection.

- *To Protect Confidentiality and Anonymity:*
 - ✓ Pseudonyms are used in all quotations and published findings.
 - ✓ No personally identifiable information was retained.
 - ✓ No financial incentives or compensation were offered for participation, in alignment with ethical best practices in qualitative research.

To consolidate the methodological approach described above, the following table summarizes the key features of the research design and implementation.

Table 2 Summary of key Methodology Features:

Aspect	Details
Design	Qualitative, constructivist
Sites	Hue, Hoi An, Ho Chi Minh City
Participants	15 guides, 20 international tourists
Tools	Interviews, observations, document review
Analysis	Thematic (NVivo, based on Right Speech + emergent themes)
Timeframe	Oct 2024 – Mar 2025

IV. RESULTS

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field observations revealed four key themes that demonstrate how the application of *Right Speech* manifests in tourist guiding and influences visitor experience. The themes align with the four components of *Right Speech*- *truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness, and non-harm* and show how they contribute to emotional connection, satisfaction, and perceived professionalism.

- *Truthful Communication Builds trust and Credibility*
Tourists consistently emphasized the importance of guides who communicated honestly and transparently. Respondents reported that when guides acknowledged uncertainties (e.g., “I don’t know the exact number, but I can find out for you”), it increased perceived credibility and reduced skepticism about other information provided during the tour. This theme was reinforced by field observations where guides who corrected historical inaccuracies or clarified local myths were positively acknowledged by

group members. *“Our guide didn’t exaggerate or sugarcoat. That made everything feel more real and respectful.”*-Visitor from Canada.

➤ *Kindness in speech Enhances Emotional Connection*

Kind and compassionate speech was associated with a warmer emotional experience for tourists. Visitors appreciated guides who addressed them by name, encouraged questions, and responded with patience even under stressful or crowded conditions. Several tourists noted how this style of speech made them feel welcomed and cared for, especially in cross-cultural settings where anxiety or confusion is common. *“She was always smiling and speaking gently. Even when someone asked a silly question, she responded with kindness.”* -Visitor from the UK. Guides who displayed verbal empathy when discussing sensitive cultural topics (e.g., war history, religious practices) were rated more favorably in post-tour interviews.

➤ *Helpful Speech as a form of Service Quality*

Tourists also valued communication that was not only informative but genuinely helpful going beyond rehearsed

scripts to offer personal insights, practical advice, or local context. For example, guides who adapted explanations based on tourist interest (e.g., connecting history to current events) or offered tips about responsible behavior (e.g., temple etiquette) were rated higher in terms of professionalism and engagement. *“He helped us understand not just what things were, but why they mattered. That changed the whole tour.”* -Visitor from Australia.

➤ *Non-Harmful speech Reduces Cultural Friction*

Speech that avoided gossip, sarcasm, political bias, or stereotyping helped minimize misunderstandings and created a more inclusive group environment. Conversely, tourists expressed discomfort when guides used humor at the expense of local people, or made assumptions about tourist preferences based on nationality. Ethical guiding, rooted in Right Speech, was perceived as more culturally sensitive and respectful. *“There were no jokes about culture or politics. It felt like he really respected both us and his own people.”* -Visitor from USA.

➤ *Summary of Table of Themes and Outcomes:*

Table 3 Summary of Table of Themes and Outcomes

Right Speech Principle	Observed Guide Behavior	Impact on Visitors
Truthfulness	Admitting unknowns; clarifying myths	Increased trust and credibility
Kindness	Using gentle, respectful tone; showing patience	Emotional warmth, stronger guide–tourist rapport
Helpfulness	Offering tailored information; local advice	Improved learning, higher satisfaction
Non-harming	Avoiding jokes, stereotypes, gossip	Reduced discomfort; greater intercultural sensitivity

(Source: author,2025)

The findings suggest that *Right Speech* is not merely a philosophical ideal but a practical and observable communication behavior in tourism settings. Its application significantly contributes to the emotional, cognitive, and moral dimensions of the visitor experience.

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how the principles of *Right Speech*, rooted in Buddhist ethical thought, can inform ethical communication practices in tourist guiding and enhance visitor experience. The findings provide empirical support for the argument that *truthful, kind, helpful, and non-harmful speech* contributes significantly to building trust, emotional connection, and intercultural respect in tourism interactions.

➤ *Right speech as an Ethical and Experiential Framework*

Consistent with previous literature on tour guiding as an emotionally and culturally charged practice (Cohen, 1985; Ap & Wong, 2001), our study reinforces the notion that guides are not only conveyors of information but also ethical actors whose words shape visitor perception and host–guest relations. The observed behaviors aligned with *Right Speech* particularly honesty in admitting knowledge limits and avoidance of harmful speech helped reinforce the guide’s role as a trustworthy mediator rather than a commercial performer.

These findings align with Fennell’s (2020) assertion that ethics in tourism must move beyond compliance to incorporate character and intentionality. *Right Speech*, in this sense, serves as a behavioral anchor that supports *virtue ethics* where the ethical quality of communication is not just about rule-following but moral disposition and cultural mindfulness.

➤ *Emotional Resonance and Service Quality*

The positive impact of kind and helpful speech on visitor satisfaction and emotional resonance reflects the growing recognition of affective dimensions in tourism experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Chhabra, 2010). This study confirms that when guides communicate with empathy and attentiveness, they contribute not only to cognitive learning but also to emotional well-being, which is increasingly valued in the era of experiential and meaningful tourism (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Moreover, the alignment between helpful communication and perceived service quality affirms Mak et al.’s (2011) conclusion that guiding professionalism involves both technical content and interpersonal sensitivity. *Right Speech* enhances this duality by grounding professionalism in ethical intention and mindfulness.

➤ *Minimizing Cultural Friction through Non-Harmful speech*

A particularly significant contribution of this study is the evidence that avoiding harmful or divisive language reduces cross-cultural friction. In diverse group settings, where tourists bring varying norms and expectations, the ability to communicate respectfully across difference is essential (Weiler & Black, 2015). This reinforces the argument that Right Speech can function as a universal ethical standard that transcends religious boundaries and supports inclusive, culturally sensitive tourism environments.

➤ *Theoretical and Contextual Contributions*

This study contributes theoretically to the growing body of research on tourism ethics by introducing *Right Speech* as a culturally grounded ethical framework rooted in Buddhist moral philosophy. Unlike conventional models that prioritize compliance or external codes of conduct, Right Speech is based on virtue ethics and mindfulness, emphasizing inner moral disposition and intentionality in communication. This perspective offers a valuable alternative to Western-centric approaches, bringing attention to non-Western philosophies as sources of ethical guidance in tourism practice.

In terms of contextual application, the study highlights the relevance of ethical speech in spiritually or culturally sensitive destinations. In such contexts, communication that lacks empathy, mindfulness, or respect may not only disrupt the visitor experience but also create tension or misunderstanding with host communities. The findings underscore the need for deeper cultural literacy and moral reflexivity among tour guides, especially those operating in diverse and dynamic tourism environments. By demonstrating that ethical communication can be observed, taught, and adapted, this study provides a foundation for further exploration of localized ethical practices in tourism interpretation.

➤ *Limitations and Future research*

This study is context-specific to Vietnam and primarily Buddhist-influenced guiding contexts. Future research could apply the Right Speech framework across multi-faith or secular tourism settings to test its broader applicability. Additionally, quantitative validation through visitor satisfaction metrics or controlled training interventions could provide stronger causal insights into the relationship between ethical speech and tourism outcomes.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

➤ *Conclusion*

This study examined the application of Right Speech, a core tenet of Buddhist ethics, as a guiding framework for ethical communication in tourist guiding. Drawing on qualitative research involving tour guides and international visitors in Vietnam, the findings reveal that communication rooted in truthfulness, kindness, helpfulness, and non-harming meaningfully enhances the emotional depth, cultural sensitivity, and perceived professionalism of guided

experiences. These results indicate that Right Speech is not solely a religious or philosophical concept, but a practical and culturally embedded strategy for fostering ethical and mindful tourism encounters.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the expanding discourse on tourism ethics by introducing a non-Western, virtue ethics-oriented model of professional behavior. This approach challenges dominant compliance-based frameworks by emphasizing internal moral disposition and intercultural mindfulness. Empirically, the research provides clear evidence linking ethical communication practices to increased trust, visitor satisfaction, and social inclusivity factors that are becoming increasingly important in the pursuit of sustainable and responsible tourism.

➤ *Practical Implications*

The findings of this study offer several practical implications relevant to guide training, tourism management, and educational reform. For guide training programs, it is essential to integrate the principles of *Right Speech* into formal instruction. Training modules should include ethical reasoning, empathic communication techniques, and culturally sensitive language use. Scenario-based exercises that simulate real-life dilemmas can help guides internalize and practice non-harmful, respectful, and inclusive communication. Developing emotional intelligence and narrative humility should also be considered core competencies in professional guiding.

For tourism operators and policymakers, there is a need to move beyond performance-based evaluations and adopt frameworks that also assess the tone, ethics, and interpersonal quality of guide-visitor interactions. Institutional policies should promote compassion, integrity, and mindfulness in language through continuous training, ethical standards, and recognition mechanisms. These measures are especially critical in destinations where political, historical, or religious sensitivities may elevate the risks associated with miscommunication.

In the academic and professional sphere, this study supports the integration of ethical systems such as Buddhist, Confucian, or Indigenous philosophies into tourism education. A pluralistic curriculum that acknowledges diverse ethical traditions can better equip future professionals to navigate complex cultural interactions. Interdisciplinary collaboration among tourism, philosophy, and communication studies should be encouraged to develop a more inclusive and contextually grounded foundation for ethical training in tourism.

➤ *Recommendations for Future Research*

Future studies should explore the applicability of the *Right Speech framework* across different religious and cultural contexts to evaluate its potential as a universal standard for ethical communication in tourism. Comparative research across regions would help to clarify its adaptability and resonance beyond Buddhist-influenced destinations.

Quantitative studies are also needed to examine the relationship between ethical speech practices and measurable tourism outcomes, such as Net Promoter Score, emotional satisfaction, and learning retention. Such data would provide stronger empirical support for the benefits of integrating *Right Speech* into guiding practices.

In addition, future research should investigate how emerging digital formats, such as virtual tours and AI-powered guide systems, can incorporate ethical communication principles into their design and user interaction. This would ensure that ethical tourism communication is sustained not only in person-to-person contexts but also in increasingly prevalent technology-mediated experiences.

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APPENDIX➤ *Right Speech Communication Scale (RSCS)*

The Right Speech Communication Scale (RSCS) was developed to evaluate ethical communication by tour guides based on the four canonical dimensions of Buddhist Right Speech: **truthfulness**, **kindness**, **helpfulness**, and **non-harming**. The items were constructed to reflect observable verbal behaviors and attitudes relevant to guided tourism encounters. Respondents rated each item on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

• *Truthfulness*

Measures the accuracy, honesty, and factual integrity of the guide's communication.

- ✓ The guide provided accurate and verifiable information.
- ✓ The guide avoided exaggeration or distortion of facts.
- ✓ The guide acknowledged the limits of their knowledge when necessary.
- ✓ The guide distinguished clearly between historical facts and personal opinions.
- ✓ The guide corrected misinformation when it arose.

• *Kindness*

Assesses warmth, respect, and emotional tone in the guide's language.

- ✓ The guide used polite and inclusive language.
- ✓ The guide maintained a warm and welcoming tone throughout the tour.
- ✓ The guide responded with empathy to tourist questions or concerns.
- ✓ The guide respected differing cultural or religious views.
- ✓ The guide avoided sarcasm or belittling humor.

• *Helpfulness*

Captures the extent to which the guide's communication supports understanding and engagement.

- ✓ The guide tailored explanations to the group's interests and needs.
- ✓ The guide clarified complex topics in an accessible way.
- ✓ The guide encouraged interaction and questions.
- ✓ The guide facilitated connections between the site and visitors' experiences.
- ✓ The guide offered recommendations and guidance beyond scripted content.

• *Non-Harming*

Evaluates the guide's avoidance of language that could offend, marginalize, or mislead.

- ✓ The guide refrained from using stereotypes or generalizations.
- ✓ The guide avoided politically or religiously insensitive commentary.
- ✓ The guide used language that promoted cultural understanding rather than division.
- ✓ The guide showed care in describing sensitive historical topics.
- ✓ The guide avoided speech that could incite discomfort or emotional harm.