

Nationalism On The Soccer: Between Naturalization Strategy And Public Pride

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the growing debate over player naturalization in the Indonesian national soccer team, extending beyond performance to issues of nationalism and public pride. The controversy reflects tensions between pragmatic strategies for international success and symbolic expectations of national identity, shaped by media narratives, public opinion, and institutional decisions within Indonesia's highly competitive and globalized soccer culture. The purpose of this research is to examine how media discourse constructs naturalization as both a strategic policy and a symbolic challenge to national identity. This study employs a qualitative research design using framing analysis based on Entman's model and semiotic analysis grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic theory. Data are collected from selected online media reports and public opinion surveys related to player naturalization in Indonesian soccer, which are analyzed to examine how nationalism and public pride are constructed and contested in media discourse. The findings reveal that media framing presents naturalization in dual narratives: as a pragmatic strategy to enhance team competitiveness and as a contested practice that may dilute national identity. Public support is largely shaped by expectations of improved performance, while opposition emphasizes symbolic nationalism and emotional attachment.

Keywords: Analysis of Content, Football, Media Framing, Nationalism, Player Naturalization, Public Pride.

INTRODUCTION

Football is more than just a sport in Indonesia; it has become a symbolic arena reflecting national identity, aspirations, and spirit (Ismail et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2025). Its massive popularity makes every national team match a collective moment, where people express pride, solidarity, and loyalty to the nation. In this context, the national team serves as a visual representation of nationalism, where players are not only required to perform technically but also to become symbols of unity and public pride (Motiva, 2025). In other words, the national team's success on the pitch is interpreted as a reflection of the nation's capacity and prestige on the international stage (Haut et al., 2017; Li & Feng, 2022).

Player naturalization brings a new dimension to the formation of the national team's identity (Han et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2023). On the one hand, this strategy allows teams to acquire players with experience and qualities that may not be available at the domestic level, thereby increasing the team's competitiveness in regional and global competitions. Naturalized players who have gained experience in foreign professional leagues often bring technical expertise, professional discipline, and a more mature understanding of tactics, which in turn strengthens the national team's capacity (Reiche & Tinaz, 2019). Thus, naturalization is not merely a matter of administrative or legal policy, but also a national strategy to pursue great achievements that can enhance the nation's reputation. Nationalism is an individual's love, pride, and loyalty to their country (Ektiren, 2024). In the context of sports, Zaid et al. (2024) stated that sports can be a "mirror of the nation" because national teams serve as symbols of identity and unity. Football, as a popular sport, often serves as an arena for the manifestation of nationalism. International competitions, such as the World Cup or the AFF Cup, allow the public to express national pride through support for their teams (Ghobain et al., 2025; Mutz & Gerke, 2024).

However, this process has also generated controversy rooted in public perceptions of nationalism. Some question the emotional and cultural attachment of naturalized players to the Indonesian nation, raising questions about the authenticity of the team's national identity (Ismail et al., 2025). Naturalization of players in football is a strategy used by many countries to strengthen national teams (Syafii et al., 2025). This process involves legal recognition as citizens and socio-cultural integration for foreign players. In sports literature, naturalization is divided into two approaches: achievement-based naturalization (referring to the athlete's abilities) and identity-based naturalization (referring to cultural ties and family history). In a social context, this perception has the potential to create tension between the logic of achievement and the symbolic logic of nationalism. The public often believes that the national team must not only win but also embody local values and historical ties to the nation. When players are perceived as "foreign" or lacking an understanding of local culture, this can spark resistance or controversy, affecting the team atmosphere and fan support.



Figure 1 Atmosphere After the Indonesian National Team Match (Fan Enthusiasm)

Source : Belakang Gawang (2025)

This phenomenon emphasizes that modern nationalism in sports is multidimensional: it is measured not only by technical achievements on the field but also by the symbolism accepted by the wider community (Bairner & Han, 2022). Player naturalization, when managed well, can be a means of broadening the understanding of nationalism from one based solely on birth to one based on contribution, commitment, and social integration. Naturalized players who actively engage with the community, learn the local language and culture, and demonstrate loyalty to the national team are more likely to be accepted as symbols of national pride. Conversely, if this integration is neglected, the naturalization strategy can become a source of public criticism and even fuel debate about the "authenticity" of nationalism.

The sports public plays a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy of naturalization strategies. According to Chaeroni et al. (2024) public perception is influenced by local identity factors, mass media, and nationalist narratives constructed by sports authorities. The public's tendency to accept or reject naturalized players can influence team atmosphere, fan solidarity, and the long-term success of this strategy.

Furthermore, mass media and digital platforms play a crucial role in framing the narrative surrounding player naturalization (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). The way the media highlights a player's achievements, background, and cultural ties significantly influences public perception. Framing that emphasizes a player's technical contributions and loyalty tends to reinforce pride and legitimacy for naturalization. Conversely, framing that emphasizes cultural detachment or foreign origins can intensify controversy and generate opposition among fans. Therefore, strategic public communication, from both the federation and the media, is a key factor in bridging sporting achievement and national symbolism. Framing theory originated in sociology in the 1960s and was later adopted in communication studies (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). This theory allows for a more in-depth examination of how the media influences individual perceptions (Herlina et al., 2023). Framing refers to the practice of journalists emphasizing a particular point of view in news reporting, thus encouraging the public to view that perspective as the most relevant, even though it may not necessarily reflect the entire truth (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023). In other words, framing is the process by which the media shapes the public's perspective or mindset regarding an issue (Garba & Aondover, 2023).

Overall, the naturalization of football players places the public at a crossroads between the logic of achievement and the symbolic logic of nationalism (Han, 2023). This strategy reflects a modern approach to national sports development, where technical quality and public pride must go hand in hand. Public acceptance of naturalized players is an indicator of the extent to which nationalism can be expanded to accommodate global contributions without sacrificing local identity (Seippel, 2017). In this context, naturalization is not only a sporting strategy, but also a socio-political experiment that challenges traditional definitions of nationalism in Indonesia.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach, combining content analysis and framing analysis to understand the coverage of football player naturalization in the context of public pride and nationalism. Content analysis examines the messages, meanings, values, and ideologies presented in media texts, both verbal and visual (Arafat, 2019; Arifin et al., 2023). This approach enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning, values, ideologies, and communication structures presented through narratives, both verbally and visually (Denton et al., 2023). Framing analysis explores how the media emphasizes certain perspectives such as national team strategies or symbols of pride that shape public perceptions of the issue (Dharta, 2024). The combination of these two methods allows for a comprehensive understanding of the media's construction of player naturalization and its relationship to national identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many researchers evaluate news content by classifying news frames as negative, neutral, or positive, depending on the issue highlighted and the information source used. (Gabore, 2020; Morstatter et al., 2018). This approach allows for comparative analysis of reporting patterns between media. Based on the research results, the following is a framing analysis of five news reports on Nationalism and Naturalism published by local media, using the Entman model method explained above.

Table 1. Analysis of News Framing 1

News Title	Pro dan Kontra Pemain Naturalisasi Timnas Indonesia, Begini Jawaban Shin Tae-yong (Syaeful, 2024)
Entman Analysis	
<i>Define Problem</i>	The news highlighted the existence of naturalized players as a controversial issue in society, where some of the public are in favor because it improves the quality of the team, while some are against worrying about hurting the opportunities of local players, so that the issue is perceived as a tension between team strategy and national interests.
<i>Diagnosis Cause</i>	The cause of the debate is shown to originate from the naturalization policy itself and the decision of PSSI and coach Shin Tae-yong, who chose foreign players to become Indonesian citizens to strengthen the team, so that the main actors are considered to be the coach and the national football institution.
<i>Make Moral Judgement</i>	The cause of the debate is shown to originate from the naturalization policy itself and the decision of PSSI and coach Shin Tae-yong, who chose foreign players to become Indonesian citizens to strengthen the team, so that the main actors are considered to be the coach and the national football institution.
<i>Treatment Recommendation</i>	The news featured Shin Tae-yong's call for public support for naturalization as a strategy to improve the team's performance in World Cup qualifying, recommending social acceptance and support for the policy as a solution to reduce the controversy.

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Table 2. Analysis of News Framing 2

News Title	Ada Pro dan Kontra Soal Naturalisasi Pemain Timnas Indonesia, Apa Kata Shin Tae-yong? (Randy, 2024)
Entman Analysis	
<i>Define Problem</i>	News reports have portrayed the naturalization of Indonesian national team players as a controversial issue. The issue is perceived not simply as a matter of player recruitment, but as a controversy over how the policy impacts national football and public perception of the national team's identity.
<i>Diagnosis Cause</i>	Reports indicate that PSSI's policy and Shin Tae-yong's decision to recruit players of mixed descent are considered to be the cause of the debate on naturalization, with critics saying this policy reduces the opportunities for local players, while STY considers this a competitive strategy.
<i>Make Moral Judgement</i>	The media displayed positive moral values towards naturalization through STY's response which asked the public not to be suspicious, emphasized the benefits of naturalization to strengthen the national team and foster pride, while also dampening criticism that this policy was detrimental to the development of local players.
<i>Treatment Recommendation</i>	STY recommends that the public support the naturalization program and view it as part of a strategy to improve the performance of the Indonesian National Team, inviting all parties to view it from a broader perspective for the advancement of national football.

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Table 3 Analysis of News Framing 3

News Title	Survei Indikator: 75,3 Persen Responden Setujui Program Naturalisasi di Timnas Indonesia (Wibowo, 2025)
Entman Analysis	
Define Problem	The news positioned naturalization as a key issue in Indonesian football by highlighting survey results that showed the majority of the public supported the program. This meant that naturalization was understood not simply as a federation policy but also as a reflection of the public's views on strengthening the national team.
Diagnosis Cause	The survey showed that approval for naturalization was influenced by public enthusiasm for football and the perception that the policy would improve the quality of the national team. Therefore, PSSI policy factors and perceptions of the team's performance were considered factors contributing to support. Thus, support was not merely emotional, but positioned as a logical consequence of perceived policy effectiveness and a focus on national achievement.
Make Moral Judgement	The news portrayed majority support as positive, emphasizing that naturalization was publicly accepted as a strategic effort for the advancement of football, while the minority who opposed it were perceived as remaining outside the mainstream of the majority of respondents.
Treatment Recommendation	The news implied that naturalization should be continued as part of a strategy to improve the national team's performance, highlighting the overwhelmingly supportive public opinion, thus lending social legitimacy to the policy.

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Table 4. Analysis of News Framing 4

News Title	PSSI: Pemain Naturalisasi Diserang, Ada Upaya Hancurkan Timnas (Ghazali, 2025)
Entman Analysis	
Define Problem	News outlets portrayed attacks on naturalized players as a threat to the unity of the Indonesian National Team. Netizen criticism linking naturalization to the dismissal of the coach was reported as a factor triggering internal conflict and negative perceptions of the PSSI's policies. The news outlets framed attacks on naturalized players not simply as individual criticism, but as a serious threat to the solidarity and stability of the Indonesian National Team.
Diagnosis Cause	The news outlets indicated that the attacks on naturalized players were perceived as originating from certain individuals seeking to "destroy" the National Team. The PSSI assessed that the criticism and accusations were fueled by speculation regarding Shin Tae-yong's dismissal, thus accusing external actors of being the source of the problem.
Make Moral Judgement	The media conveyed the PSSI's perspective, strongly condemning the attacks on naturalized players, viewing them as evil and damaging to unity. This moral assessment strengthened the legitimacy of naturalized players and rejected attitudes perceived as destructive to the National Team..
Treatment Recommendation	The news outlets' framing implied the need for the public to stop attacks on naturalized players and support the unity of the National Team. The PSSI urged football fans to prioritize loyalty to the National Team, rather than attacking individual players, for the sake of team stability.

Source: Primary Data (2026)

Table 5. Analysis of News Framing 5

News Title	Pengorbanan Naturalisasi untuk Bela Negara (Sunandar, 2024)
Entman Analysis	
Define Problem	The news positioned player naturalization as part of the national defense effort in football, emphasizing that the decision of players of Indonesian descent to choose Indonesia was a commitment to the nation and the sport, not simply a technical strategy for the national team.
Diagnosis Cause	The framing suggests that the naturalization program was driven by the national team's need for international prestige and stagnant local performance. The PSSI, under the leadership of Erick Thohir, was the primary actor initiating the issue, supported by national regulations.
Make Moral Judgement	The media placed a positive moral value on naturalization, portraying the sacrifices of players who gave up career opportunities in Europe as a demonstration of loyalty and love for their homeland. The negative stigma against naturalization was thus seen as unfair.
Treatment Recommendation	The news implied that the negative stigma against naturalization should be removed, and the public should accept the players produced by this process as part of the nation, and view naturalization as a real contribution to national pride.

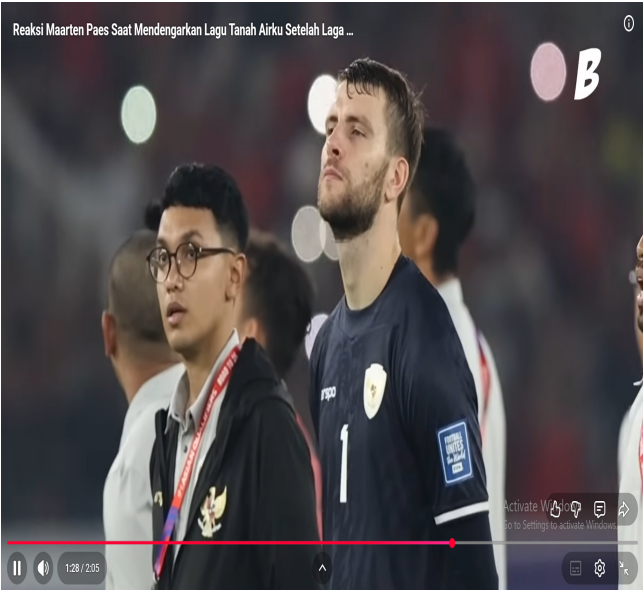
Source: Primary Data (2026)

From the five news reports, the following conclusions can be drawn: The naturalization of Indonesian national team players has generated both pros and cons in society. Public support stems from the belief that naturalized players will improve the team's quality, strengthen its performance at the international level, and foster national pride. Opposition stems from concerns about the opportunities for local players, the impact on the national team's identity, and speculation about the coach's dismissal. The causes of this controversy include the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) policy, Shin Tae-yong's decision, the recruitment of players of mixed descent, netizen criticism, and the national team's need for prestige on the international stage.

From a moral perspective, the news reports emphasize the positive aspects of naturalization, highlighting the sacrifices made by players who choose Indonesia, their loyalty to the nation, and their contribution to national pride. Minor criticism, such as the perception that naturalization harms local players or undermines the national team's unity, is seen as unfair. This moral framing strengthens the policy's legitimacy and emphasizes that naturalization is an ethical strategy that supports the advancement of national football.

The recommended news reports encourage the public to support naturalization as a strategy to improve the national team's performance, maintain team unity, stop attacks on players, and accept naturalization as part of the national identity. This program is positioned as a tangible contribution to collective pride and national defense efforts, while also providing social legitimacy to PSSI's long-term policies, strengthening nationalist awareness on the pitch, and building positive public perception of the national team. To analyze the video's content, researchers used Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis model, based on the triangle of meaning theory, which involves three main components: sign, object, and interpretant. Meaning is created through the relationship between the sign representing something, the object it refers to, and the understanding or interpretation that arises in the recipient (Kriyantono, 2008).

Table 6 Content analysis of News Video 1

Icon	- Visual: Maarten Paes's moved facial expression when the song "Tanah Airku" is played. - Audio: The singing of the national anthem, synonymous with nationalism. - This icon represents a real-life situation: a naturalized player embracing the symbols of Indonesian nationality.	
Index	- Paes' tears or emotional expression serve as an indicator of emotional connection to Indonesia. - The presence of supporters and the atmosphere in the stadium serve as indicators of public support for naturalization. - This indicator demonstrates that naturalization is not just an administrative matter, but also a real emotional attachment.	
Symbol	- The song "Tanah Airku" serves as a symbol of nationalism, conventionally accepted as a sign of love for one's country. - Paes's moved gesture symbolizes the acceptance of a new identity as an Indonesian citizen. - This symbol reinforces the message that naturalization is a moral and national commitment, not simply a technical football strategy.	

Source: BolacomID (2025b)

Table 7 Content analysis of News Video 2

Icon	▪ Main visual: three naturalized players standing solemnly singing the song "Tanah Airku". ▪ Audio: the national anthem sung by thousands of supporters. ▪ This icon represents a real-life situation: naturalization is not simply an administrative status, but is demonstrated through direct participation in national symbols.	
Index	▪ Body gestures: the players' serious and solemn expressions serve as an indicator of emotional connection to Indonesia. ▪ Supporter response: the mass singing in the stadium serves as an indicator of social acceptance of the naturalized players. ▪ This index demonstrates a causal relationship: the naturalization policy generates emotional engagement from players and tangible public support.	
Symbol	▪ The song "Tanah Airku" serves as a symbol of nationalism, conventionally accepted as a sign of love for the homeland. ▪ The participation of naturalized players symbolizes the acceptance of a new identity as part of the Indonesian nation. ▪ This symbol reinforces the message that naturalization is a moral and national commitment, not simply a technical football strategy.	

Source : BolacomID (2025a)

Based on the content analysis of the two YouTube videos, it can be concluded that the video of Maarten Paes and three naturalized players singing "Tanah Airku" (My Homeland) frames naturalization as an emotional and symbolic process. Icons such as emotional expressions and solemn attitudes demonstrate real involvement. Indexes such as tears, body gestures, and support from supporters indicate emotional connection and social acceptance. The symbol of the national anthem affirms the players' nationalism and moral commitment to Indonesia (Siahaan et al., 2025). Both videos portray naturalization as more than just an administrative status, but rather an integration of identity, loyalty, and national pride, thus strengthening social legitimacy and public support for the Indonesian National Team's naturalization policy (Prasetio et al., 2024).

Nationalism in the Green Field – Between Naturalization Strategy and Public Pride

The naturalization of Indonesian national team players is a phenomenon that combines the dimensions of sports strategy with the construction of nationalism. This policy arose from the need to improve the team's quality to compete internationally, while also addressing the stagnant performance of national football. The Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) and coach Shin Tae-yong viewed naturalization as a pragmatic measure, but the media highlighted the pros and cons within society. Some supported it, seeing its tangible contribution to the team's performance, while others were concerned about the opportunities for local players and the team's identity.

Analysis of news framing shows that the media primarily emphasized the positive moral aspects of naturalization. Public support was presented as social legitimacy, with surveys showing a majority of the public accepted the policy. Media narratives highlighted the sacrifices players made by choosing Indonesia, their loyalty to the nation, and their contribution to national pride. Minority criticism, such as the belief that naturalization would harm the development of local players or disrupt team cohesion, was positioned as resistance that deviated from the trend of collective nationalism.

News videos reinforced this narrative through Peirce's semiotics. At the iconic level, Maarten Paes's emotional expression and the solemn attitude of the three other players while singing "Tanah Airku" (My Homeland) represent concrete engagement. At the index level, tears, gestures, and support from supporters serve as signs of emotional connection and social acceptance. At the symbolic level, the national anthem serves as a representation of nationalism, while the participation of naturalized players affirms a moral commitment to Indonesia (Alwi et al., 2023).

All these signs frame naturalization not simply as an administrative status, but as a process of identity integration and loyalty (Politi et al., 2022). Naturalization is positioned as an instrument of identity politics that fosters public pride, strengthens the legitimacy of PSSI policies, and fosters national awareness on the pitch (Nurgiansah et al., 2025). Thus, naturalization in Indonesian football serves not only as a technical strategy to improve performance but also as a symbol of national unity and the strengthening of collective identity (Prawira & Suhianto, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Nationalism on the pitch is reflected in the public acceptance of naturalized players who play for the Indonesian National Team. This policy is not only a technical strategy to improve the team's quality, but also serves as a bridge between sporting interests and national pride. Through media framing and national symbols such as the anthem "Tanah Airku" (My Homeland), naturalization is positioned as a moral commitment, loyalty, and identity integration. Majority public support demonstrates that football can function as an arena for identity politics as well as a means of strengthening social solidarity. Thus, naturalization not only improves team performance but also strengthens the legitimacy of the PSSI's policies, builds national awareness, and fosters a sense of unity and collective pride among Indonesians.

It is recommended that the PSSI and the media continue to educate the public about the benefits of naturalization, emphasizing the loyalty and contribution of players to the nation. Public support must be maintained through policy transparency, development of local players, and a positive narrative that emphasizes naturalization as part of a strategy for achievement and strengthening national identity on the pitch.

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