

INDONESIA'S REPRESENTATION POLITICS AND NATION BRANDING: AN INTERNATIONAL MEDIA GATEKEEPING STUDY IN THE NEWS OF THE 2021-2024 MANDALIKA MOTOGP

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Abstract

Through MotoGP, the Indonesian government seeks to display the image of a country that is modern, advanced in infrastructure, and ready to compete in the organization of international events. However, the process of forming the country's image is not entirely under the control of domestic actors. The international media has a big role as a representation agent and gatekeeper who determines what kind of narrative reaches a global audience. This study aims to examine how international media frames news about the Mandalika MotoGP using the theoretical approach of gatekeeping, politics of representation, and nation branding. Using qualitative methods and content analysis of news from five countries with large MotoGP fan bases (UK, Italy, Spain, Germany, and the US), this study found that Mandalika MotoGP news was more dominated by dualistic representations: on the one hand Indonesia was considered exotic and interesting, but on the other hand it was doubtful in terms of readiness and professionalism. These findings show that in the nation branding strategy, developing countries such as Indonesia still have to face the hegemony of global media narratives.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, Presentations, International Media, MotoGP

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, nation branding is one of the main strategies of developing countries to strengthen their image and competitiveness on the international stage. Nation branding is a country's strategic effort to build a positive image in the eyes of the international world (Dinnie, 2008). Indonesia, as a developing country with high tourism potential and cultural wealth, is trying to use the 2021–2024 Mandalika MotoGP event as a global showcase to introduce the image of a country that is modern, open to the world, and ready to compete in the global sports industry. In the context of developing countries, international events such as MotoGP are a tool used to strengthen cultural and economic diplomacy. Mandalika, as part of the Special Economic

Zone (SEZ) developed for international tourism, was chosen as the location for the MotoGP in 2021–2024. The Indonesian government has spent around IDR 3.6 trillion for the construction of the Mandalika circuit and its supporting infrastructure, making it one of the largest sports projects after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of PUPR, 2022). However, the effectiveness of this nation branding strategy does not only depend on the readiness of the infrastructure or the amount of funds disbursed, but also on how the narrative about Indonesia is constructed and disseminated through global media. One of the forms of modern media that plays a significant role to build the narrative in international relations is news (Soeryantoputri, 2024).

In this context, the international media plays an important role as a representative agent and the main information filter (gatekeeper) that determines the face of Indonesia as it is received by the global audience. The news that appears in media such as BBC, Reuters, Fox Sports, and Marca not only conveys facts about the organization of MotoGP, but also forms a symbolic image about Indonesia as the host country. For example, the emergence of narratives about the use of rain handlers in foreign media coverage that appear in the global public space, between cultural exoticism and accusations of unprofessionalism (Fox Sports, 2022).

However, the narrative regarding the success or failure of this event is not only determined by the Indonesian government or local organizers. International media has a significant role in shaping global public perception. This is where *gatekeeping* theory is relevant, as the media acts as a filter of information conveyed to the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Meanwhile, the theory of *politics of representation* explains how the image of Indonesia is constructed in media texts as "the other" that is exotic but inferior (Hall, 1997). Nation branding has also become an arena for narrative contestation where the state must struggle to influence how it is represented in foreign media (Anholt, 2007).

Several previous studies have shown that the success of nation branding strategies is highly dependent on harmonization between domestic and international narratives (Anholt, 2007). Unfortunately, in the case of the

Mandalika MotoGP, there is still a big gap between the message that the Indonesian government wants to convey through the "Wonderful Indonesia" campaign and the narrative produced by foreign media. A study by UNCTAD (2023) also highlights that many developing countries face major challenges in maintaining international reputations due to the dominance of Western media that often prioritizes problematic narratives over the achievements of the Global South.

This research is different from the previous approach that used framing theory, because it focuses on the power structure in the global media and how media actors choose, select, and construct Indonesia's representation in the coverage of the Mandalika MotoGP. Therefore, this study seeks to examine in depth how international media coverage of the Mandalika MotoGP is constructed through the process of information selection (gatekeeping) and political representation. This research is not only relevant to understand the dynamics of global media, but also important for the evaluation of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy and nation branding strategies in the future.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on content analysis of international mass media reports related to the implementation of the 2021–2024 Mandalika MotoGP. This approach was chosen because it is able to deeply capture the meanings that are formed and disseminated through media narratives (Happer & Philo, 2013).

The unit of analysis in this study is online news articles from six international media that have great influence and come from countries with historical and cultural importance to MotoGP, namely: BBC and Reuters (UK), Marca (Spain), La Gazzetta dello Sport and Periodicodaily Sport (Italy), Speedweek (Germany), and Fox Sports (USA). Articles were collected through searches of official media digital archives and through search engines with keywords such as "MotoGP Mandalika", "Indonesia Grand Prix", and "Mandalika Circuit".

The news selection process is carried out by setting criteria: (1) news published in the 2021–2024 period, (2) specifically discussing the

implementation of the Mandalika MotoGP, and (3) containing representations or opinions of Indonesia as the host. From the results of the selection, 52 articles were collected as the main data. The analysis technique is carried out in three stages: *Categorization of news themes* based on narrative focus (positive, neutral, negative); *Analysis of the elements of gatekeeping*, including source selection, headline focus, and narrative context, and; *Representation analysis* includes diction and metaphors used in compiling Indonesian imagery (Hall, 1997).

The credibility of the data is maintained by triangulating sources, namely comparing the narrative from the media with official statements from the Indonesian government as well as reports from international institutions such as the UNHRC and Dorna Sports (BBC, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Gatekeeping Process and Narrative Selection

The analysis found that international media tend to select issues based on high news value: controversy, conflict, and uniqueness (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the context of the news coverage of the 2021–2024 Mandalika MotoGP, international media show a distinctive narrative selection pattern, influenced by news value, editorial ideology, and audience expectations of each country. This gatekeeping process looks at how the media determines the news source, the angle of the news, and the diction chosen in compiling the narrative.

As Shoemaker & Vos (2009) argue, the process of gatekeeping is not only technical (what is or is not), but also related to ideological and market interests. The BBC and Reuters, for example, have consistently placed human rights and infrastructure issues as the main highlights in the Mandalika MotoGP coverage. This focus features a selection of issues based on Western global journalism standards that place transparency, governance, and human rights as the main parameters in the evaluation of an international event host country. This is in line with a BBC report (2022) which cited Amnesty International's concerns about the relocation of residents in the Mandalika

SEZ project, which shows a negative framing trend towards Indonesia as human rights issues develop. Reuters (2022) even inserted the critical note in the midst of tourism-themed news, which indicates that narrative selection is done to balance the commercial side and editorial responsibility.

On the other hand, media outlets such as Marca and La Gazzetta dello Sport instead highlight local uniqueness, including rain charm culture, community affection, and tropical landscapes. This narrative selection shows that sports media tend to display elements of entertainment and exoticism to attract readers' interest (Marca, 2022). However, this way of reporting also contributes to the symbolic construction of Indonesia as an "other", i.e. an exotic but not modern country (Hall, 1997).

Fox Sports (2022) and Speedweek (2023), two media outlets that prioritize the technical side of the sport, have repeatedly highlighted problems with the quality of asphalt circuits, logistical delays, and extreme weather. This problem is used as a central narrative that shapes Indonesia's image as a country that is not ready in terms of technical management and infrastructure. In this context, audience preferences are an important factor: readers in the US and Western Europe tend to seek narratives about efficiency and technical professionalism in international sporting events (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Table 1. Number of International Media News Articles about MotoGP Mandalika (2021–2024)

International Media	Country of Origin	Number of Articles	Key Focus
BBC	English	12	Human rights and technical readiness
Reuters	English	10	Human rights, tourism and infrastructure
Brand	Spain	7	Local ecosystems and cultures

La Gazzetta dello Sport	Italy	9	Technical and sports performance
Speedweek	Germany	6	Technical criticism
Fox Sports	AXLE	8	Logistics and racing performance

The data in Table 1 of the document shows the highest number of articles coming from British media (BBC and Reuters) with a total of 22 articles, followed by Italian and Spanish media. Of the total 52 articles described, it was found that 61% contained negative or skeptical narratives about the implementation of the Mandalika MotoGP, 27% were neutral, and only 12% were positive.

Overall, the gatekeeping process in international media works in three levels:

1. **Source Selection:** The media tends to cite international institutions such as the United Nations and Amnesty International to provide a narrative of legitimacy.
2. **News Aspect Emphasis:** Focus on controversial and dramatic issues such as land conflicts, drivers' criticism of asphalt, and the phenomenon of rain handlers.
3. **Narrative Framing:** Interesting selection and exotic metaphors to shape the reader's opinion (e.g. "Rain shaman takes the spotlight" by Marca, 2022).

These findings reinforce the view that the global media, especially from developed countries, still hold great power in constructing discourse about the global South. Therefore, Indonesia's nation branding strategy through sports events such as MotoGP needs to be accompanied by active media diplomacy and strategic counter-narratives.

Representation Politics: Indonesia in the Global Imagination

The findings show that Indonesia's image in the Mandalika MotoGP news is often constructed in a dualistic manner between cultural exoticism and doubts of professionalism. This representation of exoticism is reflected in the narrative of the "rain charmer" that has gone viral and is cited in many international news reports, such as by Marca (2022), which calls it a "mystical ritual unique to Southeast Asia". This places Indonesia in an orientalist framework, namely as an interesting object of Eastern exoticism but still positioned as an "other" of the modern Western world (Said, 1978).

The concept of othering introduced by Hall (1997) is relevant in analyzing this representation. When Indonesia is presented through cultural elements that are considered strange, funny, or unscientific, the media forms a dichotomy of global identity: between the rational-modern and the traditional-mystical. Meanwhile, news that criticizes the asphalt circuit, poor logistics management, and the issue of human rights violations against local communities around Mandalika (BBC, 2022; Reuters, 2022) confirms Indonesia's position as a developing country that has not been fully trusted to manage world-class events. This inferior representation implies the existence of a global hierarchy in the production of meaning, in which the countries of the Global South not only have to work hard to organize international events, but also to influence how they are reported (Happer & Philo, 2013). In a study by Glover (2020), countries such as Brazil and South Africa also experienced similar representation when hosting the Olympics or World Cup, where the media focus was more on social inequality issues than on development success.

In addition, secondary data from the UN Human Rights Council report (2022) noted that there were complaints about the forced relocation of the Sasak indigenous people as part of the development of the Mandalika area. This information is reinforced by Human Rights Watch (2022) which calls the Mandalika project an example of non-inclusive infrastructure development. This representation gives rise to the narrative that Indonesia's nation branding is often overshadowed by undemocratic development practices.

Furthermore, this phenomenon does not stand alone. In the research of Ozkirimli and Yumul (2021), political representation of developing countries in the global media is still dominated by epistemic asymmetry, that is, inequality in who has the right to convey and define the truth. In this case, Indonesia does not seem to have the symbolic authority to fully regulate its own narrative in the eyes of the world.

The government's public communication strategy through the "Wonderful Indonesia" campaign has not been able to penetrate structural biases in the global media industry. This is in line with Anholt's (2007) view that nation branding is only effective if the internal narrative is in sync with external perceptions and gains legitimacy from global media actors.

Nation Branding: A Challenged Strategy

The Indonesian government has made the Mandalika MotoGP an important part of the nation branding strategy to build an image as a developed, modern, and open country for international investment and tourism (Dinnie, 2008). This strategy can be seen in the "Wonderful Indonesia" campaign which is highlighted in promotional events, the use of modern circuit technology, and the government's official narrative regarding the success of infrastructure transformation in the Mandalika area (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2022).

However, in practice, Indonesia's nation branding process cannot be separated from serious challenges that come from abroad. The international media often raises narratives that are contrary to the ideal image they want to form. In this study, it was found that international news often highlights controversial issues such as human rights violations, development crimes, and belief in mystical elements such as rain charmers (Reuters, 2022; BBC, 2022). This shows that the international media is not only a channel of information, but also an active actor in defining the meaning of an event through the process of symbolic representation (Hall, 1997).

Indonesia's nation branding effectiveness strategy in this context is hampered by two main challenges: the hegemony of Western media narratives

and the lack of control over global perception. As Anholt (2007) points out, developing countries often have to compete in a "marketplace of perceptions" dominated by the global media and public opinion that is often biased towards the countries of the South. This is reinforced by international research that shows that the image of Southeast Asian countries in the Western media is still framed in the perspective of exoticism and structural inferiority (Chitty, 2011; Choi, 2020).

In addition, Indonesia's lack of participation in managing global narratives adds to the challenges. Efforts to forge media partnerships and control representation through diplomatic communications are still very limited. In fact, in some cases, such as a report from Amnesty International (2022), human rights issues and the eviction of local residents for the development of Mandalika are the main highlights that encourage success in terms of infrastructure. In secondary data obtained from Brand Finance (2023), Indonesia's nation brand score is ranked 43rd globally with a positive assessment in the field of Culture and Tourism, but still low in the dimensions of international governance and trust. It reflects the inequality between symbolic imagery and the actual perception of the global community. In the case of Mandalika, Indonesia's narrative of "modernity" is actually overwhelmed by the spotlight of "logistical chaos" and "cultural gaps", as conveyed by Speedweek and Fox Sports (Speedweek, 2023; Fox Sports, 2022).

Thus, the biggest challenge of Indonesia's nation-branding strategy is not in weakening domestic efforts, but in the asymmetry of power representation at the international level. The state needs to build a more strategic and participatory international communication strategy, as well as form media diplomacy that is able to respond to negative framing actively and sustainably.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the 2021–2024 Mandalika MotoGP is proof of the Indonesian government's strategic efforts in building a positive image through cultural diplomacy and nation branding. However, this study shows

that the success of imagery does not only depend on the domestic narrative shaped by the state, but is strongly influenced by the gatekeeping process and political representation carried out by the international media. The findings show the duality of representation in foreign media coverage: on the one hand Indonesia is shown as a unique and attractive exotic place for tourists, while on the other hand it discusses its capabilities as a developing country in managing global events. This representation is reinforced by a selection of narratives that highlight controversial, technical, and political issues, including criticism of infrastructure, event management, and human rights issues against the local community of Mandalika.

This analysis confirms that in the current global context, developing countries such as Indonesia do not yet have full control over the way they represent the eyes of the world. Inequality in the production and distribution of global meaning makes Indonesia vulnerable to other parties and the bias of the Western media. This shows that nation branding is not just a matter of one-way communication, but an arena of ideological and symbolic contestation involving transnational actors. Therefore, the success of Indonesia's nation branding is not only determined by tourism and infrastructure promotion, but also by the ability to build media diplomacy, strengthen domestic narrative capacity, and build partnership strategies with international media. This step is important so that Indonesia's representation is not constantly in the shadow stereotype, but can reflect its progress, diversity, and true capacity as part of the global community.

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