



Indonesia's Public Diplomacy through WOW Indonesia! Festival: Nation Branding and its Implications for Bilateral Relations with the United States

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Abstract

Public diplomacy is an important instrument in strengthening the country's position and image amid the increasingly complex dynamics of international relations. Indonesia faces challenges in maximizing the power of culture as part of soft power to build a strong nation branding at the global level. This research aims to analyze the role of WOW Indonesia! Festival as Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy in building a positive image of the nation and strengthening bilateral relations with the United States. A qualitative approach with a desk study method was used to examine secondary data from official sources, state documents, and media reports. The results showed that the festival attracted more than 20,000 visitors and strengthened Indonesia's image as a democratic, multicultural and creative country through the promotion of arts, culture, culinary, and business forums. The event also encouraged the expansion of economic cooperation, education, and people-to-people relations. This research concludes that public diplomacy through international festivals can be a strategic instrument in strengthening the Indonesia-United States Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, as well as strengthening Indonesia's position in culture-based global diplomacy.

Keywords: *Public Diplomacy; Cultural Diplomacy; WOW Indonesia! Festival; Nation Branding; Bilateral Relations*

Introduction

In the current era of globalization, relations between countries are not only determined by military and economic power, but can also be influenced by a country's soft power, known as soft power. Soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye (1990), who emphasized that cultural appeals, values, and positive foreign policies can be used to build a country's image globally (Nye, 2008). Diplomacy itself is the main instrument in international relations that allows countries to achieve their national goals through dialogue, negotiation and cooperation (Abdurahmanli, 2021). Along with the development of the soft power concept comes the public diplomacy approach, which focuses on a country's engagement with the international community directly. Public diplomacy aims to build understanding, trust, and closer relationships with foreign audiences through various communication channels, including the media, educational exchange programs, and cultural and social initiatives (Hennida, 2009). Public diplomacy not

only serves as a means of foreign policy communication, but also as a long-term strategy in building a positive image of a country at the global level.

Public diplomacy can be implemented through cultural diplomacy, which can be a strategy for countries to strengthen their influence on the international stage. Cultural diplomacy is a form of diplomacy that prioritizes cultural approaches, human values, and human relations, or called people-to-people relations, to strengthen ties between countries (Yani & Lusiana, 2018). In an effort to establish cooperation with other countries, an appropriate instrument is needed for a country to strengthen cooperation with other countries. The success of a country's cooperation can be influenced by the culture or culture of the country. Cultural diplomacy can be an important instrument in building a country's branding in a positive direction so that it can affect relations with other countries. Using culture, such as the exchange of art and other cultural heritage, plays an important role in introducing a country's identity and strengthening relations between nations, as well as building a positive image of the country in the eyes of the international community.

Indonesia, as a country with very rich cultural diversity, consisting of various tribes, customs, languages, arts, and traditions has great potential to utilize cultural diplomacy in establishing relations with other countries and building a positive image of the country. This creates a strong foundation for Indonesia's cultural diplomacy and is able to strengthen ties between nations through the exchange of arts, culture and other cultural values. Indonesia has long been known as a country with abundant artistic and cultural wealth, and this has become a strategic asset that can build nation branding and strengthen international relations. One concrete form of this strategy is through the organization of WOW Indonesia! Festival 2024, an event that aims to promote Indonesian culture, arts, tourism, and creative economy in the United States. This festival is not only an art and cultural performance event, but also an instrument of cultural diplomacy that aims to enhance Indonesia's positive image in the eyes of the global community. Through the interactions that occur during the festival, a space for closer dialog and collaboration between Indonesia and the United States can be created.

Indonesia is a country that has abundant cultural wealth, but despite having a rich cultural heritage and having received UNESCO recognition for several cultural elements such as batik, angklung, and wayang, Indonesia's soft power is still insufficient in building its global influence. The Global Soft Power Index 2023 shows that Indonesia still lags behind other Asian countries in terms of cultural exposure, international promotion strategies, as well as the utilization of digital media in cultural diplomacy (Tempo, 2023). One of the main challenges is the lack of innovative and relevant approaches in introducing Indonesian culture to global audiences, especially for the younger generation who have different cultural consumption patterns. In today's digital era, young people tend to be more interested in learning about culture through interactive and contemporary hands-on experiences, such as music, art and culinary festivals compared to traditional approaches such as cultural exhibitions.

Festivals are an effective platform because they combine entertainment with cultural education in a more dynamic format that is easily accepted by all generations. Therefore, Indonesia's cultural promotion approach needs to adapt to global trends, where creative and modern aspects are key in attracting international audiences as a form of cultural diplomacy. As part of the efforts to strengthen Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in building the country's branding and strengthening bilateral relations, Indonesia organized WOW Indonesia! Festival, which is the first largest Indonesian festival in the United States. The theme "Celebrating Diversity, Strengthening Partnership" reflects Indonesia's cultural diversity as a diplomatic asset as well as a commitment to strengthen bilateral relations with the United States that will build bridges of understanding and closer collaboration between the two countries through the performance of Indonesian arts and culture.

The importance of this festival as part of a cultural diplomacy strategy was emphasized by the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, in her opening remarks for the WOW Indonesia!

Festival 2024. In her statement, Retno emphasized that the festival is not only a platform to promote Indonesia's rich culture, but also an important momentum to strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States. Quoted from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Portal, she stated:

“Although geographically separated by a large distance, Indonesia and the US have many similarities, including the diversity of society, tolerance, democracy and commitment to human rights and the rule of law. Indonesia and the US need to further strengthen their friendship, so that more mutually beneficial cooperation can be established and contribute to world peace and stability”

This statement explains that the festival is not only an instrument that aims to build nation branding, but also has a broader impact in strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries in various sectors.

During approximately 75 years of bilateral relations, Indonesia and the United States have achieved various collaborations (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Washington, D.C., n.d.). On November 28, 1801, the United States officially established its first consular office in Batavia, now Jakarta. Then in 1949, the United States recognized Indonesia's sovereignty after the proclamation of Indonesian independence on August 17, 1945, as well as the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries by exchanging ambassadors (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Washington, D.C., n.d.). Since then, the two countries have cooperated in various fields, including trade, investment, education, and defense. However, relations between countries are dynamic and can be affected by each country's foreign policy, domestic political changes, and global geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, public diplomacy through cultural diplomacy is a strategic instrument to ensure bilateral relations remain strong and stable amid global changes.

WOW Indonesia! Festival also not only showcases Indonesian arts and culture, but includes the Indonesia Business Forum as the closing event. The forum aims to bring together business people from both countries and open up opportunities for cooperation in the creative economy, tourism and trade sectors (Tribunnews.com, 2024). This shows that cultural diplomacy not only serves to enhance the country's image, but also has a direct impact on economic and business cooperation between Indonesia and the United States. The celebration of 75 years of bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States in 2024 through the WOW Indonesia! Festival is an important momentum to build Indonesia's branding and strengthen cooperation between the two countries, including through a cultural diplomacy approach. Therefore, this research will analyze how the WOW Indonesia! Festival plays a role in Indonesia's public diplomacy through cultural diplomacy and its impact on nation branding and bilateral relations between Indonesia-United States.

Theory

Public diplomacy is one of the strategies used in international relations to communicate foreign policy and influence public opinion in other countries, with the aim of building a positive image and strengthening bilateral relations between countries (Hennida, 2009). Public diplomacy is one of the instruments in soft power used to build positive relationships between a country and people in other countries through direct communication. According to Joseph Nye (2008), public diplomacy is part of a soft power strategy that aims to influence public opinion in other countries in a persuasive way, not through coercion or threats. Nye emphasizes that public diplomacy utilizes culture, political values, and foreign policy to create a positive appeal to the country (Nye, 2008).

In practice, public diplomacy does not only involve the Department of Foreign Affairs, but involves all stakeholders including cross-departmental government, private sector, NGOs, media, and

individuals (Hennida, 2009). The US State Department's Coordinator for Public Diplomacy highlights seven key pillars that need to be considered for public diplomacy to be successful in informing, engaging and influencing the international community. These seven pillars include policy coordination at the national level, a rational basis for policy, consistency and credibility of messages, prevention of contradictions in messaging, utilization of multiple communication channels, expansion of alliances with the private sector and non-state actors, and building a foundation of trust through dialogue and commitment (Hennida, 2009).

This research will focus on two main pillars that are relevant to the strategies used in the WOW Indonesia! Festival, namely the utilization of various communication channels and building a foundation of trust through dialogue and commitment through direct interaction in the festival series. The first pillar emphasizes the importance of using various communication media such as the internet, broadcasting, print publications, cultural and educational exchange programs, and activities that involve international talks. By utilizing these various channels, public diplomacy can reach a wider audience and ensure that messages are effectively received.

The festival utilizes various communication platforms such as social media, broadcasting, and live events to reach an international audience, particularly the American public. Through this approach, Indonesia seeks to introduce its culture more widely and build a positive image in the eyes of the world. The use of digital media in the festival also allowed for faster and more interactive dissemination of information, creating a more dynamic dialog between Indonesia and the American public. An important pillar in the success of the WOW Indonesia! Festival also includes building a foundation of trust through dialogue and commitment as an instrument of public diplomacy. Direct interaction with the American public through various cultural events and art exchanges allows for a closer, trust-based relationship. Through continued dialogue building, Indonesia can communicate its cultural values and national identity more effectively, which in turn can strengthen bilateral relations with the United States.

Public diplomacy involves the collection, processing and dissemination of information aimed at providing a better understanding of a country to the international community. This is done through various means, such as media broadcasting, cultural promotion, educational exchanges, and social media campaigns (Nye, 2008). Nye also emphasized that for public diplomacy to be effective, a country's cultural content, values, and policies must be appealing and relevant to the destination country, otherwise it could have the opposite effect. Public diplomacy is different from traditional diplomacy, which usually only involves communication between governments. Public diplomacy is more transparent and inclusive, involving non-state actors such as civil society, media, and even international organizations (M. Syaprin, 2017). In the current era of digitalization, public diplomacy is becoming increasingly important and complex as information becomes more widely accessible. Modern public diplomacy must utilize communication technologies such as the internet and social media to reach a global audience.

Public diplomacy theory is used in this research to analyze the soft power efforts made by Indonesia through the WOW Indonesia! Festival as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in strengthening nation branding so that it can have an impact on bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States. Cultural promotion, especially through the Festival, is a form of public diplomacy that aims to increase the American public's understanding of Indonesian culture, while strengthening Indonesia's positive image in the eyes of the international community. Through public diplomacy, the author seeks to see the importance of communication in building bilateral relations, especially through direct interaction with the people in the destination country. This research will also look at how Indonesia optimizes the Festival program to influence US public opinion towards Indonesia and communicate Indonesia's cultural values and national identity to the US public.

Concept

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a form of diplomacy that utilizes a country's cultural elements as a tool to build positive international relations. In international relations, cultural diplomacy is part of public diplomacy, where a country's influence is not only based on military or economic power, but also on its cultural appeal (Nye Jr, 2008). Countries that successfully carry out cultural diplomacy tend to be more easily accepted by people in other countries, because the approach used is persuasive and non-confrontational (Pajtinka, 2014). This diplomacy not only introduces culture as a symbol of national identity, but also as a tool to build social connections and strengthen international cooperation in various sectors.

This diplomacy is carried out by introducing art, traditions, languages, music, cuisine, and traditional clothing to the international community to create cross-cultural dialogue which can then become a means of art and cultural exchange (UNESCO, 2022).

“Cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” - Milton Cummings.

Cultural diplomacy aims to increase understanding and appreciation of other countries' cultures (Zamorano, 2016). By utilizing the universal aspects of culture, cultural diplomacy can facilitate more effective dialogue and collaboration between countries.

Cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening bilateral relations as it focuses on direct interaction between people which can create a more personal and emotional connection. This approach allows countries to reduce political barriers and ideological differences that are often an obstacle in formal diplomacy. By introducing local cultures, such as art, music, dance or traditional dress, cultural diplomacy aims to erase negative stereotypes and build mutual respect among the international community.

WOW Indonesia! Festival is used as an arts and cultural exchange platform that aims to introduce and promote Indonesian culture to the international community, especially the United States. The festival is part of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy by attempting to introduce various Indonesian cultures. During the WOW Indonesia! Festival, Indonesia did a lot of promotion to the people of the United States through local TV interviews, Embassy social media, and invited hundreds of US influencers and Indonesian influencers in the US to launch the WOW Indonesia! Festival to expand audience reach. On the day of the festival, various cultural elements were displayed, such as the performance of traditional musical instruments (angklung, gamelan, kolintang), regional dance performances, pencak silat performances, traditional clothing parades, cooking demonstrations of Indonesian specialties, a variety of food booths and local products, to various hands-on activities that can be done. Through a cultural diplomacy approach, this research will explore how the WOW Indonesia! Festival became a means of building cross-cultural understanding between the two countries.

Nation Branding

Nation branding is a strategic process used by countries to build and promote a positive image in international eyes (Kelechi, 2024). The concept involves managing public perceptions of a country, with the aim of attracting attention, investment, tourism, and increasing diplomatic influence. According to Anholt, in the formation of nation branding there are 6 aspects in it which include culture and cultural heritage, tourism, society, government, exports, and investment and immigration (Rahayu & Arianti, 2014). In building nation branding, aspects of culture and cultural heritage play an important role in

shaping a positive image of a country. Culture becomes a national identity that can be communicated globally to attract the attention of the international community so that it can have an impact on relations between countries. Countries that have a rich and unique culture tend to attract international attention more easily. Through effective communication, including the use of social media and marketing campaigns, countries can spread a consistent and compelling narrative to shape public perception. Thus, nation branding not only serves to increase the attractiveness of a country, but also to strengthen international relations and create mutually beneficial cooperation.

The research will focus on the use of WOW Indonesia! Festival as Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in building Indonesia's nation branding. Through the WOW Indonesia! Festival, various elements of Indonesian culture are introduced to the international community as part of the nation branding strategy in the aspect of culture and cultural heritage. The festival features a variety of artistic and cultural expressions that symbolize national identity and global appeal. WOW Indonesia! Festival plays a strategic role in shaping positive perceptions of Indonesia at the international level as it is the largest Indonesian festival ever organized abroad. With this approach, the WOW Indonesia! Festival is not only a cultural exchange event, but also a strategic instrument in building Indonesia's nation branding and shaping international perceptions that Indonesia is a country with a strong cultural heritage and culture, open to global collaboration, and innovative in maintaining its traditions. Strengthening this image can have a positive impact on various sectors, including tourism, the creative economy, and Indonesia's competitiveness in the international arena.

Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations are interactions that exist between two countries based on common interests in various fields, such as politics, economics, social, culture, and defense and security (Nurul, 2023). This relationship is reciprocal and based on the principles of equality and mutual benefit. In practice, bilateral relations can be realized through cooperation agreements, intergovernmental diplomacy, and various other forms of communication and coordination. In the political context, bilateral relations involve diplomacy, treaty negotiations, and cooperation on security issues, which create effective channels of communication and help resolve conflicts. On the economic side, bilateral relations include trade, investment, and economic cooperation, where a strong relationship can promote growth and stability for both countries. Social and cultural aspects also play an important role in building understanding and appreciation between the peoples of the two countries, through cultural exchange, education, and civil society interaction.

One of the key principles in bilateral relations is to achieve each country's national interests which can include increased trade, investment, security and regional stability. A good relationship is not only economically beneficial, but it can also enhance a country's image and reputation on the international stage. According to Keohane and Nye (2001), bilateral relations can be analyzed through various indicators, such as the level of trade, investment, political cooperation, and socio-cultural interactions that strengthen connectivity between the people of the two countries. In this study, bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States will be seen from socio-cultural indicators, which include cultural exchanges, community interactions, and efforts to build cross-cultural understanding and appreciation that will affect various aspects of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. This interaction is realized in the form of cultural festivals, art exchanges, education, and diplomacy that can strengthen relations between the two countries. Thus, the research will attempt to examine how the WOW Indonesia! Festival can be an instrument in strengthening bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States through socio-cultural channels.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis. This approach is used to understand the meaning, pattern, and context of Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy through the WOW Indonesia! Festival. According to John W. Creswell (2016), a qualitative approach aims to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social phenomenon in a specific context. This method is relevant to describe the processes, strategies and impacts of cultural diplomacy that are complex and cannot be measured quantitatively. Qualitative research aims to explore the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups in complex social situations (Murdiyanto, 2020).

Data collection techniques were conducted through library research, a method that relies on secondary data from various written sources such as books, scientific articles, official government reports, diplomatic documents, media publications, and digital archives relevant to the research topic. Data analysis was carried out qualitatively through content analysis interpretation of the sources that had been collected, then linked to the theoretical framework used. The researcher identified patterns, relationships, and narratives that emerged in the implementation of the WOW Indonesia! Festival as a practice of Indonesian public diplomacy. Data validity was strengthened by triangulating sources to ensure consistency of information from various documents and media used. This method was chosen because it was able to provide a deep contextual understanding of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy, as well as explain how the festival contributed to building nation branding and strengthening bilateral relations with the United States.

Bilateral Relations between Indonesia and United States

Indonesia and the United States have had 75 years of bilateral relations. Referring to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' report on Indonesia-United States Bilateral Relations, during approximately 75 years of bilateral relations, Indonesia and the United States have achieved various collaborations. The forerunner of relations between the two countries actually began long before Indonesia's independence, on November 28, 1801 the United States officially established its first consular office in Batavia (now Jakarta), which made it one of the first Western countries to open diplomatic representation in Indonesia. This fact shows that from the beginning, the Indonesian archipelago has been on the radar of the strategic interests of the United States, both economically and geopolitically, then official relations as a sovereign state began in 1949, when the United States recognized Indonesia's sovereignty after the proclamation of Indonesian independence on August 17, 1945. This moment was also the beginning of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries, marked by the exchange of ambassadors.

Cooperation between Indonesia and the United States began with the signing of the Economic Cooperation Agreement in December 1950. This agreement was part of the United States' foreign aid program as an instrument of soft power through the Mutual Security Act, which provided a legal basis for economic and technical support to Indonesia in the early days of post-independence development. It marks the first step of concrete cooperation between the two countries in Indonesia's development. Since the beginning of bilateral relations, the two countries have embraced important cultural cooperation and one of the most prominent milestones of cultural cooperation was the launch of the Fulbright Program in Indonesia in 1952, which was jointly administered by the two countries through the American Indonesian Exchange Foundation (AMINEF) and became one of the longest-running and most influential educational exchange programs between the two countries. The program aims to build mutual understanding and strengthen people-to-people relations through study and research scholarships in the United States for Indonesian citizens, as well as visits by American academics to Indonesia. Currently, more than 3,000 Indonesians have received Fulbright scholarships, and about 1,500 Americans have participated in the program (AMINEF, n.d.).

The relationship between Indonesia and the United States continues to develop over time. President Soekarno's first visit to the United States in 1956 was an important moment in strengthening bilateral relations politically and symbolically. Through this visit, President Soekarno made a speech before the US Congress, which not only marked diplomatic closeness, but also strengthened the exposure of Indonesian culture and national identity to the US public. This shows that in the context of state visits, cultural elements are also mobilized as instruments of diplomacy. Bilateral relations continued to be strengthened through multilateral and regional cooperation, in 1989, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was officially established by Indonesia together with the United States and 10 other countries. In 1994, President Bill Clinton visited Indonesia to attend the APEC Leaders' Summit as well as his state visit with President Soeharto, which symbolized the recognition of Indonesia's strategic position in the region. APEC focuses on economic integration, but in practice it also facilitates cultural exchange and increased tourism among its member economies.

In 1996, Indonesia and the United States officially signed the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). TIFA itself serves as a framework for expanding trade and investment and addressing disputes between the two countries. From then on, Indonesia and the United States regularly held meetings to discuss bilateral issues. On September 19, 2001, President Megawati Soekarnoputri made an official visit to the White House to meet with President George W. Bush. The visit took place amidst a tense global situation following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. This meeting was important because it marked the importance of cultural approaches as a tool to overcome global stereotypes of Muslims and Indonesia's position as an important US partner in combating extremism and in strengthening cooperation in the security and economic fields after the September 11 attacks. This is reflected in ongoing education and training cooperation between religious institutions, including the expansion of the Fulbright program to religious institutions through a Memorandum of Understanding between the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the US Embassy in 2025 (AMINEF, 2025).

The period 2009-2015 was an important time of consolidation of bilateral strategic relations. In 2009 Indonesia was officially inducted as a member of the G20, joining 19 other developed and developing countries and the European Union at a summit in London. Indonesia's membership in the G20 dates back to the forum's establishment at the finance minister level in 1999, but Indonesia's active participation at the country leader level began at the first G20 Summit in November 2008 in Washington, D.C. In 2010, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and President Barack Obama announced the Comprehensive Partnership. The initiative aims to deepen cooperation in various areas, including economy, trade, education and security.

In 2011, appreciation for Indonesia's cultural contributions was symbolically recognized by the city government of St. Louis, Missouri, by designating March 12 as Indonesia-United States Cultural Arts Exchange Day (Antara News, 2011). The designation of this special day reflects the acceptance of Indonesian culture in the civil society of the United States. In 2015, President Joko Widodo and President Barack Obama upgraded the bilateral relationship to a Strategic Partnership, expanding collaboration to regional and global issues. Entering the Indo-Pacific era in 2022, Indonesia officially joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to strengthen its engagement in the regional economy. Looking from the perspective of Indonesia's foreign strategy, while the IPEF initiative focuses on economic cooperation, participation in the IPEF also opens up more space for the promotion of culture as part of the region's identity.

The year 2023 marks a milestone in Indonesia's relationship with the United States. On November 13, 2023, President Joko Widodo and President Joe Biden announced the upgrade of the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) during a bilateral meeting at the White House. That same year, Indonesia and the United States hosted Super Garuda Shield, the largest joint military exercise in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries also signed a Defense Cooperation

Agreement (DCA) to strengthen military and security cooperation between the two countries. Cooperation is also carried out through culture which is not only focused on academic exchanges, but also the preservation of cultural heritage. The United States government officially provides grants through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) to support the conservation of cultural sites, manuscripts, and historical artifacts in Indonesia. One example is the cooperation in the restoration of the National Museum of Indonesia after the fire in 2023, which involved the Smithsonian Institution and the Tracing Patterns Foundation (Tempo, 2023).

In 2024, Indonesia and the United States celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations, a milestone that marks a long journey and important achievements in various fields of cooperation that have been established so far. This celebration not only reflects the diplomatic closeness of the two countries, but also illustrates how Indonesia-United States cooperation has evolved and adapted to global and regional dynamics. Commemorating 75 years of diplomatic relations, Indonesia organized the WOW Indonesia! Festival in Washington, D.C., which became a strategic platform for Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the United States. The festival combines elements of art, culinary, fashion, and promotion of MSMEs, while serving as a form of nation branding and promotion of the creative economy. This festival reflects how cultural cooperation not only functions as a strengthening of social relations, but also as an integrated foreign policy instrument.

Representation of Indonesian Culture in WOW Indonesia! Festival

Indonesia is a country rich in culture, encompassing various tribes, languages, customs, arts and traditions that have developed over the years. This diversity not only reflects national identity, but also becomes a strategic asset in international diplomacy. WOW Indonesia! Festival is a cultural initiative organized to celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and the United States, held on August 25, 2024. Commemorating this long history, Indonesia organized various activities such as the exhibition of rare Indonesian collections at the Library of Congress, the Indonesia Business Forum, and culminated in the WOW Indonesia! Festival as an effort to maintain good relations between Indonesia and the United States in various fields. Organized by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia together with the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Washington, D.C., this event is a concrete manifestation of Indonesia's commitment to introduce the richness and diversity of the archipelago's culture to the global stage, as well as a symbol of the close relationship between the two countries. The festival serves not only as a celebratory event, but also as a strategic platform to strengthen bilateral relations and promote positive cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries, which were established on December 28, 1949, have developed significantly, with both sides recognizing the importance of maintaining strong ties in various sectors (WOW Indonesia! Festival 2024, 2024). Cultural exchange is a key element in building understanding and goodwill between Indonesia and the United States. Throughout the years of Indonesia's cooperation with the United States, successful events and collaborations have emphasized the depth of ties between the two countries. Efforts by Indonesia and the United States have demonstrated a shared commitment to shared prosperity and global stability. These efforts range from business and investment agreements to education initiatives and joint military exercises (WOW Indonesia! Festival 2024, 2024).

Significant cultural exchanges, including music festivals, art exhibitions, and culinary fairs have highlighted the richness and diversity of Indonesian culture, while encouraging cross-cultural appreciation among American audiences. These successes are the basis for the WOW Indonesia! Festival, which aims to build on the legacy of cooperation and friendship between the two countries as they celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations. WOW Indonesia! Festival is the first major Indonesian cultural festival to be held in the United States. The festival was organized with the aim of introducing the richness of Indonesian culture such as music performances, dances, traditional clothing, tourism fragments, and Indonesian culinary specialties to the global community, especially the United States.



Image 1. Showcasing the vibrancy of the WOW Indonesia! Festival held in Washington, D.C., with the U.S. Capitol Building prominently in the background.

Note. Credit image by: HIPDI Indonesia

The specialty of WOW Indonesia! The festival is not only about its large scale, but also about its highly symbolic location. The festival's main stage was set in the U.S. Capitol, while the second stage was on Seventh Street, which borders Pennsylvania Avenue, one of the most historic and major thoroughfares in the U.S. capital. The special four-block closure of Pennsylvania Avenue to host an Indonesian cultural festival for the first time in the history of Indonesia-United States bilateral relations, marked an important moment in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy. The festival attracted more than 20,000 visitors from various backgrounds, including local American communities, the Indonesian diaspora, government officials, cultural figures, and representatives from various friendly countries (VOA Indonesia, 2024). The festival was opened by the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, who said that the festival was the culmination of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and the United States, and she emphasized the importance of strengthening people-to-people relations as the main foundation for future cooperation between the two countries (Niaga Asia, 2024).



Image 2. Showcasing Indonesia Culture through traditional fashion parade

Note. Credit image by: HIPDI Indonesia

The series of events in the WOW Indonesia! Festival is designed to provide an authentic and inclusive experience of Indonesian culture. The festival featured traditional art performances such as gamelan, kolintang, and angklung, as well as dances from various regions such as

Saman Dance from Aceh, Janger Dance from Bali, Reog Ponorogo from East Java, and Papuan dances. The cultural performance was also enlivened by the traditional fashion parade from Jember Fashion Carnaval (JFC), which displayed a variety of archipelago wastras with theatrical concepts, to a variety of traditional clothing from almost all regions in Indonesia used by parade volunteers. Not only presenting visual performances, the festival also provides participatory space through traditional craft workshops such as batik, face painting, traditional games, to the implementation of interactive angklung and pencak silat performances.



Image 3. Depicting the vibrant culinary scene at the WOW Indonesia! Festival.

Note. Credit image by: HIPDI Indonesia

WOW Indonesia! While the festival showcases many of Indonesia's cultures, one of the most prominent aspects of the festival is the culinary offerings of the archipelago showcased through food stands and cooking demonstrations. Visitors can sample a variety of Indonesian specialties such as rendang, satay, gudeg, gado-gado, and traditional snacks. Through this approach, the festival not only became an entertainment and educational event, but also an effective means of branding Indonesia through introducing Indonesian flavors and traditions to the international community. Musicians and artists from the country also participated in the festival, such as Andien, Aurelie Moeremans, Stephanie Poetri, Warren Hue, Kristin Delaware and Ronald Steven, also saxophonist Yuyun George. The presence of these artists not only enhanced the appeal of the event, but also demonstrated Indonesia's capacity to bring traditional and contemporary art to a dynamic and professional international stage.

Not only a cultural celebration, WOW Indonesia! Festival is also a forum for the promotion of the creative economy and the development of MSMEs. This festival presents micro, small, and medium enterprises from Indonesia who participate in introducing their superior products to the international public, especially the United States, ranging from fashion, crafts, to Indonesian food. The festival also collaborates with a number of large national companies such as Pertamina, BNI, Mayora, Artha Graha, and Telkomsel who are media partners in promoting Indonesia in the United States. This effort also expands global market access and strengthens the culture-based economy.

Indonesia's cultural diplomacy through the WOW Indonesia! Festival reflects the application of the pillar of public diplomacy that focuses on direct interaction with the international community. According to Joseph Nye (2008), public diplomacy aims to influence public opinion in other countries through persuasive, rather than coercive, approaches. The festival serves as a platform to introduce Indonesian culture without coercion, which is part of the cultural diplomacy strategy. Through performances of Indonesian art, traditions, and cuisine, the festival seeks to create a cross-cultural dialogue that can strengthen relations with the United States. Indonesia's approach demonstrates an effort

to instill national cultural values through participatory and emotional methods, targeting civil society as the main audience. The WOW Indonesia! Festival not only introduces the richness of Indonesian culture at large, but also emphasizes the role of culture as an instrument of diplomacy in strengthening Indonesia's bilateral relations with the United States and reflects that the power of culture can transcend geographical boundaries and become a strategic bridge in building trust, solidarity, and sustainable collaboration.

Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding Strategy through WOW Indonesia! Festival

WOW Indonesia! Festival 2024 held on August 25, 2024 in the heart of the United States capital, Washington, D.C., became one of the important milestones of Indonesia's public diplomacy in celebrating 75 years of diplomatic relations with the United States. The festival is not only a cultural celebration, but also a strategic public diplomacy tool that shows how Indonesia utilizes the power of culture as an instrument of diplomacy and nation branding. The organization of the WOW Indonesia! Festival represents a concrete form of the implementation of soft power-based Indonesian public diplomacy, which relies on the power of culture in building closer international perceptions and relations, and acts as a strategic instrument in strengthening Indonesia's image through intensive and participatory cultural communication. This is in line with the concept of public diplomacy proposed by Joseph Nye (2008), which is part of soft power that aims to influence the public opinion of other countries through cultural appeal. The success of the WOW Indonesia! Festival in attracting more than 20.000 visitors, shows how culture can be a bridge between nations. Traditional dances from Aceh, Java, Bali, to Papua, as well as musical performances such as gamelan, angklung, and kolintang, to performances by top musicians such as Andien, Stephanie Poetri, and Warren Hue became important elements in this festival. The combination of Indonesian traditional art and contemporary music reflects the image of Indonesia that is not only rich in culture, but also modern, open, and creative, as the values to be conveyed in Indonesia's nation branding strategy.

Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi's statement at the opening of the WOW Indonesia! Festival is an important reinforcement. The Minister emphasized that this festival is not just a cultural celebration, but a form of long-term diplomacy strategy that places culture as the cornerstone of strengthening Indonesia's relations with the United States. She emphasized the importance of people-to-people relations as the foundation of strategic partnerships, and said that this festival is a way for Indonesia to show its peaceful, tolerant, democratic, and multicultural face, where these values are the main strength in Indonesia's global image (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2024).

WOW Indonesia! Festival is part of the soft power approach through public diplomacy. This festival not only shows the uniqueness of Indonesian culture but also becomes an effective communication medium to convey the values of peace, tolerance, and diversity. In line with the theory of public diplomacy proposed by Joseph Nye (2008), utilizing culture, political values, and foreign policy can create a positive attraction to a country. Indonesia utilizes non-political aspects such as culture to build a positive image and wider diplomatic influence in the eyes of the international community, especially the United States. Through the performance of traditional arts, culinary specialties, and direct interaction with the people of the United States, Indonesia managed to influence public opinion in the country persuasively, not through force or threats. This kind of cultural power is more effective in shaping opinions and influencing foreign communities than the hard power approach.

Promotional activities for the WOW Indonesia! Festival are also not only limited to the day of implementation or only through social media, however, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Washington, D.C., also runs a series of intensive promotions as part of an integrated public diplomacy strategy. Promotion was carried out through various local television broadcasts in the United States such as FOX 5 DC and WUSA9 with the direct involvement of the Ad Interim Chargé d'Affaires of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C., Ida Bagus Sade Bimantara, in media interviews to introduce

Indonesian culture to the entire audience. The Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C., also held a launch event to officially launch the festival at the Embassy Building. At the event, a number of influencers were invited from among American citizens and the Indonesian diaspora in the US. Guests were invited to enjoy a sneak peek of Indonesian culture such as tasting Indonesian specialties, participating in batik making through a short workshop, regional dance and music performances, and invited to play the traditional Indonesian musical instrument *angklung* through an interactive session.

The promotional steps taken by Indonesia through the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C., show the utilization of a more modern approach to public diplomacy, namely diplomacy that is no longer only centered on state actors, but also involves the community, media, and other public figures as agents of influence and cultural narratives. The presence of influencers and making them part of the promotion, Indonesia was able to reach a wider audience, especially the younger generation who are active users of social media. This strategy not only increases the visibility of the event, but also reinforces the impression that Indonesia is a friendly, open and colorful country (VOA Indonesia, 2024). It also shows how diplomacy is currently shifting from the exclusivity of state actors to collaboration across national elements.

WOW Indonesia! Festival was also a venue for the implementation of Indonesia's nation branding. Through visual representations such as the cultural parade from Jember Fashion Carnaval and the appearance of traditional clothing, Indonesia conveyed an important message about harmonious diversity. The participation of Indonesian micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the festival also shows that culture is not just an expression of identity, but also an economic asset that can be introduced to the global market. Products such as batik, coffee, spices, and handicrafts became a means of promoting local products and Indonesia's creative economy. WOW Indonesia! Festival also showed the strength of synergy between actors with the collaboration between the Indonesian government through the Indonesian Embassy, cultural actors, diaspora communities, and the private sector which reflects the whole-of-nation approach, which illustrates that diplomacy can be carried out by all elements of the nation.

The organization of the WOW Indonesia! Festival 2024 can be seen as a strategic articulation of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy packaged in a contemporary public diplomacy approach. This festival does not only celebrate symbolic bilateral relations, but plays a deeper representational function, namely shaping positive perceptions of Indonesia through multi-channel, participatory and effective cultural communication. Referring to Joseph Nye's soft power framework, effective public diplomacy must be able to touch shared values, build emotional connections, and convey national narratives credibly. This festival fulfills these three aspects through authentically displayed cultural content, direct participation of visitors through various interactive activities, as well as diplomacy narratives in and diversity that are consistently conveyed by state actors through the opening of the festival by state officials such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charge d'Affaires of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C., Minister of Cooperatives and MSMEs, Ambassadors of friendly countries, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials, representatives of US officials, and cultural activists from the United States (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2024).

WOW Indonesia! The festival successfully implemented two important pillars of public diplomacy according to Nye, first, the utilization of multi-channel communication channels such as social media, local television (FOX 5 DC and WUSA9), and promotion through diaspora and influencers. According to research by M. Syaprin (2017), the use of media in public diplomacy is very important to disseminate information and build a positive image of the country. Through the involvement of influencers and the use of social media and local channels, the festival attracted more than 20,000 visitors, demonstrating the effectiveness of the communication strategy used. The second pillar is trust building through direct participation in cultural promotion, according to research from Zamorano (2016), cultural diplomacy aims to increase understanding and appreciation of other countries' cultures. Through batik

workshops, music and dance performances, angklung interactions, and culinary tastings of the archipelago, this approach creates a people-to-people relations space that strengthens the emotional connection between the people of the two countries.

WOW Indonesia! The festival also represents a nation branding strategy based on the six main dimensions proposed by Simon Anholt, namely culture and heritage, tourism, society, government, exports, and investment and immigration. The festival showcases Indonesian culture through art performances such as gamelan, kolintang, reog ponorogo, and dances from various regions (Aceh, Bali, Papua); introduces various tourist destinations in Indonesia; and involves MSME players as well as large companies such as Pertamina and Artha Graha Network and other companies in expanding the reach of local products and investment promotion. This strategy shows a comprehensive branding effort, where culture becomes a bridge to economic promotion, tourism, exports, investment, and social diplomacy.

Looking from a nation branding perspective, the festival facilitated what is referred to as experiential branding, which is the shaping of country perceptions through direct experiences that are emotional and participatory. With more than 20,000 visitors from various backgrounds, the festival did not just build an image through symbols and messages, but created real attachments through activities that touched various senses. This experience is important in forming a deep and lasting impression of Indonesia's image as a culturally rich, open and dynamic nation. Strategically, the choice of location on Pennsylvania Avenue is symbolically and geopolitically significant, as it is one of the most historic and political streets in the United States, with the closure of four blocks of the main street for the festival reflecting recognition of the importance of Indonesia-United States relations and marking Indonesia's symbolic presence in a global powerhouse.

The success of the WOW Indonesia! Festival has a long-term impact on the relationship between Indonesia and the United States. The direct experience of the American people with Indonesian culture through this festival opens up new opportunities for increased cooperation in various fields such as education, tourism, creative industries, and even trade. Through the people-to-people relations approach, Indonesia places people as the main subject in international relations, forming emotional bonds and understanding that is broader than just inter-governmental relations. Thus, the WOW Indonesia! Festival is not only a symbol of celebration of bilateral relations, but also a concrete practice of public diplomacy that brings together cultural, economic, and communication aspects in one place. The festival demonstrates how Indonesia strategically builds its global image through a creative, inclusive and long-term approach. This commitment strengthens Indonesia's position as an active and competitive actor in culture-based international diplomacy.

Implications of the WOW Indonesia! Festival for Bilateral Relations between Indonesia and the United States

Bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United States have a very strategic role in strengthening the partnership between the two countries in various sectors. Public diplomacy has developed into an important instrument in strengthening bilateral relations that does not involve state actors but also the wider community. WOW Indonesia! Festival became a concrete practice of the soft power-based public diplomacy strategy described by Nye (2008), in which culture, political values, and foreign policy are used persuasively to influence public opinion in other countries without coercion. The festival emphasized that Indonesia's soft power lies in its cultural diversity, openness, and commitment to the values of peace and tolerance.

WOW Indonesia! The Festival serves as one of the effective instruments of public and cultural diplomacy in strengthening social and cultural relations between the two countries. The festival reflects Indonesia's efforts in achieving national interests through a soft power approach, which is also reflected in the policies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Strategic Plan 2020-2024. WOW Indonesia! Festival is not

only a tool to introduce Indonesia's rich culture, but also supports the achievement of various goals in bilateral relations, especially in the fields of cultural diplomacy, economics, education, and people-to-people relations. One of the objectives of the Strategic Plan is to build a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of the global community and strengthen people-to-people relations with strategic partners, such as the United States, so as to maintain bilateral relations beyond formal diplomatic channels.

The presence of key figures, including Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Director General of Foreign Affairs in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Global Talent Management Marcia Bernicat, as well as other high-ranking U.S. and Indonesian officials at the festival, emphasized the symbolic as well as substantial dimensions of the event as a tool of cultural diplomacy through public diplomacy. In her remarks, Foreign Minister Retno said that the festival represented the 'peaceful, democratic and tolerant face of Indonesia', a strategic narrative built to shape US public perception of Indonesia as a stable and trustworthy global partner and emphasized the importance of strengthening people-to-people relations as the main foundation of the long-term partnership between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). WOW Indonesia! Festival fills the space of cooperation in the social and cultural dimensions, two important pillars that form an emotional bridge between the countries. Looking at the framework of Indonesia-United States relations, the festival is an informal platform that complements formal mechanisms such as high-level dialogues and cooperation agreements. The strengthening of the US public's perception of Indonesia as a plural, peaceful, and creative country indirectly contributes to increased strategic trust between the two countries.

The presence of more than 50 Indonesian creative economy players in this festival also shows that cultural diplomacy can help improve cooperation in the economic field. The festival provided a space for Indonesian businesses to explore the American market, promote superior products, and attract local investors. This is relevant to the focus of Indonesia's economic diplomacy to expand market access and investment, especially from major trading partners such as the United States. WOW Indonesia! Festival also succeeded in creating interactions between the wider community, including academics, students, diaspora, and local US citizens. Through an inclusive cultural approach, the event strengthened people-to-people contact, which the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes is key to the long-term sustainability of bilateral relations.

More than just cultural promotion, the WOW Indonesia! Festival also paved the way for economic cooperation through the Indonesia Business Forum, which was held the day after the festival on August 26, 2024. The forum brings together businesses from both countries, including representatives from the creative industry, tourism, energy and technology sectors. The forum aims to bring together Indonesian businesses with potential investors and partners from the United States such as Apple, Disney, Google, Ford, Freeport, Mastercard, VISA, ExxonMobil, Lockheed Martin, and Trinitan Green Energi Metals to strengthen networks and open two-way investment opportunities (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2024). This underscores the role of the WOW Indonesia! Festival not only as an instrument of public diplomacy, but also as an entry point for broader cooperation and has a correlation with the creation of economic diplomacy space.

The Indonesia Business Forum strengthens bilateral relations in the economic sector, which is one of the priorities in the Indonesia-United States strategic partnership. In a bilateral relationship of mutual interest, this forum expands the potential for deeper and more sustainable economic cooperation, especially in sectors that are the focus of the Indonesian government. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) shows that Indonesia's non-oil and gas exports to the United States in August 2024 reached USD\$2.61 billion or an increase of 22.45% compared to the previous year, with the batik sector contributing 74.75% of total national batik exports, thus reflecting the real impact of cultural promotion on increasing exports. (BPS, 2024).

The organization of the Indonesia Business Forum, a direct continuation of the WOW Indonesia! Festival also had an impact on long-standing economic commitments. This economic commitment is reflected in Indonesia's strategic steps in expanding the network of national financial institutions in the United States, namely with the launch of BNI's new office in New York as a symbol of post-festival consolidation of bilateral economic diplomacy. The launch of the BNI New York Agency was held in February 2025 and was attended by US business people, showing that the Indonesia-US cooperation relationship is deepening and mutually beneficial (KBRI Washington, D.C., n.d.). WOW Indonesia! Festival serves as an initial bridge that builds a positive image and encourages interest in investment opportunities in Indonesia.

In the education sector, bilateral connections are strengthened through academic cooperation and student exchanges. Referring to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs report "Strengthening Bridges Between Indonesia and the US Through Education and Diplomacy", educational cooperation is also an important pillar of bilateral relations (Indonesian Embassy in Washington, D.C., 2025). Student exchanges, scholarship programs, and higher education institution partnerships demonstrate that the Indonesia-United States bilateral relationship continues to grow at the people-to-people level, and the WOW Indonesia! Festival strengthens this dimension through the engagement of the Indonesian diaspora and student community in the US. The festival serves as an informal interaction space that introduces Indonesia culturally to US youth and academics, thus indirectly supporting educational cooperation. The synergy between cultural and academic approaches, which is also reflected in activities such as the Indonesia Focus Conference, also strengthens the knowledge diplomacy dimension that is the foundation of long-term relationships.

The series of activities and implications of the WOW Indonesia! Festival shows that Indonesia's public diplomacy has moved towards a more participatory and multidimensional direction. The festival does not only act as a cultural promotion, but as a multifunctional instrument in supporting Indonesia's foreign policy agenda, strengthening the nation's image, opening economic opportunities, and building socio-cultural closeness, all of which are important pillars in maintaining and developing Indonesia's bilateral relations with the United States in a comprehensive manner. The organization of the Indonesia Business Forum as part of a series of activities, as well as follow-up initiatives such as the launch of the BNI New York office and increased academic cooperation, shows that the impact of this festival is multi-sectoral and sustainable. This reflects that soft power-based public diplomacy can support the achievement of Indonesia's national interests and strengthen the foundation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries (Nye Jr, 2008). In line with the concept of bilateral relations by Keohane and Nye (2001), sustainable two-state cooperation requires the involvement of cross-sector actors and varied communication channels. Thus, the WOW Indonesia! Festival can be positioned as a meeting point between cultural strengths and the direction of Indonesia's foreign policy that encourages the creation of bilateral relations that are more inclusive, mutually beneficial, and long-term oriented.

Conclusion

WOW Indonesia! Festival is a concrete manifestation of Indonesia's culture-based public diplomacy in building positive nation branding and strengthening bilateral relations with the United States. The festival represents the utilization of cultural strength as a form of soft power, delivered through a communicative, participatory, and multichannel approach. The participation WOW Indonesia! Festival is a concrete manifestation of Indonesia's culture-based public diplomacy in building positive nation branding and strengthening bilateral relations with the United States. The festival represents the utilization of cultural strength as a form of soft power, delivered through a communicative, participatory, and multichannel approach. The participation

The communication strategy implemented through social media, influencer engagement, and cooperation with local media shows Indonesia's responsiveness to the dynamics of contemporary public diplomacy. The festival shows that culture-based public diplomacy is not just about building an image, but also creating emotional connections between communities by strengthening people-to-people relations that have an impact on long-term bilateral relations. Direct interaction through cultural activities bridges geographical and ideological differences, and opens space for more equal and friendly cross-cultural dialogue. This approach effectively supports the strengthening of the foundation of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Indonesia and the United States, and emphasizes culture as an instrument of diplomacy capable of constructively navigating the dynamics of international relations.

This research proves that cultural diplomacy can make a multidimensional contribution to bilateral relations if implemented strategically and inclusively. Further research development can be directed at comparative studies of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in various countries. A qualitative approach with primary data collection, such as interviews or audience surveys, will provide a deeper understanding of public perceptions. The study of the role of digital media in shaping the country's image also needs to be a focus in the context of contemporary public diplomacy.

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