

The Role of Public Relations in Improving Image and Visibility of Tourism Destinations in Mandalika

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Abstract - Mandalika has recently been designated Indonesia's Tourism Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The area is projected to become one of the ten New Bali. Establishing a tourism SEZ is one of the government's agendas to accelerate the achievement of national economic development. Located on Lombok Island, Mandalika has attracted international attention after improving its infrastructure and hosting the prestigious MotoGP races. Lombok is well-known among Muslim tourists for its halal tourism, which has been ranked in the top several times. However, tourist visits to the destination have not been significant despite the local government's efforts to improve its halal and sports tourism attractiveness. This study aims to investigate the role and practices of public relations in enhancing the image and visibility of Mandalika as a case study. This descriptive-qualitative study employs semi-structured interviews (n=16), field observations, sensory data, and online news and social media monitoring as data collection techniques. The study's findings suggest that local governments and event organizers need help to maximize their communication strategies and more aggressively implement public relations practices crucial to enhancing the destination's image and visibility for international and domestic tourists. As one of the underdeveloped regions in the country, technical support and regular financial assistance from the central government are also needed to make this destination self-sufficient and more attractive to visitors.

Keywords: Destination image-visibility, Halal-sports tourism, Mandalika MotoGP, Public relations, Special economic zone.

Introduction

It is a truism to say that tourism is one of the economic drivers and job creators in most nations. Small countries such as Macau, Maldives, Aruba, Seychelles, and the British Virgin Islands are independent countries that rely on the tourism sector for around 25% to 50% of their national revenue (Statista, 2020). Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic ended, Indonesia's tourism industry gradually recovered. In 2022, the worldwide travel and tourism sector has created 21.6 million new jobs, bringing the total to US\$295 million (WTTC, 2023). Worldwide travel and tourism spending increased by around 21.5% in 2023, equivalent to \$6.45 trillion (Statista, 2024).

Departing from high economic growth in the tourism sector, the government currently prioritizes its policies on tourism development endeavours. Mandalika is one of the main targets for advancing tourist destinations. Lombok has been identified as the pioneer of halal tourism destinations in Indonesia (Haerisma et al., 2023). This small island has received international recognition in this sector as the

World's Best Halal Honeymoon Destination and Most Popular Overseas Islamic Tourist Destination (GMTI, 2023). Lombok has a strategic position, flanked by two famous tourist destinations: Bali and Komodo Islands. All these have helped to reinforce Lombok's tourism, including Mandalika on the map for halal tourism worldwide.

Mandalika was designated to become a Tourism Special Economic Zone in the southern part of Lombok Island. Figure 1 shows one of the new tourist attractions in Mandalika. This small town was part of the government's plan to develop ten New Bali to diversify the country's tourism portfolio (Ramadhan & Kusumah, 2022). Therefore, investment in Mandalika and other destinations on Lombok Island is expected to increase tourist visits, especially from Islamic nations in the Middle East and Chinese travellers, which is estimated to reach US\$125 million annually (Machmudin, 2017).



Figure 1. Kuta Beach Park, the newest tourism destination in Mandalika, Lombok
Source: itdc.co.id

Despite its halal tourism category, Lombok has emerged with a new tourist destination: Sports Tourism. In 2021, the government took the initiative to build and inaugurate the Mandalika Circuit, which hosts MotoGP and other leading motorcycle racing events. The government adopted this approach since sports tourism has been acknowledged as an effective way to promote tourist destinations, attract visitors, and stimulate economic growth. The circuit immediately became a new icon of Mandalika that attracted many people worldwide and boosted the area's status. International media coverage with live MotoGP broadcasts made Mandalika increasingly popular globally. These sports events brought Mandalika to the global tourism competition and have the potential to become a world tourist destination.

However, organizing a large sports event that can attract tens of thousands of spectators from many countries is complicated and challenging. Several issues of accommodation and transportation that are not well managed and a lack of understanding of effective promotional strategies and tactics have drawn criticism directed at local governments and competition organizers (Astuti, 2021). Academics suggested that understanding the function of public relations in modern society requires a thorough understanding of public relations tourism research (L'Etang et al., 2007).

In addition, other barriers, including financial and logistical problems and land compensation issues (Annisa et al., 2019), expensive air transportation costs, and high increases in accommodation costs during big events also hinder the progress of tourism in the destination (Susanti et al., 2022). A study contended that tourism development includes a broad perspective, including but not limited to infrastructure expansion, local community sponsorship and implementing public relations and marketing strategies (Widanarko & Atmadi, 2023).

Based on the above context and background, this study aims to examine how public relations strategies and practices are implemented to enhance the image and awareness of tourist destinations in Mandalika and other hotspots in the Lombok area. Two research questions arise in this study. *First*, to what extent do the local government and the Mandalika circuit management harness public relations to improve the image and visibility of the destination? *Second*, what factors may hinder the effectiveness of public relations strategies to promote Mandalika as a halal and sports tourism destination? The

answers to these questions can provide valuable insights into the growing tourism business and serve as an intersection between tourism and public relations fields.

Theoretical Framework

Previous studies on halal and sports tourism have discussed many aspects, including their development trends, sustainable tourism, place branding and marketing (Carneiro et al., 2016; Samori et al., 2016; Slamet et al., 2022). However, only a few empirical works address the role and practices of public relations in tourism in the context of promotional cultures. The role of public relations in sports business development is also under-explored, and as a microcosm of social life, it demands attention from analysts (L'Etang, 2006). In addition, technological changes have required communication specialists to modernize and adopt new and modified strategies to connect with their target stakeholders through internet-based communication channels. This study also discusses the strategy of digital public relations and its implementation.

Halal Tourism. Halal tourism is a form of innovation from the tourism sector created to meet Muslim tourists' needs when travelling (Alam et al., 2024). As a religious tourism category, halal tourism involves the availability of tourism products and facilities that can meet the needs of Muslim tourists for worship and halal food needs (Mohsin et al., 2016). Halal tourism has emerged as one of the most popular types of global tourism over the past decade (Mohsin et al., 2016). In line with globalization and competition in the tourism industry, many countries, including Taiwan, Australia, and Japan, have made strides to cater to the needs of Muslim tourists, including food and facilities. In this context, governments in many countries also provide unique tourism experiences based on Islamic cultural and religious practices to the market segment. Halal tourism is increasingly important as a large Muslim population travels worldwide, looking for places and regions that fit their beliefs and values.

Lombok's halal tourism business is closely intertwined with the island's cultural and religious roots, considering that the Sasak tribe, which constitutes most of the population, practices Islam (Muhammad et al., 2022; Prawiro & Prawiro, 2022). Lombok is ideal for implementing Muslim-oriented principles such as halal tourism, where food and beverage services comply with Islamic laws. The area does not allow the consumption of alcohol or pork in public areas. Meanwhile, mosques are easily found everywhere in public places. Mandalika and other tourist destinations on Lombok Island offer beautiful natural scenery and unique and diverse tourist attractions that combine halal tourism with sports tourism for various visitor segments.

The advancement of halal tourism is significantly correlated with the persistent escalation of the Muslim demographic on a global scale. Projected to attain US\$2.8 billion by the year 2050, Muslims will constitute one-third of the worldwide populace adhering to Islam (Global Muslim Travel Index 2023, 2023). Hence, some Asian, European, and African halal-friendly tourism destinations aim to fulfil the needs of Muslim tourists. They seek to gain admiration and build confidence with Muslim tourists to market themselves as Muslim-friendly travel destinations (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019). Apart from the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry, communication strategies are needed to polish the image and raise the destination's visibility to get visitors' trust and recognition.

Sports tourism. Sports tourism has infinite opportunities for developing new entrepreneurship that can offer products and services to people involved in the journey. Sports can be influenced by social, economic, and political changes, influencing ideologies, politics, bureaucratization, science, technology, and mass media. By one definition or another, sports tourists are always looking for a good time, preferring sports on the one hand and an interest in travelling on the other. Sports tourism is associated with a two-dimensional concept, as it involves a cultural experience of physical exercise and its location. Place experience is linked to the accessibility, lodging, and venue quality of a destination or event site, whereas physical activity depends on the planning and provision of content (Morfoulaki et al., 2023).

Recreational tourism through sports activities is a tool to improve health while at the same time enhancing the standard of living of the host community. Academics noted that sports tourism contributes to a region interested in attending events or doing sports activities (Chang et al., 2020). Public relations is vital to promoting them and organizing exercise events within the framework of tourism development objectives. Featuring events, such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar (Hajjaj et al., 2024) and the Dragon Boat Festival (Richards & King, 2022), shows that sports tourism can create a significant marketing boost for all destinations.

Organizing sports events offers many prospects, but they also confront numerous obstacles locally (Bazzanella et al., 2023). Although there is a great deal of literature about sports tourism and city branding, there is a gap concerning the role of public relations in promoting international sports events. Existing research suggests that potential customers should undergo extensive market research and analysis so that an entrepreneur can find a niche market of sports tourists that can be served with a unique value proposition that can compete closely with its competitors (Mallen & Adams, 2012). For example, a sports tourism venture can be explicitly positioned for marathon tourists interested in various marathons worldwide, or luxury sports tourism deals offer multiple services to golfers interested in playing at prestigious golf courses.

Sustainability is another primary issue in the tourism business, particularly sports tourism. It is always essential to have these measures in place to ensure that tourism growth does not have adverse effects on the environment or the host community (Carneiro et al., 2016; Zamzuki et al., 2023). A study examines the relationship between doing sports while travelling (sports tourism) and Islam, arguing that women's sports, tourism, and sports tourism are acceptable within Islamic teachings if certain conditions are met (Malchrowicz-Mosko, 2021). They also analyze the problems with sports tourism management and Muslim sporting events. To ensure the success and development of major international sporting events and sports event tourism within and beyond non-secular Islamic countries, adaptations and compromises on behalf of the host community and event rights holders may be necessary. These are all important issues when considering Mandalika, where tourism development ought to be geared towards increasing tourism and, at the same time, protecting cultural, values, and ecological resources.

Public Relations in Tourism. Public relations is a strategic communication approach that establishes positive relationships between an organization and the public. It aims to shape the organization's reputation, communicate information effectively, and build trust with various stakeholders (Silverman & Smith, 2024). According to Silverman and Smith, public relations help create connections and understanding between organizations and the public, ultimately influencing public opinion and behaviour through planned communication and promotion strategies.

Chartered Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom, defines public relations as "the discipline that looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organization and its publics" (cited in Silverman & Smith, 2024). In other words, public relations is a "management of reputation." Public relations is about reputation—the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (*About PR CIPR*, n.d.).

Public relations are essential for creating a positive image and cultivating a favourable attitude towards tourism products and destinations in the tourism sector. Public relations professionals contribute significantly to establishing an inviting atmosphere that attracts tourists and ensures their satisfaction throughout their journey by strategically managing communication channels and implementing diverse promotional activities (Petrovici, 2014). Petrovici maintains that public relations in tourism involve strategically communicating to enhance an organization's visibility and build positive relationships with the public.

Public relations in tourism is fundamental in influencing visitors and directing residents' sentiments and support towards an area or its tourism development. Research shows that community support for tourism projects depends on residents' views of the impacts, costs, and benefits to their environment and constituents (Chang et al., 2020). For instance, residents with higher levels of community satisfaction will engage in sports tourism by attending events and promoting certain attractions that can contribute to tourism development efforts.

Local community support for the program is also essential if tourism initiatives are to have sustainable value and be part of development with little benefit to residents or following planned responsible exchanges. Therefore, public relations is not only about promotion for outsiders but also managing a healthy relationship between tourism stakeholders and the local community that can keep development in line with the cultural values of the local community.

Neeley and Stewart (2022) describe government public relations (GPR) as a process to maintain good relations between the government and its public (cited in Lee et al., 2022). City branding or place promotion to the international community is usually GPR's responsibility in government organizations.

GPR also has essential tasks and roles in helping government agencies influence the minds, behaviours, and views of the public through the media, advertising, and public service campaigns (Lee et al., 2022).

Moreover, some of the primary roles of GPR include writing messages and speeches, strategic planning, event management, image building, and crisis communications. GPR also typically conducts campaigns and public service announcements about government programs and services, informs the public of new program readiness, uses social media to communicate current issues, gathers public feedback, and facilitates public participation in government decision-making. Public relations in government will help agencies achieve their missions and goals (Lee et al., 2022). In short, all these GPR tasks, roles and responsibilities require a solid government public affairs team with adequate strategies and capabilities.

Digital Public Relations and Influencer Relationship Management. The internet has significantly impacted public relations strategy, making digital media a crucial component of branding tactics. According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022), effective online public relations is crucial for organizations of all sizes to enhance their reputation, credibility, and awareness. Due to its cost-effectiveness and potential impact, small businesses and startups can benefit from internet PR and content marketing.

Today, internet PR and influencer outreach are frequently managed as a year-round process called influencer relationship management (IRM). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick contended that the cause for this transformation is twofold. First, a new category of software applications for identifying and communicating with influencers has emerged. Service suppliers refer to this category as IRM since it demonstrates the value of their solutions. Second, savvy companies employ influencer outreach in a more structured and continuous manner to align with an 'always-on' inbound or content marketing strategy. They maintain as follows (Chaffey & Chadwick, 2022).

The main element of online PR is maximizing favourable mentions of an organization, its brands, products or websites, on third-party websites that are likely to be visited by its target audience. Furthermore, as we noted in the section on search engine optimization, the more links there are from other sites to your site, the higher your site will be ranked in the natural or organic listings of the search engines. Online influencer outreach is now an important activity to identify companies or individuals with a strong online following and then use these contacts to influence their audience. Minimizing unfavourable mentions, for example monitoring and influencing conversations in blogs and social networks, through online reputation management is also an aspect of online PR.

Destination Image and Reputation Management. Theories addressing destination image and reputation management are supportive tools that public relations practitioners can employ to ensure effective tourism promotion. Academics identify destination image as the impression the tourists formulate during their travels through emotions or beliefs, among other aspects (Nazir et al., 2021). Other supporting elements, such as the type of attractions, the kind of accommodation, and the type of marketing communication, foster such perception.

Knowing how to deal with these aspects, public relations professionals can shape tourists' perceptions, improve their satisfaction levels, and persuade them to return or refer to others. The role of consistent reputation management refers to shaping smoothly over and addressing the concerns raised by stakeholders (Silverman & Smith, 2024).

Nazir et al. (2021) contended that the destination image is the mental picture tourists develop in their perceptions, cognitions, and impressions. They depend on various factors such as destination characteristics and offers, type of hotel, or other sorts of accommodation or advertisements. Thus, when regulating these factors well, public relations practitioners can control expectations and satisfaction with the tours among the tourists to generate a circle of repeat visitation or word-of-mouth. Moreover, scholars pointed out that reputation management also encompasses how the public views a specific business and collaborates with stakeholder inputs. While reputation is progressively established through the organization's character, the destination image is subject to context and audience (Silverman & Smith, 2024).

Silverman and Smith (2024) defined reputation management as the ongoing process of shaping an organization's public perception and understanding over time. The strategy focuses on establishing and maintaining a desirable reputation among essential audiences. During crisis communication,

reputation management can aid in the organization's recovery from a poor situation. Previous studies demonstrate that sports tourism supports destination image development and stimulates economic growth (Hajjaj et al., 2024; Larasati et al., 2023). A mega event like the FIFA World Cup, hosted in Qatar, tremendously impacts the nation's tourism image and international support (Hajjaj et al., 2024). Such events attract foreign tourists and position the host country on the global stage – thus increasing its soft power.

Material and Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative approach. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and sensory data (Yin, 2016). These methods provided rich and sufficient data to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders (n=16) from several professions and roles, including PR practitioners, government officials, academics, event organizers, international and domestic tourists, residents, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) owners.

Although not all participant responses are relevant and can be presented in the findings, interviews with several participants from the same role are necessary for backgrounders and noteworthy to ensure and implement triangulation of data sources. Participants were selected using the snowball technique and randomly selected based on their capacity and role to assess the public communication and public relations practices of the government and organizations managing tourism events. Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding.

All interviews in Indonesian were transcribed verbatim and translated, except for interviews with international tourists. Field notes from observations were used to identify key themes related to Mandalika's reputation, PR strategies, and the challenges of promoting dual-themed tourism. Research ethics standards were implemented in this study, including ensuring that all participants received information about the purpose of the study and gave their consent before participating in the interview. Respondent anonymity was also applied.

Field observations were conducted in Mandalika and other hotspot destinations in Mandalika, Lombok, to see firsthand the atmosphere, communication and hospitality of residents and attractions that create appeal for tourists. Yin's ideas regarding sensory data, such as the ambience of a place or its temporal pace, were also applied. Secondary data is obtained from journal articles, books, government documents, and online news and social media reports.

Results and Discussion

Mandalika and many other tourist destinations in Lombok offer unique and diversified tourist experiences, including halal and sports tourism that are not accessible elsewhere in Indonesia. However, visiting the Province of West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) is relatively low (see Table 1). In this regard, the study investigates two research questions. First, to what extent do the local government and the Mandalika circuit management harness public relations to improve the image and visibility of the destination? Second, what factors may hinder the effectiveness of public relations strategies to promote Mandalika as a halal and sports tourism destination?

Table 1. Tourist Visits to NTB Province in 2019-2023

Year	Visitor
2019	3,706,352
2020	622,826
2021	964,036
2022	1,376,295
2023	2,119,927

Source: *Angka Kunjungan Wisatawan Ke NTB*, n.d.

Table 1 above shows statistical data on domestic and foreign tourist visits per year for the last five years (2019–2023) in NTB Province. The data shows that the number of visitors to NTB has grown slowly since the end of COVID-19. The study focuses on public relations strategies and practices, so the researcher explored the issue with several key stakeholders (see Table 2 below). They were considered capable and relevant in providing answers according to their professions and positions.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Profession/Position	Organization
Interviewee 1	Male	Executive Officer/Deputy General Manager	Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC)
Interviewee 2	Male	Head of NTB Tourism Department	NTB Tourism Office
Interviewee 3	Male	PR Practitioner, Chairman of the Local Public Relations Association	PERHUMAS, Indonesia PR Association, Lombok, NTB
Interviewee 4	Female	Employee in the MICE sector	N/A
Interviewee 5	Male	Lecturer, Head of Comm. Dept.	Mataram University
Interviewee 6	Male	Lecturer, Sociologist	Mataram University
Interviewee 7	Male	Lecturer, Vice Dean	Mataram University
Interviewee 8	Male	International Tourist from France	N/A
Interviewee 9	Female	International Tourist from France	N/A
Interviewee 10	Female	International Tourists from Brazil	N/A
Interviewee 11	Female	Domestic Tourist from West Jawa	N/A
Interviewee 12	Male	Small-medium enterprises (SMEs)	N/A
Interviewee 13	Male	Small-medium enterprises (SMEs)	N/A
Interviewee 14	Female	Small-medium enterprises (SMEs)	N/A
Interviewee 15	Male	Local resident, Postgraduate student	N/A
Interviewee 16	Male	Local resident, Taxi driver	N/A

Source: Research Results, 2024

The Harness of Public Relations in Tourism

After three years of hosting MotoGP, Mandalika will enjoy again global promotion for the next seven years as part of a ten-year agreement with Dorna Sports. Hosting this international sports event provides enormous benefits related to location visibility and a positive image that can fascinate domestic and international tourists (Interviewees 3 & 4). From observations through live broadcasts on television and the official MotoGP website, several exciting activities were held in Mandalika that had never been conducted elsewhere, such as a parade around the city with special open-topped buses featuring the leading MotoGP riders and cheered by fans along the way.

Event management also brought the riders to a stage to interact with thousands of fans and gave away some souvenirs. The results of these public exposures were significant because these activities were broadcast live on various television networks, the official MotoGP website, Instagram accounts, and other social media platforms for MotoGP racers and fans.

Moreover, the promotional mix is conducted for city branding and locations by installing billboards with the “Wonderful Indonesia” tagline in several places. The central government supports this place branding initiative because it aligns with the government’s priority agenda.

The government and event organizer also maintained the promotion through official websites and social media: www.indonesia.travel/id/en/home.html, on YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7AArQOS1gDZzaTGUQ2ZcQw>) and Instagram account (www.instagram.com/wonderfulindonesia/). All these websites and social media are maintained by the Ministry of Tourism, except one website (<https://www.itdc.co.id/>) managed by the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises. The local government also maintains a regular online media channel: <https://gomandalika.com/> to promote Mandalika tourism and heritage.

Regarding the promotion of halal tourism, which has won several world awards, one of the participants from the government tourism office wondered why the number of tourists from the Middle East to Malaysia was much greater than to Indonesia. The interviewee knew that his public affairs team still needed to improve its promotion and communication strategies to enhance its image and reputation. He admitted that Malaysia was very enthusiastic and aggressive in promoting Muslim-friendly tourism in their country.

What’s the problem? The population here is 95% Muslim. We have more destinations, more spacious, and thousands of mosques. Maybe it is related to our capability and our human resources quality. If you look at the commitment of the marketing team, it is not enough. It means that assistance from the central government is needed (Interviewee 2).

Several studies, including from Malchrowicz-Mosko (2021), highlight the growing demand for halal tourism. This presents an excellent opportunity for destinations such as Mandalika and Lombok to capitalize on the ever-increasing Muslim tourism market. However, Mandalika's current public relations strategy appears to lack focus on promoting halal tourism even though it could provide a competitive advantage. Integrating halal tourism into sports tourism, as proposed by Malchrowicz-Mosko, would increase Mandalika's appeal, especially among tourists from Muslim-majority countries.

Put differently, with the help of marketing and public relations that are more sports-oriented, Mandalika can market itself as an exciting place for adept Muslim travellers as it seeks to combine halal tourism and sports tourism. Such an approach has been applicable in Malaysia and Turkey, where halal tourism is incorporated into many other forms of tourism, making the region appealing to tourists (Malchrowicz-Mosko, 2021).

Public Relations and Community Engagement

It was found that despite existing public relations efforts, a more coordinated and strategic approach is needed to communicate Mandalika's unique issues to local and international audiences. Interviews highlighted that the current public relations strategy promotes high-profile events like MotoGP. However, Mandalika's broader potential as a sustainable tourism destination has not been fully realized (Interviewees 3 & 4). One of the informants stated that cultural differences were an obstacle in communicating with residents. This shows the importance of expanding public relations strategies that can understand local culture to encourage a more sustainable tourism communication model (Interviewee 3). In the past, he said, land acquisition conflicts and compensation cases needed to be covered so as not to become detrimental global issues.

This action must be done to maintain a positive image and reputation management. Our approach to the community follows what has become customary and with a friendly smile. If the community is approached correctly, we can invite them to cooperate. But, when their interests are disturbed, customs and religion clash (Interviewee 3).

Furthermore, crisis communication still occurs on some issues, so community engagement remains essential to sustainable tourism development. Strategic communication management is needed, considering local support for tourism activities is diverse. Some can get economic benefits, especially those involved in the hospitality sector. However, others, especially small-medium-sized enterprise vendors, feel excluded from the benefits of large-scale events such as MotoGP (Interviewees 12 & 13). Reliance on international tourism without integrating local businesses into the supply chain has caused dissatisfaction among many local stakeholders (Interviewees 14 & 16).

In recent years, commotion and crime are still issues that interfere with the development of tourism in Mandalika and the southern region of Lombok. The local community sees their area as a tourist destination, but they cannot get any jobs. This problem persists, even though the local government wants to involve them due to their lack of skills and knowledge. These locals become spectators and eventually become criminals (Interviewees 2, 7, 15). One said that if there was openness and it was discussed with the community, maybe the community could accept it. "A kind of communication forum needs to be created. If the community sits together to discuss something, I think the community will support it" (Interviewee 5).

The Role of GPR in Enhancing Image and Visibility

Another finding emerged in this study posited by a sociologist. The participant (interviewee 6) argued that the performance of GPR demonstrates not only the practical steps undertaken but also the failures of the local authorities to supplement the profile and the marketing features of Mandalika in its attempts to promote the tourism industry. He noted that one of the prominent roles the local authorities play has been seeking resources for construction works like the Mandalika International Circuit, which attracted global attention and prominence through sports activities such as MotoGP. This worldwide spectacle has not only put Mandalika in the spotlight but has also focused on Lombok as a hub for sports tourism.

Nevertheless, the local authorities have failed to leverage the opportunity to effectively use public relations measures promoting the region's unique halal and sports tourism mixture. Consequently, while the international standing of MotoGP was able to capture world interest, the cultural and other environmental resources surrounding Mandalika remained untapped. There is an urgent demand for the

local administration to be more unified in their approach to marketing Mandalika by focusing on its strengths, such as its geographical premise, historic sites, and the fact that Mandalika is the hub of halal tourism (Interviewee 6).

Some foreign tourists interviewed around the Mandalika circuit said they knew and were interested in visiting Mandalika and Lombok through social media and mainstream media coverage (Interviewees 8 & 9). They arrived at the circuit to witness firsthand the location and beauty of the motorbike racing arena and the surrounding beaches.

A tourist who brought his family from France said, "This place is wonderful, and the scenery is amazing. I am happy to visit here for a vacation in a place that is not too crowded and will recommend this place to others" (Interviewee 8). Another international tourist from Brazil expressed a similar opinion, saying that she knew about tourist destinations in Lombok from social media and internet searches. She was interested in visiting even though she was unaware that Lombok was a halal and sports tourism destination (interviewee 10).

Factors that hinder the effectiveness of PR strategies

Several interviewees pointed out that today's public relations trends seem more focused on promoting events than trying to place Mandalika as an all-year-round tourist destination (Interviewees 3, 5 & 6). This points to the fact that there is a gap in the communication strategies employed to ensure that the key messages about what makes Mandalika so exceptional reach both local and foreign audiences.

Public relations strategies must also be integrated with broader policies to incorporate marketing and community outreach. Much of the information concerning Mandalika does not reach many people, and this is a more pertinent issue now than ever because of the technological age. For this reason, the local government must harness information and technology resources in marketing the area's remarkable geographical features and its people's unique culture.

Challenges in Infrastructure and Local Involvement

The lack of preparation for Mandalika's infrastructure and human resources has been identified as a significant problem. Many stakeholders see human resource development as slow, while the pace of development of physical infrastructure is too fast, rendering local companies and residents to international best practice standards (Interviewee 2). Hence, it was posited that while global events heighten exposure, they also pose accessibility challenges to tourists and residents due to the exorbitant costs associated with transport and accommodation during peak periods of such events (Interviewees 1 & 2).

Unclear Roles and Responsibilities in Communication

In the interviews, it was revealed that there were indications that no prominent party was responsible for establishing communication between authorities, including the Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) and the community. Sometimes, a third party is appointed, but often, there is no concrete follow-up in implementing the recommendation or resolving the problem. This issue emerged due to a lack of clarity on duties and responsibilities, leading to confusion when dealing with community complaints. The public is unsure who to contact or to whom they should direct their issues.

Another issue that occurs is related to the resolution of pending conflicts. Problem-solving is delayed without a transparent communication system, and current tensions can escalate into more significant conflicts and become crises. The communication problems faced by ITDC and the government in the context of development projects are complex and multi-layered.

Transparency gaps, lack of dialogue mechanisms, and the dominance of communication through the media create feelings of neglect among local communities. A more inclusive, transparent, and community-focused communication approach is needed to resolve this problem. This includes direct community involvement in decision-making processes, implementing effective dialogue mechanisms, and ensuring that CSR policies and programs positively impact the welfare of local communities (Interviewees 3,5 & 6).

Conclusions

This study has examined the role of public relations in Mandalika and Lombok. It concluded that public relations strategies and practices to popularize tourist attractions in the destination have been implemented but have not been creative and effective enough. The local government and tourism managers in Mandalika have used several public relations strategies to popularize this area when organizing international events. However, there has been no optimization and full integration of the promotion of Mandalika, Lombok as halal tourism and sports tourism. Therefore, the local government in Mandalika, Lombok, needs assistance from the central government, including financial support to build a more effective communication program to ensure that Mandalika's potential is fully realized as a halal and sports tourism destination.

In addition, the public relations functions and practices have not been effective enough because several factors limit the growth pattern, including poor facility status, lack of promotional budget funds, and lack of local involvement in the tourism industry, which makes them feel marginalized. On the contrary, poor and effective communication by the government has primarily exacerbated existing local tensions that have not been resolved. Furthermore, the lack of coherent coordination between central and regional authorities regarding promotional activities also reduces Mandalika's competitiveness compared to other halal tourism hubs such as Malaysia. Further research with a quantitative approach is recommended to gain different viewpoints and strengthen the study.

Recommendations. The study, as concluded above, suggests the following measures, among others, that should be put in place: *First*, there is the need to enhance the skills and capacity of the public relations team in local government organizations and undertake training that involves national public relations experts to be more aggressive in promoting international tourism. *Second*, both local and central governments should also focus on improving the provision of services by building more infrastructure, such as transportation and accommodation, that enhances the satisfaction and comfort of the tourists. *Third*, local communities should be at the forefront of marketing and developing tourism by incorporating them into CSR programs to promote SMEs. Fourth, this strategy needs to be complemented by a plan for reaching international markets with digital platforms for the promotion and marketing of tourism products, including those targeted at international Muslims. Fifth, marketing tourism is advised to reach potential customers by utilizing the services of travel bloggers and the mass media to create and manage the image.

Strengthening digital public relations strategies will increase Mandalika's visibility in the international market, especially by utilizing digital platforms for halal tourism and sports promotion. In addition, integrating local small and medium enterprises into the tourism supply chain can reduce the imbalance between regional stakeholders. Improving infrastructure, such as transportation and accommodation, will increase tourist appeal and improve Mandalika town as a tourist destination.

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