

## Indonesia's Nation Branding Through the Lens of Neighboring Countries: An AI-Assisted Study of Visual Content Analysis

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**Abstract** - This study investigates how Indonesia is portrayed in the news media of nine ASEAN neighboring countries, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, through an AI-assisted visual content analysis. Adopting a constructivist paradigm, the research analyzes 452 news articles published between May 2023 and March 2025, a period marked by the post-pandemic recovery phase. Major national news portals from each country were purposely selected based on credibility, coverage, and availability of visual content. Both manual coding and AI tools (ChatGPT 4o Models) were used to classify narratives and identify dominant visual themes, followed by multimodal interpretation of text-image interactions. The findings reveal nine thematic categories, with news on politics and economy dominating coverage, followed by environment, security, infrastructure, tourism, culture, sports, and incidents. Indonesia's image in ASEAN media is thus heavily shaped by political governance, diplomacy, and economic activities, while cultural, tourism, and other soft power narratives appear less prominently. The study highlights the need for Indonesia to diversify its nation branding strategies by amplifying non-political stories, promoting sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, and creative industries, and strengthening cross-border media partnerships. Such efforts can foster a more balanced regional image, enhance soft power, and support long-term regional cooperation and tourism growth.

**Keywords** - Indonesia, nation branding, media portrayal, ASEAN, regional, visual content analysis, tourism management, AI-assisted study.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Media can be a social storyteller for nation branding across the institutional, technological, and symbolic logic, which plays a powerful role in shaping the image of a country [1]. Nation branding plays a tool for communication between a country and the rest of the world, creating a positive reputation in the eyes

of international audiences [2]. This effort involves many aspects, ranging from a country's identity like visual signs and symbols, to its tourism, economy and even governance, aiming at enhancing a country's soft power and fostering favorable image perceptions from other countries [3]. In the ASEAN context, many countries have implemented their nation branding through tourism marketing campaigns to differentiate themselves- for instance, "Amazing Thailand" or "Malaysia, Truly Asia". Indonesia, in particular, has been using "Wonderful Indonesia" as the nation branding campaign since 2010, as part of the government's initiative to promote Indonesian tourism to the global audiences [4].

Studies on the nation branding of Indonesia have explored how the campaign is depicted in various media. [5], for example, analysed the image of Wonderful Indonesia across online mainstream media in 16 countries as the main target market of Indonesian tourism. The study suggested that only few mentions of the Indonesian nation brand, compared to Singapore, Australia and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, a Wonderful Indonesia social media study by [6] argued that Indonesian nation branding discourse is still becoming part of the country's dynamic struggle due to the fact that the country has complex and diverse identities that made it confused whether to promote agriculture, local heritage or the spectacles of political power. Such findings somewhat indicate the challenge of gaining visibility in foreign viewpoints and the importance of understanding how Indonesia is actually being perceived.

Despite the growing interest in nation branding research, most studies on Indonesia (e.g. [6]; [7]; [5] focus on state-driven branding campaigns or the country perceptions from Western countries. Nonetheless, there remains a gap in understanding how a nation is portrayed by its neighboring countries, particularly within a region like ASEAN. Moreover, there is a lack of exploration of nation branding through the visual representations of symbols, signs or narrations. In the interconnectedness of regional blocs like ASEAN, a nation's branding is not only

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constructed by its official nation branding campaigns, but also by how the country is represented in the mainstream media, and how the image is co-shaped through narrations. Examining Indonesia's nation branding from the perspective of neighbouring countries in the Southeast Asia region is significant, given that they are the key tourism markets and important political economic partners for Indonesia. The Southeast Asia regional neighbouring nations' perception of the ASEAN member nations can influence travel decisions, regional investment and business cooperation [8].

The aims of this study are three folds: 1) to examine how Indonesia is portrayed in the news media of the neighbouring countries, particularly the other nine ASEAN countries, namely Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam; 2) to identify dominant themes and narratives associated with Indonesia within the scope of ASEAN; and 3) to suggest the implications of visual representations of Indonesia to foster strong regional collaborations and tourism visitations. Employing visual content analysis, this research unveils the predominant themes and narrations that have been used to portray Indonesia in the ASEAN media.

The research uses the official post pandemic timeframe, starting from May 5th 2025 when WHO declares the end of COVID-19 as a global health emergency [9]. The end of the pandemic marks a very significant step for states and nations to revisit and reshape their branding and public diplomacy [10]; [11]. This research examines a total of 452 news articles about Indonesia across the newsportals of the other nine ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam) from 2023 to 2025. On top of that, this study utilizes primary news portals to get a holistic view of news related to the country, assuming that they might encompass various aspects that influence nation branding according to [12]'s Nation Brands Index, such as governance, tourism, people, exports, investment and immigration, and culture and heritage. Due to language differences, all the article contents were translated to English via the internet browser.

This study utilises Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly ChatGPT 4o, as a tool to assist researchers in working on the research project, starting from 1) creating a big picture of the article outline; 2) exploring potential gaps from the existing literatures that are relevant to the research topic; 3) gaining insights on which news portals from the nine ASEAN countries to be selected for this study; 4) assisting in organising the massive datasets; and 5) proofreading the manuscript to ensure the language quality of this scholarly article. The utilization of AI in the context of nation branding is somewhat a novelty in existing research, offering a room for this study to contribute to the existing literature by providing insights not only theoretically, but also methodologically.

While the integration of AI into this research assists researchers to generate scholarly research papers, ensuring academic integrity by balancing the AI use with human intelligence is also crucial [13]. Although being assisted by AI, all the critical review on literature, data, results, and analysis was done by the researchers. To demonstrate integrity, being honest and transparent is fundamental. The disclosure of AI utilization in this article authorship allows readers to assess the AI contribution and the research accountability [14].

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Nation Branding

Nation branding covers several attributes that are embedded to the nation, such as identity, visual sign and symbols, as well as country image, competitiveness and soft power [3]. Various definitions of nation branding have been suggested in existing literature. For example, according to [15], nation branding incorporates branding and marketing communication strategies to promote images of a nation. Meanwhile, [16] argues that nation branding is a multifaceted concept that covers a whole image of the country, including its politics, economic, social, environment, history and cultures.

The term 'nation branding' and 'country branding' has been used interchangeably across literature although they are different [15]; [17]. Despite the comprehensive systematic review on nation and country branding, studies (e.g. [18]; [2]; [19]) argue these two remain a confusing, complex, and multifaceted concept. Nonetheless, this study uses the term 'nation branding' instead of 'country branding', as nation branding lies between marketing and political communication, playing a role as a tool for communication between a country and the rest of the world, creating emotional benefits and positive perceptions to other countries as the target market [2].

According to [18]'s study, the plethora of research that discusses nation branding can be distinguished into four primary streams. The first stream of studies focuses on nation branding and image reputation (e.g. [20]; [21]; [22]). [20] for example, argued that a nation should create and manage their positive image reputation to attract tourists, to add value to the local products, to attract foreign investors, and to attract talented citizens. The second stream discusses nation brand personality (e.g. [23]; [2]; [24]). Nation brand personality refers to the human personality traits that are associated with a country name, perceptions of a country's government, companies, institutions, people, product and other outputs [2]. These aspects play roles in attracting tourists, investment and promoting the exports of goods and services, therefore identifying these can help a nation to formulate their branding strategy [24].

The third stream has to do with the measurement of a country brand (e.g. [12]; [16]), which can be done

using two different approaches. First is the company-based brand equity approach (top down), such as the assessment of the country's performance in terms of exports or attracting tourists [16]. Another one is the consumer-based brand equity approach (bottom-up), such as Nation Brands Index, measuring different countries' perceptions towards one country from governance, tourism, people, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, to export potential [12]. The last stream concentrates on nation branding and integrated marketing communications (e.g. [25]; [26]). For instance, [25] investigated the importance of interorganizational coordination in a nation branding, and how each key organization plays parts in helping the country promotional activities to achieve nation branding goals.

Notwithstanding the extensive literature in nation branding, the exploration of nation branding through the visual representations of symbols, signs or narrations are still in infancy. Meanwhile, exploring nation branding visual representation can help understanding external perceptions and revealing discrepancies between the intended nation branding and how it is conveyed and perceived in other countries [27].

### *B. Visual Representations and Media Portrayals*

This study uses the term 'visual representations' to cover all the heterogeneous types of visualization as suggested by [28], who defined visual representations as the presentation of information in visual form that generates meanings and understanding. Visual representation has functions of aesthetics and meanings [29]; [30]. These functions are typically applied within two general approaches: (1) rhetoric, a formal and literal approach of object representation [30]; [31]; [32]; and (2) semiotics (also known as visual metaphor), a visual image that is used to represent a particular concept or meaning [33]; [34].

Scholars have discussed the role of visual representations in building nation branding. [35], for example, studied event logos as visual branding tools using semiotic analysis, and found that the logo plays an important role in communicating the event's identity, and the host country's image. This finding emphasises the significant power of visual symbols in nation branding, particularly in diplomacy. Another example of research that highlights the significant role of visual representations is [36], who examined a national art exhibition and a blockbuster film from China. The study utilized both visual and narrative analysis, and indicated that visual representations in the form of art and film can serve as tools of nation branding, with more emphasis on art and culture.

The construction of nation branding through media portrayals have also been discussed in existing literature. A study focusing on South Korea's successful response during COVID-19 pandemic across government communication, global news coverage, and social media discourses by [37] showed

that positive media framing can increase trust and interest from global audiences, hence enhancing the nation brand. The study also argued that global crises can amend the previous nation branding, noting that cooperation and competence in crisis management became one of the factors of nation branding. Likewise, [38] identified the role of news media in shaping international perception. The study indicated that negative portrayals of a country in media can significantly hurt the reputation of the country, therefore suggesting media management in nation branding to maintain the country's image.

In a more regional context like ASEAN, most research focused on social media sentiments. For instance, using Indonesia as their research scope, [39] investigated the influencer activities and the use of national symbols during the international fashion event participation, as portrayed on social media. The study argued that the visual representation of influencers on Instagram can shape the nation branding through a personality figure.

Notwithstanding the existing studies on visual representations and media portrayals in the context of nation branding in the Southeast Asia region, the ideas of how one ASEAN country is portrayed in other neighboring countries, visually and textually, has not been discussed well. By using Indonesia as the object of the study, this research explores how this country is portrayed on regional news portals by examining frequency of thematic narratives associated with Indonesia. Furthermore, this study aims to suggest the implications of visual representations of Indonesia to foster strong regional collaborations and tourism visitations.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### *A. Paradigm*

This research was conducted using the constructivism paradigm, which views that social reality is not objective and fixed, but is formed intersubjectively through social, cultural, and linguistic constructions. In this context, Indonesia is represented in the media in ASEAN countries not as an independent fact, but as a result of symbolic and narrative processes shaped by the media through the choice of images, visual captions, and news context. The constructivism paradigm emphasizes that meaning is not something that is naturally attached to an object, but is formed through contextual and historical interpretation [40].

Thus, this approach allows researchers to explore in depth how images in the news shape Indonesia's image and identity in the eyes of foreign publics. This research not only describes how Indonesia is reported, but also examines how visual signs such as national figures, state symbols, and cultural attributes are articulated and interpreted in a particular socio-political context. The choice of constructivism paradigm is in line with the visual content analysis

approach used in this research, where the main focus lies on the process of interpreting meaning through the social context [41]; [42]. Therefore, in this paradigm, the researcher plays an active role as a subject who constructs understanding based on the theoretical framework and depth of interpretation of the collected visual corpus.

### *B. Data Source*

Data were collected from major national news portals in nine ASEAN neighboring countries: Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Selection criteria were: (1) credibility and reputation at the national level; (2) consistent coverage of international and ASEAN-related issues; (3) availability of visual content (main images and captions) relevant to Indonesia; and (4) accessible archives within the research period (May 2023–March 2025).

Malaysia – Five major portals were selected: Malaysiakini, Berita Harian, Bernama, The Star, and Harian Metro, representing the most influential and trusted media spectrum in Malaysia. Malaysiakini is known for being critical and independent, Berita Harian is conservative and popular among the Malay community, Bernama is the official government source, The Star is modern and neutral for the multi-ethnic urban segment, and Harian Metro has a popular style for young readers. This combination provides coverage ranging from critical to official perspectives, urban to rural.

Singapore – Six portals were selected: The Straits Times, Channel NewsAsia, Lianhe Zaobao, TODAY, The Business Times, and Berita Harian, all under SPH Media or MediaCorp with high editorial standards. These portals cover the dominant mainstream voices, ASEAN diplomatic and policy perspectives, Chinese and Malay community views, as well as economic coverage and social trends, thereby representing a credible spectrum of national media.

Thailand – Two portals were selected: the English-language Bangkok Post, which is credible and widely read by professionals and international audiences; and Khaosod, which is popular among urban and younger audiences and known for its fast coverage and proximity to grassroots issues, although it can be sensationalist at times. This combination represents both elite and grassroots perspectives.

Philippines – Five portals were selected: Inquirer.net, which is critical and trusted by professionals; Philstar.com, which is neutral and friendly to all segments; GMA News, which is accurate and avoids sensationalism; Rappler, which is progressive and investigative; and Manila Bulletin, which is conservative and focuses on official news. This selection provides a diverse range of perspectives from progressive to conservative.

Brunei Darussalam – Two major portals, Borneo Bulletin (in English) and Media Permata (in Malay),

were selected for their status as major national media outlets with official and credible coverage, representing urban and local communities, and providing a balance of language and social background.

Vietnam – Three portals were selected: Nhân Dân as the official state media with a focus on diplomacy, Tuổi Trẻ, which is popular among young and critical readers, and VietnamNet as a pioneer in digital media for the professional segment. This combination reflects the views of the government, the urban public, and the professional community.

Myanmar – Three independent portals, Frontier Myanmar, The Irrawaddy, and Myanmar Now, were selected for their credibility amid political pressure, representing the views of professionals, activists, and urban communities, with minimal government bias in their coverage.

Laos – Two portals, Khaosan Pathet Lao (KPL) as the official government news agency and The Laotian Times, popular among young people and expatriates, were selected to combine the official narrative with contemporary and multi-voiced perspectives.

Cambodia – Khmer Times was selected for its status as a leading English-language media outlet with consistent coverage of Indonesia–Cambodia bilateral relations, although its framing tends to be moderate. This media outlet is representative of urban and international readers in Cambodia.

### *C. Data Collection*

The data collection in this study was conducted manually through digital documentation methods, focusing on visual content in online news from mainstream media of ASEAN countries. This approach aims to identify how Indonesia is symbolically represented through images that appear in international news, especially in the Southeast Asian region.

The collection process began by conducting a news search using the keyword “Indonesia”; to identify articles that explicitly addressed the topic of Indonesia. The search was conducted through an external search using Google with the writing formula “Indonesia site:[news site address]”. To maintain temporal relevance, the researcher used the Google Tools → Time Range feature to filter search results only within the period of May 2023 to March 2025 (See Figure 1). This kind of filtering serves as an initial stage to ensure that the selected news really puts Indonesia as the focus of the news, not just a peripheral mention [43]; [44].

Once the relevant news was found, the accompanying key images were downloaded in their original format (not screenshots) to retain the visual quality and metadata information. All images were entered into a spreadsheet as a visual data management system. Each image entry was

accompanied by related information such as the article link, headline, media name, publication date and image caption where available. This approach follows the practice in digital visual research that emphasizes the importance of integration between visuals and metadata to ensure accuracy and traceability in the subsequent analysis process [45]; [46].

This method is used so that the research obtains a collection of visual data that is representative and systematically managed, so that it can be further analyzed to explore the meaning of Indonesian branding in the visual discourse of media in the ASEAN region.

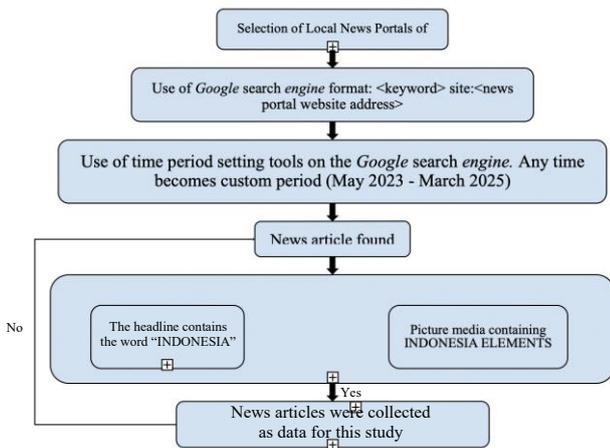


Figure 1. Data Collection Flow

#### D. Data Analysis

In order to understand how Indonesia is portrayed in the neighboring ASEAN countries, the data analysis was carried out by conducting content analysis and descriptive statistics on categories, news portals, countries and other data. This analysis was carried out to find out how often the country's news portal talked about Indonesia, through titles that contained the keyword "Indonesia".

The study was done by utilizing Google Sheet to allow all research teams to compile, organise, and analyse data manually, simultaneously. During this process, an Artificial Intelligence platform (ChatGPT 4o) was used as a tool to assist researchers to classify the specific code of each article to be categorised into a broad theme after the manual coding and visual content analysis was done. To get a comprehensive picture as well as to ensure the study validity, researchers also employed a critical review on the AI results and paid attention to the relationship between images and text: how visuals reinforce, add, or even reposition the meaning contained in the news narrative. Thus, the analysis does not stop at the image level alone, but involves the interaction between visuals and narrative, according to the principle of multimodality in media analysis. The results of the interpretation of each news story and

main image were then compared between news portals and between countries.

This comparison aims to find patterns, similarities and differences in the way each country frames Indonesia, both in visual and narrative aspects. Investigator and theoretical triangulation were also carried out to ensure the AI results as well as the researchers' interpretations and analysis demonstrate accurate, reliable, and valid representation of the findings.

The findings of this analysis are expected to critically map how Indonesia's branding process is formed in the local media discourse of ASEAN countries, as well as identify the dynamics of Indonesia's image and perception in the region. With a comprehensive content analysis approach, this research is able to provide deep insight into the process of forming Indonesian meaning and identity in the regional media sphere, as well as contributing to the study of nation branding in Southeast Asia.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study identifies nine themes that emerge in orders from the most to the least discussed across the selected news portals in ASEAN neighbouring countries, namely 1) politics, 2) economy, 3) environment, 4) security, 5) infrastructure, 6) tourism, 7) culture, 8) sport, and 9) incidents; as summarised in Table 1. It is revealed that politics is the most dominant theme, comprising 46.46% of the coverage. Topics that represent this theme encompass important political events in Indonesia, that vary from presidential election to inauguration, bilateral relationships to BRICS, political dynasty to protests, and other politic-related topics like constitutional court regulations or ministries' policies. Most articles use political figures like the president of Indonesia, the ministers, the governor of Jakarta, or event documentaries like bilateral meetings or protests.

The ASEAN news media's emphasis on political events and figures in Indonesia indicates that the neighboring countries perceive Indonesia mainly through the lens of governance and diplomacy. As the largest nation in ASEAN, Indonesia has become a role model for its neighbouring countries, especially with regard to leadership, politics, economy, and policy [47]. Given that the timeframe of this study is around the changes of leadership roles (e.g. presidential, cabinet, governor), it appears that these political events naturally drew neighbouring nations' media interest. The study suggests that the impact of political governance in Indonesia may be directly related to the interest of neighbouring countries in making economic-related decisions. This finding is also supported by the frequent coverage of bilateral relationships between Indonesia and the neighbouring countries (e.g. Singapore), and also BRICS (intergovernmental organizations comprising ten states outside ASEAN).

Moreover, the emergence of the economy as the next primary theme, which incorporates about 17.26% of the total articles, indicates a direct relationship to the foreign relationships with Indonesia. The most dominant topic that represents the economy theme is trade-related activities and investment. This is somewhat aligned with [48] who investigated the impact of political events in Latin America on the foreign direct investment decisions of US firms, and argued that political events directly affect the decisions. Furthermore, the study argues that media coverage of politics and economy in Indonesia might capture the diagnostic lens of neighbouring countries that assess Indonesia's political and economic health. Media framing plays a part in determining the way a country perceives the causes and effects of political events or conflicts (Evans, 2010).

## V. CONCLUSION

The aims of this study are three folds: 1) to examine how Indonesia is portrayed in the news media of the neighbouring countries, particularly the other nine ASEAN countries, namely Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam; 2) to identify dominant themes and narratives associated with Indonesia within the scope of ASEAN; and 3) to suggest the implications of visual representations of Indonesia to foster strong regional collaborations and tourism visitations.

Based on the findings of the research, this study suggests that the coverage of Indonesia in neighboring ASEAN countries' news portals is predominantly framed by political and economic discourses, whereby politics take place for nearly half of the total coverage. This coverage reflects the strong regional interest in Indonesia's politics, diplomacy, and changes of leadership, which are seen as indicators of the country's stability and status in ASEAN. Economic news, particularly trade and investment news, exhibit the profile of Indonesia as a regional player whose market and policy situation directly impacts the neighbours. While other themes such as environment, infrastructure, and tourism appear in the coverage, they remain secondary in shaping the overall image. The political and economic dominated discourses show Indonesia's broader cultural, tourism, and soft power narrations appear less prominently in the regional media than anticipated.

With these trends, the study proposes that Indonesia strategically diversify its nation branding strategy to achieve a more balanced presence in ASEAN media. First, policymakers and branding institutions must actively promote stories of Indonesia's cultural diversity, sustainable tourism, green government, and creative economy that complement the political-economic focus. Second, establishment of media partnerships and cross-border cultural exchange initiatives can generate positive,

non-political stories into regional news streams.

Third, government communication strategies should include visual narratives and symbolic representations namely, national icons, events, and cultural ambassadors to establish emotional connection and soft power appeal in neighboring countries. Through doing so, Indonesia can be able to build a more cohesive and resistant nation brand that supports tourism growth, regional cooperation, and diplomatic goodwill over the longer term.

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