

## The 'green island' imaginary: media framing of Bali's energy policy

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**Abstract** This study examined how the mass media depict the transition to renewable energy in Bali through the cultural imagination of the 'green island'. Using a critical case study approach, this study combines media content analysis, interviews with journalists, policymakers, and community leaders, as well as a review of energy policies implemented between 2019 and 2024. The results show that state and corporate actors strategically adopt local cultural values, such as *Tri Hita Karana*, to legitimise energy policies. On the other hand, forms of community resistance rooted in customary and spiritual claims gain visibility but have limited political effectiveness because they are integrated into the dominant media narrative. The results of the study show that the 'green island' imagination functions as a symbolic mechanism that prioritises tourism-oriented development and political legitimacy over substantial community participation in Bali's energy governance.

**Keywords:** Bali; cultural legitimacy; energy policy; media framing; renewable energy transition

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary communication research increasingly shows that the media is not merely a neutral channel of information, but rather a contested arena where power, ideology, and identity are constantly negotiated. In Indonesia, the media often functions as an agent of legitimisation for the discourse of development, where environmental issues are often positioned within technocratic boundaries that reflect the changing dynamics of the public sphere. This portrayal constructs sustainability as a domain of policy and technology, rather than as a social field filled with conflicting meanings. Previous studies show that even in issues seemingly unrelated to the environment, such as religious conflict in Palembang, local and national media actively shape discursive networks that reinforce political legitimacy.

This process demonstrates how power, particularly that held by state actors and corporations, operates through public representation to maintain dominance over the narrative of development (Bafadhal et al., 2024). Moreover, scholars have noted that Balinese cultural values, such as *Tri Hita Karana* and *Nawangleh*, serve as symbolic filters for interpreting media messages (Darmastuti et al., 2019). In this context, local wisdom is not merely a traditional ornament, but a symbolic filter that allows communities to interpret, negotiate, and challenge dominant development narratives in a complex digital information landscape. Rather than attempting to block the flow of information, these cultural values provide a framework for local actors to reformulate global and national messages in accordance with indigenous ethics and social realities.

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A synthesis of these perspectives shows that in Bali, the media does not merely reflect reality, but constructs it through complex interactions between discourse, local culture and power. Although communication for sustainable development should be rooted in local values as social practices, the experience of Bali shows that these values are often exploited to serve top-down policy projects. Consequently, a critical question that has not been widely explored in the context of Bali's energy transition is: how does the media transform Balinese cultural values into discursive tools to legitimise development? This study addresses this gap by analysing how the imagination of the 'green island' frames energy issues, revealing social practices that are closely intertwined with power networks, development ambitions, and the maintenance of cultural legitimacy.

Bali's strategic importance is underscored by Indonesia's broader commitment to the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which consider decarbonisation a shared global responsibility (Lautrup, 2022). In line with the central government's efforts to achieve Net Zero Emissions (NZE) by 2060, Bali has been designated as the main laboratory and stage for the national renewable energy mix. Within this framework, the island is projected as a space where nature, culture and technology synergise, a position that not only leverages Bali's technical potential but also its deep symbolic capital as a world-renowned cultural destination (Rosalina et al., 2023). As a result, Bali has become a strategic location where the national vision of a green future is being realised for both domestic and global audiences. Within this framework, Bali is strategically positioned as an example of sustainability—an island that is envisioned as a harmony between nature, culture and technology. This position not only capitalises on Bali's technical potential, but also its deep symbolic value as a world-renowned 'cultural island' and tourist destination (Rosalina et al., 2023). As a result, Bali serves as a laboratory and stage where a green vision of the future is showcased to national and global audiences.

However, behind this harmonious image lies complex structural tensions. The narrative of 'Green Bali', which was intensively promoted at international forums such as the 2022 G20 Summit, depicts the island as an ecological paradise (Pramesti et al., 2025). In fact, the material reality contradicts this representation; Bali remains heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Despite its 'green island' branding, the island relies on large-scale coal-fired power generation infrastructure, notably the Celukan Bawang Power Plant (approximately 425 MW), which is the backbone of the regional electricity supply (Delina, 2021). This contradiction has sparked legal disputes over environmental permits and climate impact, turning power plants into sites of legal contention that reflect a broader battle over the legitimacy of development (Wibisana & Cornelius, 2020). The difference between cultural symbolism and material reality is striking. Governments and corporations often cite values such as *Tri Hita Karana* to justify energy projects (Iman et al., 2023), reducing these principles to rhetorical devices rather than applied ethics (Bräuchle, 2023).

A similar pattern can be seen across the Asia-Pacific region, where energy transitions often intersect with complex local power dynamics. In the Indonesian context, research from Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, shows that community energy initiatives aimed at promoting sustainability have paradoxically deepened social inequality and restricted civil space (Fathoni et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that the success of energy projects depends on their compatibility with local values and social needs, rather than simply on the adoption of technology (Pandyaswargo et al., 2024). Without cultural sensitivity and social justice mechanisms, the energy transition risks becoming a technocratic project that only serves to consolidate the authority of the state and corporations (Ahmed et al., 2024). Therefore, the 'green' discourse in Bali must be understood not merely as an ecological campaign, but as an expression of power negotiations involving cultural, economic and political capital.

The power of the sustainability narrative depends on its dissemination through the media. The representation of 'green development' in Bali emerges from the way the media selects, highlights, and packages environmental events. Over the past two decades, environmental communication studies have shown that climate coverage is often dominated by technocratic logic and growth-oriented development paradigms (Schäfer & Painter, 2021). In this dynamic, the general public is positioned as passive recipients, while the voices of local communities are marginalised. Although local media in developed regions such as Bali often highlight social dimensions, their coverage still operates within a framework shaped by the

national development narrative (Hase et al., 2021). In Indonesia, for example, reporting on geothermal energy is often dominated by economic and security frameworks that prioritise information sources from the government and industry over the concerns of local communities (Trisiah et al., 2022). This trend is rooted in the political economy of the media, where the drive for news efficiency and alignment with the official narrative often limits editorial independence (Adiprasetyo et al., 2024). As a result, the state-corporate narrative has become commonplace, portraying sustainability as a techno-moral project rather than an arena for social struggle (Fox, 2023). On the other hand, recent studies show that green discourse is often reframed within a technocratic framework that reduces political conflict—media attention and energy planning emphasise technical or financial solutions rather than demands for social justice (Andersen & Silvast, 2023). As a result, as noted by previous researchers, ideological issues and the aspirations of grassroots communities are often marginalised, so that sustainability appears to be a moral-technocratic project that restores, rather than challenges, the existing order (White, 2024).

The boundaries of this discourse extend beyond representation and extend to the negotiation of social justice. When the media normalises the logic of development, energy justice is discussed superficially, ignoring structural inequalities. Energy justice serves as a critical lens for analysing the distributional, procedural and recognition dimensions of transition projects (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015). In the context of development, such as Bali, these principles are often applied unevenly; large-scale projects often ignore local communities, using token participation for legitimacy (Heffron & McCauley, 2017). In Bali, this is exemplified by melaspas ceremonies performed before project inaugurations, rituals presented as evidence of cultural sensitivity, despite community participation being largely ceremonial (Roth & Sedana, 2015). In the context of energy justice, this form of ‘recognition’ is more akin to a symbolic ritual than a genuine deliberative process, manifesting as tokenism in energy governance (Setyowati, 2021)

This symbolic participation is closely related to how countries build their image of sustainability for global diplomacy (Prontera & Rubino, 2024). ‘Green’ projects often serve as tools of political legitimacy, where cultural inclusion is symbolically expressed but not substantially implemented (Azubuike et al., 2024). Thus, the seemingly spiritual and harmonious representation of sustainability functions as a communication strategy that conceals the structural tensions behind it. This raises questions that are rarely asked in energy transition studies: to what extent do green energy projects in developing contexts such as Bali aim to reduce emissions, and to what extent do they serve as tools of political legitimisation and development diplomacy?

The patterns of symbolic legitimisation that accompany energy projects in developing regions such as Bali show that sustainability is not merely a technological agenda, but also an arena where power, culture and political image intersect. In such situations, local community resistance often emerges through cultural idioms such as spirituality, land sanctity, or the value of harmony, which seek to challenge the dominant narrative. Research shows that energy transitions in developing countries such as Bali are often accompanied by narratives of development diplomacy and political legitimacy (Thomas & Ritala, 2022). In media practice and energy projects, representations of sustainability often prioritise state or corporate sources and marginalise the voices of local communities, meaning that cultural participation is merely symbolic and serves as a tool for image-building rather than a genuine deliberative process (Diamond et al., 2024).

Forms of resistance or community involvement are often softened by the logic of social harmony and the rhetoric of sustainability, thereby losing their critical nature (Setyowati, 2021). This phenomenon forms the starting point for the framework proposed in this study, namely *co-optation-resonance*—a way of understanding how symbolic resistance can gain resonance in the public sphere through local media and cultural idioms, but at the same time be *co-opted* by state and corporate powers that control the narrative of green development. Using this framework, this study attempts to show that resistance is not only silenced but also often subtly managed and absorbed through seemingly harmonious cultural discourse. Without substantial participation mechanisms, even the much-touted ‘recognition’ risks becoming mere symbolism in the transition process (Jenkins et al., 2018).

The media landscape in Bali offers a unique perspective from which to observe these dynamics, particularly through a comparison between provincial media and community-based platforms. Initial observations of news coverage between 2019 and 2024 show a significant surge in energy-related reporting, peaking during large-scale events such as the 2022 G20 summit. Local mainstream media, such as NusaBali, often align their narratives with the provincial government's agenda, frequently portraying renewable energy through the lens of cultural harmony and economic progress. On the other hand, community-based media such as BaleBengong provide a platform for critical and grassroots perspectives that highlight the tensions between energy infrastructure and the sacred spaces of indigenous communities. These differences in the local media ecosystem show that the 'green island' narrative is not a monolithic discourse, but rather a contested space of representation.

Based on these observations, this study aims to analyse how local media in Bali frames the renewable energy transition through the cultural imagination of the 'Green Island,' and how this framing process shapes power relations between the state, corporations, and communities. Theoretically, this study seeks to expand the discourse of energy justice by placing cultural and symbolic dimensions as often-neglected political arenas.

In the field of media studies, this research contributes by showing how media political economy and local journalism practices operate within the discourse ecosystem of sustainability. Conceptually, the introduction of the *co-optation-resonance* framework offers a new way of understanding how cultural resistance not only emerges and disappears but also resonates and transforms under hegemonic pressure. This study proposes a co-optation-resonance framework to understand this phenomenon: how symbolic resistance gains resonance in the public sphere through local culture but is simultaneously co-opted by state-corporate forces that control the narrative of green development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study stems from the understanding that communication not only functions as a channel of information, but also as a social space where meaning and significance are constructed and negotiated. With this perspective, the analysis focuses on understanding how the relationship between media, culture, and policy plays a role in shaping the narrative of green development in Bali. This study uses an intrinsic case study approach as described by Robert E. Stake (1995), which emphasises the importance of a deep understanding of the uniqueness of a case. This approach does not aim to produce generalisations, but rather to explore the complexity of uniqueness, namely the specific situations in which media, politics, and cultural values are intertwined in a particular social landscape (Johnson & Stake, 1996). By utilising qualitative strategies, this research provides space for reflection, researcher involvement, and layered interpretations of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, Bali was chosen not only as a research location, but also as a symbolic arena where energy projects, cultural identity, and sustainability discourse interact dynamically.

This research focuses on media representations and communication practices surrounding energy transition in Bali, with particular attention to how cultural values and political legitimacy are integrated into the narrative of green development. Bali was chosen as a case study because it offers a social landscape rich in symbolism and politics: it is a space where energy projects, indigenous traditions, and the tourism industry are intertwined in the same narrative ecosystem. Research data was obtained from four main sources: online media reports, in-depth interviews, field observations, and policy documents. A total of 130 news articles published between 2019 and 2024 by *Kompas*, *NusaBali*, and *BaleBengong* were analysed as representations of three media models: national, local, and community. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with eight key informants, each selected to provide a unique perspective on communication and debate surrounding Bali's energy transition.

Table 1 presents the background of the research informants. These key informants were selected using purposive sampling to represent diverse stakeholders in Bali's energy transition landscape, including their institutional affiliations and specific roles in providing data for this study. This diverse group of participants ensured a comprehensive triangulation of perspectives between institutional mandates and community-level concerns. The researchers also conducted limited observations at several strategic locations, such as the Nusa Penida solar power plant

and the Bedugul energy project, to understand practices of representation beyond the news text.

**Table 1.** Background of research informants

<b>Informant (initial)</b>	<b>Sector / affiliation</b>	<b>Specific role / expertise</b>
Initial A	Local Mainstream Media	Journalist
Initial B	Community Media	Journalist
Initial C	Provincial Government	Official
Initial D	National Energy Dept.	Public Official
Initial E	Environmental NGO	Activist
Initial F	Local Community	Community Leader
Initial G	State Electricity Co. (PLN)	Technical Engineer
Initial H	State Electricity Co. (PLN)	Planning Staff

Source: Primary research data, compiled by the authors (2025)

Official documents, including provincial policies, ministry reports, and national energy policy documents, complement the data set and provide a layer of context that facilitates triangulation between media narratives and institutional practices. Data collection was conducted through a layered and reflective process, with the aim of capturing the dynamics of media discourse on renewable energy more comprehensively.

The data collection strategy followed the principle of purposive sampling, which prioritised issue representation over data volume. This process was carried out through systematic manual searches of the digital archives of three selected media outlets: *Kompas*, *NusaBali*, and *BaleBengong*. This method involved executing specific search queries using each platform's internal search engine for the period between 2019 and 2024. The search used Indonesian keywords and phrases, specifically '*energi terbarukan*' (renewable energy), '*Bali*', and '*transisi energi*' (energy transition), to identify articles relevant to the 'green island' imagination. A total of 130 news articles were identified and selectively chosen based on their depth and relevance to the research focus.

Instead of using automated scraping applications, researchers manually tracked and coded the text. This manual approach was chosen to ensure a layered and reflective interpretation of the data, as it allowed for a more in-depth identification of the dominance of actors and subtle linguistic patterns that might be missed by automated tools. To validate these findings, the data was further triangulated through in-depth interviews and a review of official energy policy documents

This approach allowed researchers to trace the issues across multiple levels, from national to local and community, in a communication study that emphasised the importance of understanding the relationship between text, institutions and audiences (Deacon et al., 2021). The search yielded 130 news articles, which were then selected to ensure the depth and relevance of their narratives. The data was supplemented with interviews and observations, forming a network of mutually reinforcing findings.

Data analysis was conducted through a gradual reading process that combined qualitative content analysis and reflective thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data analysis was conducted through a gradual reading process that combined qualitative content analysis and reflective thematic analysis. Each text was read repeatedly to identify patterns of representation, actor dominance, and how language functions in shaping the meaning of green energy.

To ensure a deep and context-sensitive interpretation, the identification of keywords, dominant themes, and word clusters for media framing was conducted manually and openly, without the use of automated software applications. This manual approach facilitated the inductive formation of themes, such as cultural legitimacy, the co-opting of local values, and the image of the 'green island'.

Throughout the process, the researcher's reflexivity was maintained to remain open to the ambiguities and layers of meaning that emerged from the data, rather than being bound by normative views of development. This manual strategy was crucial to achieving interpretative coherence and uncovering the power relations hidden behind public discourse.

The validity and credibility of the findings are ensured through a process of triangulation of sources and methods, by comparing data from media texts, interviews, field observations, and policy documents. This approach helps to ensure that interpretations do not rely on a single type of evidence but are constructed from the interconnection of various layers of experience and representation. Validity in critical research is not understood as objective truth, but rather as interpretive coherence, that is, the extent to which the researcher's reading is able to reveal the power relations and meanings hidden behind public discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson & Stake, 1996). In this process, reflexivity becomes an important aspect. Researchers are aware that every decision, from the selection of media to the interpretation of language, always involves a particular social and epistemological position. This awareness is not a weakness, but part of an effort to maintain openness to different possible meanings. Effective qualitative analysis does not claim to be neutral but rather remains honest about the reasoning process it employs (Braun & Clarke, 2022). With this spirit, this research positions itself as an effort to understand how ideas about green energy in Bali are formed, negotiated, and disseminated through complex symbolic networks in which culture, economy, and power are intertwined in the space of communication.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Media representation and cultural imagery

Of the 130 articles analysed between 2019 and 2024, three prominent patterns emerged. After a relatively quiet period of coverage, media attention increased significantly in 2021-2022, mainly triggered by the G20 summit held in Bali. This increase declined significantly from 2023 onwards, reflecting a common pattern in environmental journalism, where public attention surges during large-scale events but quickly fades once the momentum has passed (Schäfer & Painter, 2021).

Of the total sample, the provincial media outlet *NusaBali* and the national media outlet *Kompas* were the most productive, publishing 65 and 41 articles respectively, while the community-based media outlet *BaleBengong* published 24 articles. Analysis shows that two main themes dominated this coverage: technical energy issues (around 40%) and cultural issues or local resistance (around 30% each). This distribution indicates the dominance of the government's official narrative in the mainstream channels, while alternative voices are beginning to emerge through community platforms.

This pattern shows that the imagination of the 'green island' relies heavily on international political momentum for its visibility rather than a sustained local ecological discourse. *Kompas* and *NusaBali* were the two most productive media outlets, with 41 and 65 articles respectively, while *BaleBengong* published 24 articles.

Two main themes dominated the coverage: technical energy issues (around 40%), and cultural issues and local resistance (around 30% each). This mix signifies the dominance of the government's official narrative, but also the emergence of alternative voices from community channels.

Differences in tone are evident in the choice of headlines. *Kompas* displays international optimism: "Bali Switches to Solar Energy, Shares Solutions with the World" (2021). Meanwhile, *NusaBali* emphasises cultural harmony: "Clean Energy in Bali Respects Old Traditions" (2021). In contrast, *BaleBengong* highlights tension: "Bedugul is Not Just Cables and Valves; It is Sacred Land" (2021). These differences show how values such as *Tri Hita Karana* are reinterpreted according to the position of the media. Mainstream media uses it as rhetoric for legitimacy, while community media uses it as a tool for criticism and defence of living space.

Interviews with journalists reinforce this reading. An editor at *NusaBali* acknowledged that almost all data comes from local officials, meaning that news narratives tend to repeat government messages. This imbalance of information sources represents a structural bias in local reporting on energy issues. In Bali, this bias is further legitimised through rituals such as *melaspas*, which appear to respect tradition but rarely involve genuine dialogue.

Energy projects in developing regions such as Bali often serve two purposes: not only to reduce carbon emissions, but also as a tool for political legitimacy and global image (Sareen &

Haarstad, 2018). This is evident in Bali, where clean energy initiatives are often linked to green tourism strategies and destination branding. Previous studies have shown that the image of a 'cultural island' and its reputation as a green tourism destination have become key symbolic assets in regional development policies (Astuti et al., 2024). Meanwhile, another empirical study on the Nusa Penida solar power project revealed that renewable energy projects in tourist areas are often promoted as national models, even though the benefits are not evenly distributed among local communities (Prahastono et al., 2023). Therefore, energy projects in Bali present a paradox: they serve a dual role as technological infrastructure and public spectacles that support the image of a 'green island.'

These findings show that reporting on renewable energy in Bali not only builds the image of a 'green island' but also reinforces the dual function of clean energy as technical infrastructure and a tool for building a global image. The energy transition in developing countries such as Indonesia, particularly in Bali, often serves not only as a climate solution, but also as a project to legitimise development and promote international image (Swilling et al., 2022). In Bali, the close relationship between tourism and development means that discussions about green energy take place within the framework of green tourism, which extends the legitimacy of the state and corporations (Astuti et al., 2024). As previous researchers have shown, integrating cultural values into development narratives often creates a legitimacy trap, whereby local symbols are used to conceal persistent inequalities (Kahsar, 2019). In the case of Bali, cultural image does not fully strengthen community participation but rather reinforces the dominant position of political and economic actors in determining the direction of energy transition.

### **Framing mechanisms**

If in the previous section the image of the 'green island' appeared to function as a symbolic project that reinforced the legitimacy of development, this section explores how that meaning was constructed and disseminated through media framing mechanisms. These mechanisms not only determine what is considered important in the news but also how the public is led to understand energy issues as technical, moral, or cultural problems. By analysing narrative structures, source selection, and visualisation methods, we can see how the media plays a role in normalising the power relations behind the energy transition discourse. As previous researchers have shown, this type of framing often reflects the media's political economy logic, where news efficiency and alignment with the official narrative are prerequisites for continued production (Adiprasetyo et al., 2024).

Based on an analysis of 130 articles published between 2019 and 2024, three main framing patterns emerged. First, crisis framing reflects the media's tendency to highlight dramatic moments such as power outages or energy project obstacles. This type of coverage focuses more on extraordinary events than on ongoing structural processes. Second, eco-branding framing positions renewable energy as a symbol of progress, modernity, and cultural harmony. Third, expert-driven framing occurs when technocratic narratives dominate, and the voices of local communities are rarely heard.

National media outlets such as *Kompas* present narratives that combine technological success with the cultural image of Bali. News headlines such as "Bali Switches to Solar Energy, Shares Solutions with the World" (2021) or "Clean Energy in Bali Respects Old Traditions" (2021) demonstrate an explicit effort to position renewable energy as an expression of modernity rooted in tradition. On the other hand, *BaleBengong* often takes a critical stance. Coverage such as "Bedugul Is More Than Just Cables and Valves; It Is Sacred Land" (2021) highlights the conflict between development and the sanctity of living space. These differences show that framing is not merely a linguistic strategy but also reflects ideological positions and media ownership.

Eco-branding patterns show how the language of green development works through the aesthetics of optimism. As noted by previous researchers, this type of discourse often presents sustainability as a commodity of hope—a moral promise that legitimises economic growth (Fritz et al., 2024). In NusaBali's coverage, for example, the solar power project in Nusa Penida was praised as 'a milestone of pride for Bali towards energy independence' (21 March 2022), even though most of the electricity is distributed to urban and tourist areas. This representation shows a mismatch between symbolism and material reality. Thus, 'green energy'

emerges as a language of loyalty to the state and the market, rather than to the needs of local communities.

At the same time, the technocratic framework reinforces the impression that energy transition is a problem that can be solved through innovation and management, rather than through social or political negotiation. In many articles, the government and companies appear as rational actors managing solutions, while communities play the role of beneficiaries. The integration of cultural values into the development narrative often leads to the depoliticisation of the energy debate: the discourse of 'green growth' is constructed in such a way as to reinforce technocratic solutions while sidelining political and justice demands. This can be observed in studies on the governance of energy transition that emphasise the role of regional structures and planning mechanisms that tend to close off alternative spaces (Coenen et al., 2021), as well as in studies on the relationship between energy transition and development agendas in developing countries (Swilling et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the space for resistance has not completely disappeared. Interviews with journalists from *BaleBengong* reveal how alternative reporting utilises indigenous and spiritual languages to challenge the official version of development. One journalist (Initial B), stated: 'We write about sacred lands not out of nostalgia, but because that is where the limits of power are tested'. In this context, 'boundaries of power' refer to the discursive boundaries where the dominant logic of development meets the ethical and spiritual claims of local communities. This statement affirms that framing functions as a tool of resistance, particularly through a 'war of narratives' in which small-scale community media challenge the hegemonic discourse of mainstream media, which often aligns with the interests of the state and corporations.

### **Energy justice and the politics of symbolic inequality in Bali**

The energy transition in Bali, on the one hand, seems to promise the image of a 'green island' in line with the Tri Hita Karana philosophy; however, on the other hand, it reinforces inequality in the three dimensions of energy justice: distributive, procedural, and recognitive. This framework is adapted from Sovacool & Dworkin and is used here not as a normative description, but as an analytical lens to analyse how 'clean' energy policies in Bali are implemented amid economic-political inequality and the dominance of tourism (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015).

In the context of energy justice, the most obvious imbalance in distribution is seen in the Nusa Penida Hybrid Solar Power Plant project. Although it was inaugurated by PLN in 2023 with an official capacity of 3.5 MWp, reports from PLN and analysis from IESR (2024) show that its contribution to local supply remains marginal compared to total demand.

As a result, the regional electricity grid remains heavily dependent on fossil fuel power plants. More importantly, peak loads are primarily driven by surges in electricity demand from tourism facilities rather than rural households. Further field interviews highlight this inequality, as residents note that the electricity supply in the tourism corridor is much more stable than in local settlements. This disparity illustrates how renewable energy infrastructure in Bali is strategically prioritised to serve the dominant tourism sector rather than the basic needs of residents.

These findings confirm that low-carbon energy policies often reinforce distributional inequalities by favouring capital-intensive sectors under the guise of sustainability. This trap of legitimacy shows that the 'green island' imagination functions more as a showcase of development for the tourism industry than as a substantive solution for energy justice.

Peak loads are triggered by surges in electricity demand from tourism facilities, not from rural households. In field interviews, several residents mentioned that electricity in tourist areas is more stable than in their settlements, signalling that renewable energy serves the dominant economic sector rather than the basic needs of residents. These findings indicate that energy service distribution in Bali is inherently unbalanced, as clean energy stability and infrastructure are largely allocated to support high-power tourism industries, while local housing needs remain a secondary priority.

The procedural dimension reveals a pattern of ceremonial participation. Public consultations are often represented by traditional rituals such as *melaspas*, which are positioned as signs of cultural blessing. The procedural dimension of energy justice in Bali is often reduced to symbolic participation. A community leader, (Initial F), expressed his frustration in an interview, stating: "We are invited to ceremonies, not to discuss their impact." This key finding shows how

traditional rituals are often used to create the impression of consent. This pattern reflects recent observations in which the principle of *Tri Hita Karana* is often politicised to portray industrial development as social harmony, even in the absence of substantial discussion with the affected communities (Iman et al., 2023). As a result, traditional rituals in the context of Bali's energy transition serve as a representation of legitimacy rather than a genuine mechanism for community control over policy.

Meanwhile, the dimension of recognition appears to be the most fragile. The Bedugul geothermal dispute shows how spiritual claims to sacred land are reduced to administrative issues and 'democratic participation.' Previous studies show that community lawsuits against the Bedugul PLTP project were placed within a legal framework that neutralised the sacred dimension (Iman et al., 2023). On the other hand, technical research reinforces the narrative about the potential of geothermal energy as an untapped economic resource (Keintjem et al., 2023). Activists interviewed by researchers assessed that cultural recognition often serves as a form of legitimisation rather than a tool for negotiating power. This is also explained by Heffron & De Fontenelle as a form of tokenism in energy governance in developing contexts such as Bali, where symbolic recognition is not accompanied by changes in power structures (Heffron et al., 2024).

This inequality is exacerbated by the priority given to the tourism economy. Tourism-oriented development concentrates investment in high-value corridors, while rural areas merely host the infrastructure without receiving commensurate benefits. The literature on energy justice and financialisation in Southeast Asia confirms a similar trend: energy projects are often directed towards supporting capital-intensive sectors (Heffron et al., 2024; Setyowati, 2021). In mainstream media coverage, such inequalities are rarely presented as conflicts. Instead, narratives of 'harmony' and 'coexistence' are more dominant, obscuring the tensions between green development and social justice. Chong's study on the representation of Balinese society in tourism discourse and Bräuchle's study on the Bali Tolak Reklamasi protests show that the media often simplifies resistance into peaceful cultural expressions (Bräuchle, 2023; Chong, 2020). A similar phenomenon also appears in energy reporting: conflict is seen as a deviation from Bali's harmonious image, rather than as a legitimate part of the public debate on the direction of development.

### **From resistance to resonance: media co-optation in the energy discourse in Bali**

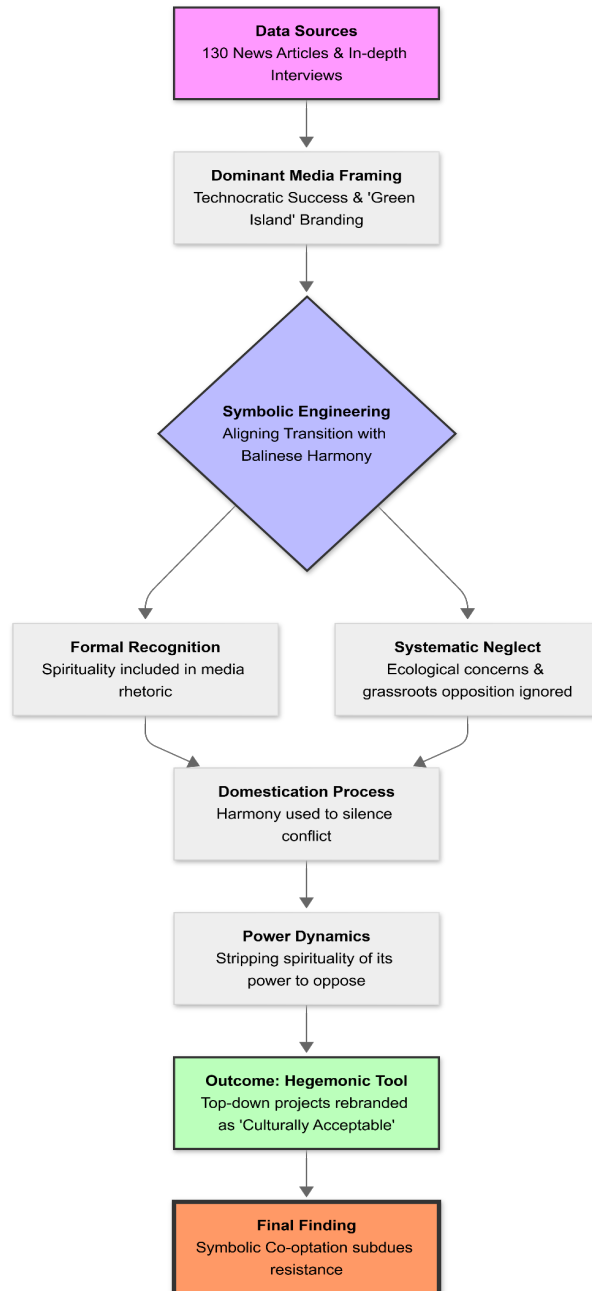
Although there are forms of local resistance to energy projects in Bali, most of the resistance appears tame and easily absorbed into the official development discourse. Birgit Bräuchler's study of the Bali Tolak Reklamasi (Bali Reject Reclamation) movement shows a similar pattern, namely how local expressions of protest are articulated within a cultural and spiritual framework to avoid open confrontation (Bräuchle, 2023). Resistance thus does not disappear but is transformed into a form of participation that is safe for the existing order.

The renewable energy transition in Bali reflects an approach dominated by top-down policies, in which community participation remains largely symbolic. This orientation is consistent with the argument that low-carbon energy policies in Indonesia often reinforce existing power imbalances by prioritising the interests of the state and corporations over local autonomy (Setyowati, 2021). Furthermore, empirical evidence from energy initiatives in rural Indonesia shows that without genuine procedural reform, such projects tend to function as technocratic exercises that neglect the communities they are supposed to serve (Fathoni et al., 2021).

In the provincial context, this orientation is intrinsically linked to the promotion of tourism and the image of the 'Green Island', which positions energy transition as a strategic tool for branding development rather than a substantive process of energy democratisation.

In the cases of Bedugul and Celukan Bawang, community concerns about spiritual and ecological damage are often transformed into narratives of harmony and inclusivity. Research shows that the symbol of *Tri Hita Karana* is often mobilised to support development projects, while recent legal analysis of the Bedugul geothermal dispute shows that spiritual claims are reduced to administrative issues within the framework of positive law (Iman et al., 2023). This process illustrates how local participation is formally recognised but remains separate from the spiritual and ecological context that underpins indigenous peoples' resistance.

Meanwhile, the media plays a key role in turning criticism into legitimacy. Coverage on BaleBengong.id, such as Bali's Wild Energy and Bali's Wild Journey for Tomorrow's Energy, highlights residents' concerns about the impact of energy projects in coastal and rural areas, including Nusa Penida and North Bali. In contrast, mainstream media such as Kompas more often portrays energy projects as efforts to realise clean energy in harmony with Balinese culture—a narrative that combines green development with an image of social harmony. This imbalance signals a process of media co-optation, in which protests and criticisms are rearticulated through the language of development and harmony.



**Figure 1** Symbolic co-optation mechanism in Bali  
*Source: Processed by the authors, 2025*

This phenomenon is in line with recent analyses showing that energy governance in developing contexts such as Bali often diverts social conflicts into symbolic compliance through legislation and public rhetoric (Heffron et al., 2024). In Bali, this co-optation process occurs not only in the realm of policy, but also at the cultural and media levels, where rituals, slogans, and media representations become tools to quell resistance.

As a result, the resonance of resistance in Bali is often temporary. Although it echoes through alternative media and activist networks, this resistance is often reabsorbed by the dominant power structure through symbolic co-optation. This pattern shows that low-carbon energy policies in Bali can maintain existing power relations under the guise of 'green' policies (Setyowati, 2021). In this case, cultural language and rituals of harmony function as hegemonic tools—not to eliminate resistance, but to transform it into a narrative driven by consensus (Iman et al., 2023).

The findings of this study indicate that the debate surrounding energy transition in Bali is not solely related to technology or policy, but rather centres on how power operates through symbols and representations. Previous research has shown how protests in Bali are often absorbed by a cultural logic that emphasises harmony (Bräuchler, 2018). A similar mechanism can be seen in the dynamics of renewable energy, where ecological resistance is transformed into the symbolic language of participation. Within this framework, *Tri Hita Karana* has been shifted from a philosophy of balance to a political rhetoric of development, functioning as a moral framework that silences criticism through symbolic co-optation (Iman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the energy transition in Bali is still dominated by economic and state actors, so that the narrative of energy justice is seen as an elitist project rather than an emancipatory practice (Setyowati, 2021). This reflects the concept of 'symbolic compliance,' in which participation and fairness are primarily used to maintain the legitimacy of unequal governance (Heffron et al., 2024).

The empirical findings of this study, obtained from manual coding of 130 news articles and in-depth interviews, reveal a clear discursive shift in Bali's energy narrative. Although the main coverage in *NusaBali* and *Kompas* (representing over 80% of the analysed sample) consistently prioritises technocratic success and the branding of the 'Green Island', manual thematic grouping reveals that spiritual and ecological concerns are systematically neglected.

This process of symbolic engineering ensures that the energy transition does not appear as a source of conflict, but rather as a project that is inherently aligned with the logic of Balinese harmony. Data from interviews with community leaders (initials F) and journalists (initials B) further explain that this harmony is not the result of consensus, but rather a sophisticated process of 'domestication.' This mechanism of discursive transformation is illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, local spirituality is formally recognised in media rhetoric, but its power to oppose development has been eliminated. As a result, the imagination of the 'Green Island' functions as a hegemonic tool that transforms top-down national projects into culturally acceptable provincial narratives. These findings make a critical contribution to the study of energy justice by revealing how symbolic co-optation functions as a key mechanism for dampening grassroots resistance in culturally sensitive landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the energy transition in Bali is not only related to technical and environmental issues, but also to politics of representation and symbolic co-optation. The discourse of 'clean energy' is often wrapped in cultural values such as *Tri Hita Karana* and the image of 'Green Bali,' so that it appears to be in harmony with tradition. However, behind this language of sustainability, a process of reproducing inequality is underway: energy projects remain controlled by state actors and corporations, while local communities are more often positioned as symbolic recipients rather than substantial decision-makers. The media plays an important role in this process. Through coverage that emphasises harmony and culture, criticism of energy projects is directed towards politically safe narratives of development as a form of co-optation that defuses tensions without touching the roots of power.

These findings show that resistance in Bali is resonant but quickly absorbed. Protests and rejections from residents do echo, but that echo is immediately suppressed by the logic of harmony institutionalised through rituals, laws, and news coverage. This phenomenon reinforces the view that energy justice is not only measured by the distribution of resources, but also by who regulates the meaning of 'justice' itself. In the Balinese context, spirituality and culture have a dual function: on the one hand, they are a moral source for rejecting inequality; on the other, they are used as a tool of legitimisation by dominant actors. Therefore, seemingly inclusive 'energy justice' conceals a lack of genuine participation and the reproduction of power in a new, more subtle and symbolic form.

To understand these dynamics, this study introduces the concept of co-optation–resonance, which is a way of looking at the relationship between resistance, representation, and hegemony. This concept highlights three interrelated dimensions: (1) fair and negotiated distribution of resources, (2) equal joint decision-making, and (3) cross-cultural respect that involves local values without turning them into mere decoration. Through this framework, it becomes clear why various forms of local challenges—whether protests, customary rejections, or legal challenges—often fail to change established power structures. Cultural principles that should form the basis of environmental ethics become symbolic rhetoric when they are not supported by responsive institutions and independent media.

Theoretically, this research expands the horizons of critical communication studies and energy justice by showing that the production of discourse on clean energy is a political practice that contains power relations and cultural hegemonic strategies. The co-optation-resonance approach offers a conceptual contribution to understanding how local media, public policy, and cultural symbols work together to shape the legitimacy of green development while dampening social resistance. These findings confirm that the media not only conveys information but also acts as a hegemonic cultural agent that regulates meaning and determines what is considered harmonious, sustainable, and acceptable to the public. Therefore, energy justice in Bali (and Indonesia more broadly) cannot be achieved solely by increasing projects or emission targets, but by building egalitarian communication spaces, strengthening independent media, and ensuring local communities have an equal voice in determining the direction of the energy transition.

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