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## **Indonesia's Gastrodiplomacy for Nation Branding, Diplomatic Relations, and Tourism Promotion: A Lived Experience Approach**

**Rahmat Kusnedi\*, Willy Arafah, M. Husen Hutagalung, Saptarining Wulan, Rahmat  
Inkadijaya**

Institut Pariwisata Trisakti, Indonesia

Email: rahmat.kusnedi@pradita.ac.id\*, willy.arafah@trisakti.ac.id, husen@stptrisakti.ac.id,  
saptariningwulan@iptrisakti.ac.id, rachmatingkadijaya@stptrisakti.ac.id

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### **Abstract**

Indonesia has a rich and diverse culinary heritage, but Indonesia's culinary presence globally is still limited and often less prominent than the cuisines of other countries that are promoted more systematically. This gap highlights the need to explore how gastronomy can be strategically leveraged for nation branding, diplomatic relations, and tourism promotion. This research aims to analyze Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy as a strategic instrument for tourism promotion through a lived experience approach. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with Indonesian diaspora actors, including chefs and restaurant owners across Asia Pacific, the United States, and Western Europe. Thematic analysis was used to interpret lived experiences and identify key patterns in tourism promotion. The findings reveal that gastrodiplomacy promotes tourism through five key mechanisms: entry point awareness, cultural communication, sensory and emotional engagement, destination image formation, and visit intention. Diaspora actors play a central role as informal tourism ambassadors. Indonesian gastrodiplomacy operates as an experiential and relational process embedded in everyday practices. It significantly contributes to nation branding, diplomatic relation, and tourism promotion, although its effectiveness is constrained by limited policy integration. This research is limited to qualitative analysis and diaspora perspectives, which may not fully represent broader tourism stakeholders. Contributions: This study introduces the concept of lived gastrodiplomacy and contributes to tourism and public diplomacy literature by emphasizing experiential and bottom-up approaches to tourism promotion.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Food has increasingly been recognized not merely as a basic human necessity, but as a powerful cultural artifact that embodies identity, history, and social values (Utami, 2018). In the context of globalization, cuisine has evolved into a strategic medium for cross-cultural communication, enabling countries to project their identity and influence international perceptions. As a result, food has become an integral component of public diplomacy, particularly through the practice of gastrodiplomacy, which utilizes national cuisine to engage foreign publics and enhance a country's global image (Rockower, 2012).

Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation with immense cultural diversity, possesses a rich and complex culinary heritage shaped by geographical, historical, and socio-cultural interactions (Hakim & Hamidah, 2022). This diversity positions Indonesian gastronomy as a potentially powerful instrument for both nation branding and tourism promotion. However, despite its vast culinary resources, Indonesia's global culinary presence remains relatively limited and uneven, often overshadowed by more systematically promoted cuisines from other

countries (Trihartono et al., 2020; Untari et al., 2025). This condition indicates a gap between Indonesia's gastronomic potential and its strategic utilization in international engagement (Sitorus et al., 2024).

Gastrodiplomacy has been widely acknowledged as a form of soft power that operates through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2023). Unlike formal diplomatic mechanisms, gastrodiplomacy relies on everyday interactions and sensory experiences, making it more accessible and impactful in shaping public perception (Rockower, 2012). In the Indonesian context, gastrodiplomacy practices have been implemented through various initiatives, including international food festivals, diaspora restaurants, and cultural promotion programs (Ghafiqi, 2023; Untari et al., 2025). Nevertheless, existing approaches tend to emphasize macro-level policies and promotional activities, often overlooking the micro-level dynamics where gastrodiplomacy is actually experienced and enacted (Prasasti, 2021; Murdhanita, 2022).

This study argues that the effectiveness of Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy cannot be fully understood without examining the lived experiences of its key actors, particularly culinary diaspora. Empirical findings reveal that Indonesian gastrodiplomacy operates primarily through informal, everyday practices carried out by diaspora actors who introduce Indonesian cuisine through direct interaction with international audiences. These actors function not only as entrepreneurs but also as cultural intermediaries who actively construct and negotiate Indonesian identity in global contexts (Imanuella & Aryani, 2020). Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that gastrodiplomacy works through three interrelated mechanisms: experience, interaction, and satisfaction. Culinary experience serves as the entry point for generating awareness about Indonesia, interaction facilitates cultural understanding through interpersonal communication, and satisfaction reinforces positive perceptions and encourages behavioral outcomes such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth promotion. This experiential mechanism highlights that gastrodiplomacy is not merely representational but deeply relational and affective.

In addition, this study identifies a structural paradox within Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy. While diaspora actors are highly effective in fostering cultural proximity and informal diplomatic relations through everyday interactions, institutional support from the state remains relatively weak and fragmented. As a result, gastrodiplomacy practices often operate in a sporadic and uncoordinated manner, limiting their strategic impact at the macro level (Melissen, 2005). This gap between grassroots effectiveness and institutional support reflects a broader disconnect between normative frameworks (what should be) and empirical realities (what actually occurs).

From a tourism perspective, Indonesian gastronomy plays a crucial role in shaping destination image and influencing travel behavior. The findings indicate that culinary experiences function as an entry point for destination awareness, a medium of cultural communication, and a driver of memorable tourism experiences. More importantly, positive gastronomic experiences contribute to the formation of destination image and stimulate visit intention, positioning gastronomy as a key component in experience-based tourism. Despite its strategic potential, the integration of gastronomy into Indonesia's tourism promotion remains limited due to weak policy coordination, lack of cross-sectoral integration, and overreliance on diaspora initiatives (Nurwahdini 2021; Parmato et al., 2023). These challenges highlight the

need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach that aligns cultural, diplomatic, and tourism strategies.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy as a strategic instrument for tourism promotion through a lived experience approach. By focusing on the experiences of diaspora actors, this research seeks to bridge the gap between macro-level policy discourse and micro-level practices, offering a more nuanced understanding of how gastrodiplomacy operates in real-world contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its shift from a state-centric perspective to an actor-centered approach, emphasizing lived experience as the primary analytical lens. It also introduces the concept of "lived soft power," where national image and cultural influence are continuously constructed through everyday practices, interactions, and emotional engagement. Theoretically, this study contributes to the broader literature on public diplomacy, tourism studies, and cultural studies by providing an integrated framework that connects gastrodiplomacy, nation branding, diplomatic relations, and tourism promotion. The concept of lived gastrodiplomacy enriches existing theoretical approaches by demonstrating that soft power operates not only through institutional channels but also through experiential and relational processes embedded in daily life. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide insights for Indonesian policymakers in designing more effective and coordinated gastrodiplomacy strategies that leverage the role of diaspora actors, strengthen institutional support mechanisms, and integrate culinary promotion with broader tourism and diplomatic objectives.

Furthermore, this research offers practical guidance for diaspora communities and culinary entrepreneurs in maximizing their role as informal cultural ambassadors, and serves as a reference for other countries seeking to develop gastrodiplomacy initiatives that balance grassroots engagement with institutional coordination. Ultimately, this study underscores that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy is not merely a policy instrument but a lived and dynamic process shaped by the interaction between diaspora actors, cultural identity, and global audiences. Strengthening this process requires not only recognizing the role of non-state actors but also enhancing institutional coordination to transform dispersed practices into a coherent and sustainable national strategy.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the meanings and lived experiences of Indonesian culinary diaspora in practicing gastrodiplomacy. The interpretive approach is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena shaped by human interaction, perception, and context (Creswell, J. W., 2014). Within this framework, the study employs a phenomenological research design, which seeks to capture and interpret the essence of participants' lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). Rather than conceptualizing gastrodiplomacy as a formal, state-driven policy, this research positions it as a lived and enacted practice embedded in the everyday activities of diaspora actors. This perspective enables a shift from macro-level policy analysis toward micro-level realities, where cultural diplomacy is experienced, negotiated, and reproduced through daily interactions.

The research focuses on Indonesian culinary diaspora operating in international contexts, particularly those engaged in food-related businesses such as restaurants, catering

services, or culinary promotion initiatives. These actors are selected due to their role as informal agents of gastrodiploamacy who directly interact with foreign audiences and represent Indonesian cultural identity through cuisine. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight (Creswell, J. W., 2014), based on criteria including active involvement in culinary businesses abroad, direct engagement with international customers, and experience in promoting Indonesian cuisine across cultures. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in their own terms. The interviews explored key themes such as culinary experience, forms of interaction with international audiences, customer responses and satisfaction, and challenges in practicing gastrodiploamacy. These data were complemented by field notes and contextual observations to provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach involving systematic stages of data familiarization, coding, thematic categorization, and interpretation. Through this process, three core themes emerged experience, interaction, and satisfaction which together form the central analytical framework of the study. These themes capture the experiential mechanisms through which gastrodiploamacy operates, linking sensory engagement and interpersonal communication with emotional responses and behavioral outcomes. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study applied qualitative validation strategies including credibility, triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity (Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Gray, D. (2017). Ethical considerations were also maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible data use. Methodologically, this study contributes by integrating a phenomenological lens into gastrodiploamacy research, offering a novel experiential framework that bridges cultural diploamacy and tourism promotion while providing a more nuanced understanding of gastrodiploamacy as a form of lived soft power.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Gastrodiploamacy as a Lived and Actor-Driven Practice**

The findings indicate that Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy operates predominantly as a lived and actor-driven practice, rather than as a fully institutionalized state strategy. Empirical evidence shows that Indonesian culinary diaspora play a central role in introducing and representing Indonesian culture through everyday culinary activities. These actors function as informal cultural ambassadors who translate national identity into tangible experiences accessible to international audiences.

Participants consistently highlighted that their role extends beyond food provision. They actively engage in storytelling, explaining the origins, ingredients, and cultural meanings of Indonesian dishes. This process transforms dining into a form of cultural interaction, where food becomes a medium of communication and identity negotiation. Such practices reflect the concept of everyday diploamacy, in which diploamatic engagement occurs through routine social interactions rather than formal state mechanisms (Melissen, 2005).

This finding reinforces and extends existing literature by demonstrating that gastrodiploamacy is not merely a policy instrument but a socially embedded practice shaped by lived experiences. The notion of *lived soft power* emerges here, emphasizing that attraction and

influence are continuously constructed through micro-level interactions and experiential engagement (Nye, J. S., 2023; Rockower, 2020).

### **The Experience, Interaction, Satisfaction Mechanism**

A central contribution of this study is the identification of an experiential mechanism that underpins Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy, consisting of three interconnected dimensions: experience, interaction, and satisfaction. First, experience serves as the initial trigger of engagement. Exposure to Indonesian cuisine creates sensory and emotional impressions that generate curiosity and awareness. The multisensory nature of food taste, aroma, and presentation enables individuals to form immediate connections with Indonesian culture, supporting the argument that gastronomy is a powerful experiential medium (Blumer, H. (1969).

Second, interaction deepens the engagement process. Participants described how direct communication with customers through explanations, conversations, and cultural storytelling—facilitates mutual understanding. This interaction transforms passive consumption into active cultural exchange, reinforcing the relational nature of gastrodiploamacy.

Third, satisfaction represents the outcome of positive experiences and interactions. High levels of satisfaction were associated with emotional attachment, positive perceptions of Indonesia, and behavioral intentions such as repeat visits and recommendations. This aligns with tourism research that highlights satisfaction as a key determinant of destination image and revisit intention (Lai, M. Y., Khoo-Lattimore, C., & Wang, Y., 2018).

Together, these three dimensions form a dynamic experiential cycle, illustrating how gastrodiploamacy operates not as a linear promotional tool but as an interactive and evolving process. This framework provides a novel contribution by linking experiential processes with diplomatic and tourism outcomes.

### **From Culinary Experience to Nation Branding**

The findings further reveal that gastrodiploamacy contributes significantly to Indonesia's nation branding, particularly through bottom-up and relational processes. Participants noted that international customers often associate their culinary experiences with broader perceptions of Indonesia, including its cultural richness, hospitality, and diversity.

This indicates that food functions as a gateway to national image formation, supporting previous studies that position gastronomy as a key instrument in nation branding (Mawuntu, C., 2021). However, unlike traditional branding approaches that rely on centralized communication strategies, this study shows that national image is co-created through interactions between diaspora actors and consumers.

The concept of "lived nation branding" emerges as a key insight, emphasizing that branding is continuously constructed through everyday experiences rather than imposed through top-down narratives. This perspective challenges conventional state-centric models and highlights the importance of grassroots actors in shaping global perceptions (Lee, S. T., & Kim, H. S., 2021).

### **Gastrodiploamacy as a Strategic Instrument for Tourism Promotion**

Aligned with the study's central objective, the findings confirm that gastrodiploamacy functions as a strategic instrument for tourism promotion. Culinary experiences serve as an

entry point for destination awareness, introducing international audiences to Indonesia in an engaging and memorable way.

Participants reported that customers frequently expressed interest in visiting Indonesia after experiencing its cuisine. This demonstrates that gastrodiploamacy influences both cognitive dimensions (knowledge and awareness) and affective dimensions (emotions and attraction), which are critical in shaping travel intentions (Michael, N., & Fusté-Forné, F., 2022). Moreover, gastronomy enhances the memorability of experiences, positioning it as a core component of experience-based tourism. Rather than being a supplementary attraction, Indonesian cuisine acts as a primary driver of tourism interest, reinforcing the strategic importance of integrating gastrodiploamacy into tourism promotion frameworks.

### **Research Limitations**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach with a relatively limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. While the study provides in-depth insights into lived experiences, it does not aim to produce statistically representative conclusions.

Second, the study focuses primarily on the perspectives of Indonesian culinary diaspora, without incorporating the views of other stakeholders such as policymakers, tourists, or local communities. As a result, the analysis may not fully capture the broader ecosystem of gastrodiploamacy and tourism promotion.

Third, the research context is limited to specific international settings where Indonesian diaspora operate. Differences in cultural, economic, and institutional environments across countries may influence the practice and impact of gastrodiploamacy, which are not fully explored in this study.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's gastrodiploamacy functions as a strategic instrument for tourism promotion when understood through a lived experience approach. Rather than being driven primarily by formal state mechanisms, gastrodiploamacy is enacted through the everyday practices of Indonesian culinary diaspora who act as informal cultural ambassadors. These actors play a critical role in translating Indonesian cultural identity into tangible and relatable experiences for international audiences. The findings highlight that the effectiveness of gastrodiploamacy is shaped by an experiential mechanism consisting of experience, interaction, and satisfaction. Culinary experience serves as the entry point for awareness, interaction facilitates cultural exchange and understanding, and satisfaction reinforces positive perceptions and behavioral intentions. This process illustrates that gastrodiploamacy operates not merely as a representational tool but as a relational and affective practice, where meaning and influence are constructed through direct engagement.

Furthermore, the study reveals that gastrodiploamacy contributes significantly to nation branding and tourism promotion. Indonesian cuisine functions as a gateway for shaping destination image, stimulating interest, and influencing travel decisions. However, the study also identifies a structural gap between the strong performance of diaspora-led initiatives and the limited institutional support from the state. This gap suggests that while gastrodiploamacy is effective at the grassroots level, its strategic potential remains underutilized at the national

level. Overall, this study contributes to the literature by introducing the concept of lived soft power and proposing an experiential framework that integrates gastrodiplomacy with tourism promotion. It emphasizes that strengthening Indonesia's global presence requires not only recognizing the role of diaspora actors but also developing a more coordinated and sustainable policy approach.

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