
MOTOGP MANDALIKA 2025 AS INDONESIA'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY TO UPHOLD ITS SAFETY IMAGE AMID POLITICAL UNREST

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Abstract: *In late August 2025, Indonesia was rocked by nationwide political demonstrations (triggered by the death of a delivery driver at the hands of police), which turned violent and resulted in multiple casualties, injuries, and arson attacks on government and commercial buildings apnews.com/aljazeera.com. These events have raised international concerns about the country's safety image. This paper employs a qualitative descriptive approach, analyzing secondary sources (news media, government releases, and academic literature) to examine how hosting the 2025 MotoGP at the Mandalika Circuit can serve as a nation-branding strategy to counteract negative perceptions. Drawing on nation branding theory, destination image concepts, event leveraging, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), we find that MotoGP Mandalika 2025 is being actively promoted by Indonesian authorities as a showcase of the nation's resilience and safety standards mataram.antaranews.com/en.antaranews.com. We compare scenarios in which the event is cancelled versus successfully executed, arguing that cancellation (absent a genuine health crisis) would signal weakness and harm the country's image, whereas proceeding signals confidence and crisis management capability. As a "brand shield," the event is leveraged to reinforce a narrative of Indonesia as a stable, safe international sports host*

INTRODUCTION

In August 2025, widespread anti-government protests erupted across Indonesian cities, including Jakarta, Bandung, and Makassar, triggered by public outrage over perceived government excesses and police brutality. What began as peaceful rallies deteriorated into violent clashes: protesters burned public buildings (including regional legislative offices) and attackers targeted banks and other facilities apnews.com/aljazeera.com. In Makassar alone, an angry mob set fire to a provincial parliament building, trapping occupants and killing at least three people apnews.com. In Bandung, protestors similarly torched a local parliament building apnews.com. Security forces resorted to tear gas and water cannons, while social

media footage of a delivery driver killed by a police armored vehicle fueled public anger apnews.comaljazeera.com. Hundreds were arrested and scores injured on both sides. Foreign embassies (US, Australia, and others) promptly warned their citizens to avoid demonstrations and large gatherings apnews.com. This unrest has prompted concerns that Indonesia's image as a safe tourism destination and stable host for international events could be tarnished.

Amid this turbulence, Indonesia is preparing to host the 2025 Indonesian MotoGP Grand Prix at the Mandalika International Street Circuit on 3–5 October 2025. The government and event organizers are framing MotoGP Mandalika 2025 as not only a premier sporting event but also a nation-branding opportunity. Former Tourism Minister Sandiaga Uno and other officials have publicly linked the event to the "**Wonderful Indonesia**" brand campaign, highlighting the global media coverage (119 media partners in over 200 countries for the 2023 MotoGP) and the influx of international spectators as promoting Indonesia's tourism image en.antaranews.comtravel.detik.com.

This raises key research questions: *Can MotoGP Mandalika 2025 strategically signal Indonesia's safety and resilience after the demonstrations? What are the potential impacts on Indonesia's destination image if the event proceeds versus if it is canceled?* This paper addresses these questions by reviewing relevant theory and analyzing secondary sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nation Branding: Nation branding involves a country's concerted efforts to project a favorable image beyond its borders for goals like tourism and investment wipo.int. Simon Anholt (2007) and others argue that countries, like corporations, compete in a global reputation market, using symbols, events, and campaigns to shape perceptions. A country's brand includes its culture, people, tourism appeal, governance, and more wipo.int. Major international events (sports, culture) are commonly employed as "symbolic actions" to influence nation brand by showcasing a country's attributes (Anholt, 2007). Indonesia's branding campaign "**Wonderful Indonesia**" explicitly leverages events (Mandalika MotoGP, Olympic bids, ASEAN summits, etc.) to convey images of a dynamic, attractive country. As WIPO Magazine notes, nation branding is about "conveying a particular image of the country beyond its borders to achieve beneficial goals" wipo.int. In this context, hosting a globally televised MotoGP Grand Prix is treated as a strategic branding tool and it sends symbolic signals about Indonesia's modernity, hospitality, and stability to the world.

Destination Image: A destination's image is the collection of perceptions (beliefs, ideas, impressions) held by potential visitors about that place (Crompton, 1979). According to Gartner (1993) and later tourism scholars, destination image has cognitive (knowledge-based), affective (emotion-based) and conative (behavioral intention) components pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. Negative news (e.g. violence, unrest) can damage cognitive and affective image, reducing tourists' intention to visit. Destination image theory emphasizes that media coverage and official messages heavily influence these perceptions. In tourism marketing, managers therefore seek to reinforce positive attributes of a place to influence image (Um & Crompton, 1990). A sporting event like MotoGP can influence all three image components: cognitively by drawing attention to a destination's infrastructure and amenities, affectively by generating excitement and national pride, and conatively by inspiring travel intent (Chalip et al., 2003). However, sudden negative events (protests,

violence) can overshadow these positives unless addressed strategically.

Event Leveraging: Chalip (2004) introduces the concept of *event leverage*, emphasizing that it is not the event per se but how it is used by stakeholders that creates lasting benefits. Effective leveraging means aligning an event with broader social, economic, or promotional objectives beyond the competition link.springer.com.

For example, Mandalika MotoGP has been positioned as more than a race: it was built into local infrastructure investment, tourist product development, and national promotion (e.g. including cultural performances and the Wonderful Indonesia brand at the venue travel.detik.com/travel.detik.com). In this view, the current unrest could be seen as a crisis that the country must leverage as well – by demonstrating crisis-management and conveying resilience through the event. If successfully leveraged, the MotoGP can help “bundle” Indonesia’s destination brand with the excitement and media attention of the race, potentially mitigating negative images caused by unrest (Chalip & Costa, 2005; Jago et al., 2003).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT): Coombs’ SCCT (2007) provides a framework for how organizations can protect reputational assets during a crisis link.springer.com. It suggests that crisis managers should assess the crisis type, history, and stakeholders’ perceptions to select response strategies. Key strategies include *rebuilding* (showing concern and corrective action) or *diminishing* (excusing or defending) approaches to minimize reputational damage. In nation-brand terms, authorities must anticipate how stakeholders (foreign tourists, media, investors) interpret the unrest and respond accordingly with transparent, positive messaging. Hosting MotoGP as planned can be seen as a **bolstering** strategy emphasizing normalcy and competence, reminding audiences of positive national attributes (Coombs, 2007; Ullah et al., 2022). Conversely, outright cancellation would likely confirm a high level of perceived threat (undermining the image of safety) unless due to an unavoidable crisis (e.g. a pandemic).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative-descriptive** approach, synthesizing information from diverse secondary sources. We collected data from reputable Indonesian news outlets (Kompas, Detik, CNN Indonesia), international media (Associated Press, Al Jazeera), government releases (Ministry of Tourism press statements, BPS reports), and academic literature (journals on tourism, branding, and crisis communication). The literature review identified theoretical constructs (nation branding, destination image, event leveraging, SCCT) relevant to the research questions. The findings section analyzes media reports of the demonstrations and MotoGP preparations, as well as official commentary on tourism and safety. No new survey or interview data are used; instead, we integrate existing reports and statistics (e.g. tourism arrival trends) to paint a comprehensive picture. This method allows for contextual analysis of how MotoGP Mandalika 2025 is being framed as a national strategy during the unrest period.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- **Impact of Demonstrations on Perceived Safety:** The August 2025 protests had immediate negative effects on Indonesia’s safety image. Violent incidents including deadly fires at government buildings were widely reported internationally

apnews.com/aljazeera.com. For example, at least three people were killed when a crowd set a legislature building ablaze, an act denounced by officials as beyond legitimate protest apnews.com. In Jakarta, demonstrators clashed with police, burning bus shelters and damaging infrastructure (see image captions) aljazeera.com. Such scenes triggered travel advisories: U.S. and Australian embassies warned citizens to avoid protest zones apnews.com. Indonesian media also noted that hospitals treated scores of injured officers and civilians (Komnas HAM reported 25 officers hospitalized and hundreds of protesters detained apnews.com). These events feed into foreign perceptions, reinforcing concern over civil unrest.

Deputy for Resources and Institutions at the Ministry of Tourism, Martini M. has explicitly acknowledged this threat: officials warned that “if not handled properly, negative incidents could create negative perceptions of Indonesia’s top destinations” en.antaranews.com. In other words, unchecked violence or chaos in major cities could tarnish destination image. Indeed, a sustained media narrative of unrest might shift cognitive and affective images toward danger and instability. Thus, one key insight is that the protests have indeed risked Indonesia’s safety reputation, necessitating strategic countermeasures.

- **MotoGP Mandalika’s Role in Safety Branding:** In response, the Indonesian government and organizers are leveraging MotoGP Mandalika 2025 as a counterbalancing signal. High-ranking officials repeatedly emphasize the event’s safety preparations. For instance, Vice Chairman of the Pertamina Grand Prix of Indonesia (MGPI) Priandhi Satria stated that all infrastructure, human resources, and electronic systems at the Mandalika circuit are being “*prepared comprehensively*” to meet global safety standards, reflecting “Indonesia’s commitment to hosting a world-class event that is safe, comfortable, and memorable” mataram.antaranews.com mataram.antaranews.com. Such statements are examples of bolstering messaging (SCCT) stressing safety and readiness to reassure international audiences.

Meanwhile, tourism authorities highlight MotoGP Mandalika as a nation-branding platform. Former Deputy Tourism Minister Angela Tanoe Soedibjo praised the 2024 MotoGP as a major promotional venue for **Wonderful Indonesia**, noting that “the nation-branding ‘Wonderful Indonesia’ was placed at strategic points inside and outside the circuit” and broadcast via over 100 international TV channels travel.detik.com travel.detik.com. The Ministry openly admits MotoGP is a “big sports tourism event” that effectively broadcasts Indonesia’s image to the world en.antaranews.com. The combination of these messages – about safety, global broadcast, and cultural elements (opening ceremonies with local dances) – suggests a deliberate strategy: to use MotoGP as a “*brand shield*” that protects and enhances Indonesia’s image amid the crisis.

Economically, the stakes are high.

The inaugural 2022 MotoGP Mandalika was projected to generate around Rp500 billion in economic activity and create tens of thousands of temporary jobs, according to the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (ANTARA News, 2022). By 2024, the scale of impact had expanded significantly, with independent studies estimating that MotoGP Mandalika contributed Rp4.8 trillion to the national and regional economy (ObserverID, 2024).

Cancelling the 2025 event would therefore mean forfeiting not only substantial financial benefits but also reputational value, signaling potential disruption in Indonesia’s tourism and

investment climate. In contrast, a successful execution could be framed as tangible evidence of political stability and effective crisis management, reinforcing a broader narrative of resilience in Indonesia's destination branding.

- **Canceled vs. Proceed Scenarios:** Two comparative scenarios emerge. If MotoGP Mandalika 2025 were *canceled*, even officially citing security concerns (rather than, say, a pandemic), it would likely confirm worst fears internationally. A cancellation might be interpreted as an admission that Indonesia is too unsafe to hold a major event. According to SCCT logic, this would escalate the reputational threat: stakeholders (foreign fans, media, investors) would assign blame to Indonesian authorities for losing control, and would have little reassurance besides already negative news. Such an outcome could deeply damage tourism outlook.

In contrast, proceeding with the event (with tight security measures and contingencies) can communicate the opposite: that Indonesia remains open for business and capable of hosting safely despite unrest. This follows Coombs' "minimizing and rebuilding" strategies demonstrating that the nation "has safety under control" and offering positive messaging. Indeed, the Mandalika organizers are coordinating with local governments and health agencies (e.g. Lombok Tengah governor's health readiness review en.antaranews.com) to ensure not just race safety but also overall visitor welfare. By running the event, Indonesia can point to its robust response (police protections at the track, emergency plans, crowd management) as evidence against travel bans. In sum, our analysis finds that only a truly uncontrollable crisis (such as a pandemic like COVID-19) would fully justify canceling MotoGP from a safety-image perspective. **Political unrest alone is a reason to proceed, not to cancel.**

- **MotoGP as a "Brand-Shield" and Resilience Signal:** The evidence suggests that MotoGP Mandalika 2025 is being positioned as a "*brand-shield*" a high-profile platform that reinforces Indonesia's global image as resilient and trustworthy. The extensive preparations (infrastructure beautification, marshal training, security drills) and the placement of national branding throughout the venue are overt acts of image construction travel.detik.com mataram.antaranews.com. If the event goes on successfully and without incident, international broadcasters will highlight Indonesia's tourism highlights (beaches, culture) alongside the race, potentially offsetting negative protest images. Conversely, even announcing these thorough preparations now serves as a preemptive narrative of stability. The SCCT framework suggests that this proactive bolstering can mitigate reputational threats by emphasizing positive identity cues (e.g. "we care about your safety, see how we are improving every aspect").

Importantly, this strategy relies on synergy between tourism marketing and crisis management. The government's "public campaign promoting safe tourism" (as cited by Antara) underscores the message en.antaranews.com. It is a form of **event leveraging** whereby the crisis itself becomes part of the promotional story: "see how we overcame challenges and still delivered a world-class event." Chalip (2004) notes that sustained benefits require linking the event to broader goals. Here the goal is maintaining destination attractiveness; success in October 2025 would be touted as proof that "Indonesia is back on track." Anecdotal signals from the field reinforce this: during lockdowns and emergencies, other event-hosting countries have similarly marketed successful events as proof of

normalcy.

In summary, hosting MotoGP 2025 under current conditions sends a strategic signal. A thoroughly managed MotoGP demonstrates organizational competence and commitment to tourism, which may reassure international travelers and investors. The very message that "these global sports events proceed as planned because Indonesia is safe enough to host them" directly targets and hopefully alleviates concerns generated by the protests.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the August 2025 demonstrations posed a clear threat to Indonesia's safety image by generating violent incidents and media reports of unrest apnews.com/aljazeera.com. In terms of nation branding, this demanded a strategic response. Hosting the MotoGP Mandalika 2025 race is being used exactly for this purpose: as an action that can counteract negative perceptions. Key insights include: First, the Indonesian authorities recognize that *perceptions matter* (Antara): "not handled properly... [safety incidents] could create negative perceptions of Indonesia's top destinations" en.antaranews.com. Second, MotoGP Mandalika is explicitly tied to the "**Wonderful Indonesia**" brand campaign and is treated as a "media magnet" (119 media outlets, global broadcast) en.antaranews.com/travel.detik.com. Third, officials emphasize safety and world-class standards to the press, effectively using SCCT strategies to protect reputation mataram.antaranews.com mataram.antaranews.com mataram.antaranews.com.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude that canceling the event without an overwhelming public health reason would likely harm Indonesia's image more than any unrest does. Pandemic-level crises aside, political protests are better countered by demonstrating resilience through continuity. Thus, policymakers should proceed with MotoGP Mandalika 2025 as planned, framing it as proof of normalcy, and indeed continue to leverage high-profile sporting events into the future for nation branding. This includes preparing thorough crisis-communication messages around the event (e.g. highlighting security measures, community support, cultural hospitality) and coordinating multi-stakeholder campaigns (government, tourism boards, MGPA) to emphasize safety and welcome messages. Finally, we recommend that Indonesian authorities continue to capitalize on international sports events (MotoGP, Mandalika Run, Porsche, etc) as platforms for nation branding, making these events "complementary to [the country's] competitive identity," so that the country's image remains robust even when facing socio-political challenges wipo.int/en.antaranews.com.

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