

Indonesia's Nation Branding Strategy Through the International Geography Olympiad (iGeo) 2023: Enhancing International Tourist Visits to Bandung City Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

Dimas Faturohman¹, Achdijat Sulaeman²

^{1,2}Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Al-Ghifari University, Bandung, Indonesia

Email: dimas.faturohman@unfari.ac.id

Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the global tourism sector, including Indonesia. Bandung City, as one of Indonesia's premier tourist destinations, experienced a drastic decline in international tourist arrivals from 252,842 in 2019 to merely 3,021 in 2020. This study analyzes Indonesia's nation branding efforts through hosting the International Geography Olympiad (iGeo) 2023 in Bandung City as a tourism recovery strategy. Employing a qualitative approach with literature review methodology, this research examines nation branding strategies based on Simon Anholt's six dimensions: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and investment. The findings reveal that iGeo 2023 successfully functioned as an effective cultural diplomacy platform, introducing Indonesia's geographical wealth, culture, and tourism potential to the international community. The event contributed to a gradual increase in international tourist visits to Bandung, reaching 38,570 in 2023, while strengthening Indonesia's image as a nation committed to education and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: nation branding, cultural diplomacy, tourism, COVID-19, International Geography Olympiad

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that swept the world since early 2020 has had an extraordinary impact on various sectors of life, particularly tourism. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as an international pandemic in March 2020, lasting until 2022 (Sugirhamretha, 2020). Indonesia, as one of Southeast Asia's premier tourist destinations, was not immune to these negative impacts.

Bandung City, known as the "Paris van Java" and one of Indonesia's flagship tourist destinations, experienced a dramatic decline in international tourist arrivals. Data indicates that international tourist visits to Bandung City plummeted from 252,842 in 2019 to only 3,021 in 2020 (Department of Culture and Tourism of Bandung City, 2023). This decline was attributed to the implementation of various international travel restriction policies and the closure of access to various regions.

In efforts to recover the tourism sector post-pandemic, the Indonesian government implemented various strategies, one of which involved organizing international events as a means of nation branding (Rahmat & Apriliani, 2023). Nation branding represents a strategic concept used to build and promote a country's positive image globally (Dinnie, 2015). This concept becomes increasingly important in the context of globalization, where a nation's identity and reputation can influence various aspects, from tourism to investment.

The International Geography Olympiad (iGeo) 2023, held in Bandung City from August 8-14, 2023, presented a significant opportunity for Indonesia to implement nation branding strategies. This prestigious academic event brought together geography students and teachers from various countries, providing an ideal platform to showcase Indonesia's geographical wealth, cultural heritage, and tourism potential (Artvinli & Dönmez, 2023).

Literature Review

Nation Branding Theory

Nation branding theory, pioneered by Simon Anholt, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how countries can strategically build and manage their international reputation. Anholt's Nation Brand Index (NBI) identifies six key dimensions that shape a nation's global perception: exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, tourism, and investment and immigration (Gudjonsson, 2005).

The exports dimension encompasses perceptions of a country's products and services, reflecting their quality and international competitiveness. Governance relates to global views of government competence, transparency, and commitment to human rights and environmental issues. Culture and heritage involve perceptions of a nation's cultural influence, including arts, music, literature, and sports (Fan, 2010).

The people dimension reflects perceptions of a nation's citizens, including their friendliness, competence, and hospitality. Tourism measures a country's attractiveness as a destination, encompassing natural beauty, climate, and cultural attractions. Finally, the investment and immigration dimension evaluates a nation's appeal for business, education, and quality of life (Szondi, 2008).

Cultural Diplomacy and Tourism

Cultural diplomacy represents a form of soft diplomacy that utilizes cultural assets to build international relationships and enhance national image (Lee & Hocking, 2011). In the context of tourism, cultural diplomacy becomes particularly relevant as it can bridge communities and nations through the powerful force of tourism (L'etang & Pieczka, 2006).

Tourism diplomacy, as defined by Baranowski et al. (2019), is "the process of promoting tourism resources and resolving crises or problems in specific destinations through peaceful negotiations between two or more countries." This approach aims to promote tourism investment, minimize current crises and conflicts between nations, generate tourists, improve host community living standards, preserve natural resources, and bring peace among countries (Bunakov, 2018).

Post-COVID-19 Tourism Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered global travel patterns and tourist behaviors. Research by Pradana and Mahendra (2021) highlights the significant challenges faced by tourism destinations in adapting to new health protocols while maintaining attractiveness to visitors. The recovery process requires comprehensive strategies that address both health concerns and economic revitalization.

Digital transformation has emerged as a critical component of tourism recovery efforts. Purike (2021) emphasizes the importance of digital platforms in promoting destinations and facilitating tourist experiences while maintaining safety protocols. This transformation includes the implementation of e-ticketing systems, digital marketing strategies, and data-driven tourism management approaches.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach using library research methodology. Data collection was conducted through comprehensive literature review, including books, academic journals, news articles, government reports, and relevant digital sources. The research follows a systematic content analysis approach as described by Fraenkel and Wallen (2007), examining various forms of communication to understand the phenomenon under study.

The analytical framework is based on Simon Anholt's Nation Brand Index dimensions, providing a structured approach to evaluate Indonesia's nation branding efforts through iGeo 2023. Data verification was conducted through cross-referencing multiple sources to ensure accuracy and reliability of findings (Mirzaqon & Purwoko, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Bandung's Tourism Landscape Post-COVID-19

Bandung City's tourism sector experienced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The city's international tourist arrivals data reveals the severity of the impact and the gradual recovery process. From a peak of 252,842 international visitors in 2019, the number plummeted to 3,021 in 2020, representing a 98.8% decline.

The recovery began in 2021 with 33,961 international visitors, followed by 37,285 in 2022, and 38,570 in 2023. While these figures remain significantly below pre-pandemic levels, the consistent upward trend demonstrates the resilience of Bandung's tourism sector and the effectiveness of recovery strategies implemented.

Several factors contributed to this gradual recovery. First, the implementation of comprehensive health protocols and CHSE (Cleanliness, Health, Safety, Environment) certification helped restore tourist confidence (Medhawi & Salma, 2023). Second, the city's digital transformation initiatives, including e-ticketing systems and digital marketing campaigns, enhanced accessibility and promotional reach (Nuraini et al., 2019).

iGeo 2023 as a Nation Branding Platform

The selection of Bandung City as the host for iGeo 2023 was strategic, leveraging the city's geographical diversity, adequate infrastructure, and strong educational reputation. The event served as an effective platform for implementing nation branding strategies across multiple dimensions.

Cultural Heritage Dimension

iGeo 2023 provided extensive opportunities to showcase Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. The event included cultural performances, traditional art exhibitions, and culinary showcases that introduced international participants to Sundanese culture and Indonesian traditions. These activities created authentic cultural exchanges that enhanced participants' understanding and appreciation of Indonesian culture (Widhasti et al., 2017). The integration of local cultural elements into the academic program demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to preserving and promoting its cultural identity while embracing international collaboration. Traditional performances such as Sundanese dance and angklung music created memorable experiences for international participants, contributing to positive perceptions of Indonesian culture.

Tourism Promotion

The event strategically incorporated tourism promotion activities, including guided tours to Bandung's iconic destinations such as Tangkuban Parahu volcano, Kawah Putih crater lake, and various cultural sites. These experiential activities provided participants with direct exposure to Indonesia's natural beauty and tourism offerings (Rusmini, 2021). The tourism promotion strategy extended beyond traditional sightseeing to include agrotourism experiences in Lembang and cultural heritage sites in the city center. This comprehensive approach showcased Bandung's diverse tourism portfolio, from natural attractions to urban cultural experiences, demonstrating the city's potential as a multi-faceted destination.

Educational Excellence

As an academic competition, iGeo 2023 highlighted Indonesia's commitment to educational excellence and international collaboration. The successful organization of this prestigious event enhanced Indonesia's reputation as a capable host for international academic events and demonstrated the country's educational infrastructure capabilities (Schee, 2007). The involvement of Indonesian universities, particularly those in Bandung, showcased the country's academic prowess and research capabilities in geography and related fields. This academic diplomacy contributed to building Indonesia's image as an intellectually vibrant nation committed to advancing global knowledge.

Environmental Stewardship

The event emphasized Indonesia's commitment to environmental sustainability and conservation. Field work components of the competition highlighted Indonesia's unique ecosystems and biodiversity, while also addressing environmental challenges such as climate change and natural resource management (Rahmat, Faozanudin, Nurany, 2024).

This environmental focus aligned with global sustainability concerns and positioned Indonesia as a responsible nation committed to environmental stewardship. The emphasis on sustainable tourism practices during the event reinforced Indonesia's dedication to balancing economic development with environmental protection.

Economic Impact and Investment Attraction

iGeo 2023 generated significant economic benefits for Bandung City. Hotel occupancy rates increased substantially during the event period, particularly in central Bandung, Dago, and Lembang areas. The influx of international participants and accompanying delegates stimulated local businesses, including restaurants, transportation services, and retail outlets. The event also served as a platform for showcasing local products and innovations, potentially attracting international business partnerships and investment opportunities. The participation of local entrepreneurs and creative industries in event-related activities provided exposure to international markets and networking opportunities (Dano et al., 2022).

Digital Transformation and Modern Tourism

The organization of iGeo 2023 demonstrated Bandung's adaptation to digital tourism trends. The event utilized digital platforms for registration, coordination, and promotion, showcasing the city's technological capabilities. Live streaming of the opening ceremony and various activities extended the event's reach to global audiences, amplifying its promotional impact. This digital approach aligned with post-pandemic tourism trends, where digital engagement became crucial for destination marketing and visitor engagement. The successful integration of digital technologies in event management enhanced Bandung's image as a modern, technologically capable destination (Anggarini, 2021).

Long-term Branding Impact

The success of iGeo 2023 established a foundation for long-term nation branding benefits. The positive experiences of international participants created ambassadors who could promote Indonesia in their home countries through word-of-mouth marketing. The extensive media coverage and digital documentation of the event created lasting promotional materials that continue to benefit Indonesia's tourism marketing efforts. The event also strengthened Indonesia's position within the International Geography Union community, potentially leading to future opportunities to host similar prestigious events. This positioning enhances Indonesia's reputation as a reliable and capable host nation for international academic and cultural events.

Strategic Implications

The success of iGeo 2023 as a nation branding platform demonstrates the effectiveness of utilizing international academic events for tourism promotion and cultural diplomacy. This approach offers several strategic advantages, including targeted audience engagement, authentic cultural exchange opportunities, and sustainable promotional benefits.

The integration of educational content with tourism promotion creates value-added experiences that differentiate Indonesia from traditional tourism marketing approaches. This strategy appeals to educated, culturally curious travelers who are often high-value tourists with significant spending power and positive word-of-mouth influence.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, several policy recommendations emerge for enhancing Indonesia's nation branding efforts:

First, the government should systematically pursue opportunities to host international academic and cultural events as part of a comprehensive nation branding strategy. These events provide cost-effective

platforms for reaching targeted international audiences while demonstrating Indonesia's capabilities and assets.

Second, digital transformation in tourism should be accelerated, including the development of comprehensive digital platforms, e-ticketing systems, and data analytics capabilities. These technologies enhance tourist experiences while providing valuable insights for tourism planning and marketing.

Third, coordination between different government levels and agencies should be strengthened to maximize the branding impact of international events. The success of iGeo 2023 demonstrates the importance of collaborative approaches involving education, tourism, and cultural agencies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's nation branding strategy through hosting iGeo 2023 in Bandung City was effective in promoting the country's image and contributing to tourism recovery post-COVID-19 pandemic. The event successfully showcased Indonesia's geographical wealth, cultural heritage, educational excellence, and environmental commitment to an international audience.

The gradual recovery of international tourist arrivals to Bandung, from 3,021 in 2020 to 38,570 in 2023, reflects the positive impact of strategic nation branding efforts combined with comprehensive recovery measures. While visitor numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels, the consistent upward trend indicates successful positioning for continued growth.

The application of Simon Anholt's nation branding framework through iGeo 2023 effectively addressed multiple dimensions simultaneously, creating synergistic benefits that enhanced Indonesia's overall international image. The event's success provides a valuable model for leveraging international academic events as nation branding platforms.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of such events on destination image and visitor behavior, as well as investigate the optimal strategies for sustaining branding benefits beyond the immediate event period. Additionally, comparative studies of different types of international events and their relative effectiveness for nation branding purposes would provide valuable insights for tourism marketing strategies.

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