

Indonesia's Gastrodiplomacy in a Constructivist Framework: A Form of National Identity Strengthening

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Informasi Artikel

ABSTRAK

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Penelitian ini menganalisis gastrodiplomasi Indonesia dalam kerangka konstruktivisme sebagai bentuk penguatan identitas bangsa di tingkat global. Berangkat dari keterbatasan pendekatan realisme dan liberalisme yang cenderung menempatkan makanan sebagai instrumen sekunder dalam politik internasional, studi ini menegaskan bahwa kuliner merupakan medium sosial yang sarat makna, mampu membentuk persepsi dan identitas melalui interaksi lintas budaya. Dengan menggunakan metode studi pustaka, penelitian menelaah berbagai literatur akademik dan kebijakan resmi, khususnya program Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) sebagai kasus utama. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa gastrodiplomasi Indonesia tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai instrumen soft power untuk meningkatkan ekspor rempah serta memperluas jaringan restoran Indonesia di luar negeri, tetapi juga sebagai praktik konstruktif yang mereproduksi narasi historis Indonesia sebagai bangsa rempah. Melalui interaksi antara aktor negara dan non-negara—termasuk diaspora, pelaku industri kuliner, media, dan komunitas internasional—makanan menjadi simbol yang mengomunikasikan nilai-nilai keramahtamahan, keberagaman, dan kreativitas bangsa. Dengan demikian, gastrodiplomasi berperan memperkuat nation branding sekaligus membangun identitas Indonesia secara dialogis di ruang internasional.

ABSTRAK

Keywords:

*Constructivism,
Gastrodiplomacy, Indonesia
Spice Up the World, National
Identity, Soft Power*

This study analyzes Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy within a constructivist framework as a form of strengthening national identity at the global level. Departing from the limitations of realist and liberal approaches that tend to place food as a secondary instrument in international politics, this research argues that cuisine is a meaningful social medium capable of shaping perceptions and identity through cross-cultural interactions. Using a literature review method, the study examines academic publications and official policy documents, particularly the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program as the main case. The findings show that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy functions not only as a soft power instrument to increase spice exports and expand the network of Indonesian restaurants abroad, but also as a constructive practice that reproduces Indonesia's historical narrative as a spice nation. Through interactions between state and non-state actors including the diaspora, culinary entrepreneurs, media, and international communities, food becomes a symbol that communicates the values of hospitality, diversity, and creativity. Thus, gastrodiplomacy contributes to nation branding while simultaneously building Indonesia's identity in a dialogical manner within the international arena.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, diplomacy has undergone a profound transformation. Once understood primarily as a formal arena of interaction among states, diplomacy has expanded into broader and more dynamic forms that incorporate social, cultural, and even everyday dimensions of society. One of the emerging developments in this context is gastrodiplomacy, namely the practice of using food and culinary traditions as instruments to build a country's image, influence, and identity in the international sphere. The term became popular after *The Economist* published its 2002 article "Thailand's Gastro-Diplomacy," which highlighted how the Thai government launched the Global Thai campaign to promote national cuisine as a tool of nation branding (*The Economist*, 2002). This initiative marked an important milestone that introduced cuisine as a soft power instrument at the global level.

Conceptually, gastrodiplomacy is understood as a branch of public diplomacy that employs food as a medium of cross-border cultural communication. Rockower (2011) defines it as "winning hearts and minds through stomachs," emphasizing that food can serve as a universal language that fosters emotional connection between states and international audiences. Through sensory experiences such as tasting food or attending culinary festivals, global publics encounter not only the distinctive flavors of a nation but also the values, history, and identity embedded within them. Gastrodiplomacy thus extends beyond the commercial promotion of culinary products; it constructs narratives about who a nation is and what it represents. Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), gastrodiplomacy reflects a paradigm shift from diplomacy based on hard power to diplomacy grounded in cultural attraction, or soft power (Trihartono et al., 2022; Baskoro, 2017). The concept draws on Joseph Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, which emphasizes a nation's ability to influence others through the appeal of its values, culture, and policies rather than coercion. Under this framework, food functions as a symbolic instrument that produces cultural meanings and shapes public perceptions of a country.

In Western scholarship, research on gastrodiplomacy has developed rapidly since the 2000s. Countries such as Thailand, South Korea, Japan, and Peru have been pioneers in utilizing cuisine as a tool of public diplomacy. Zhang (2015), in the *International Journal of Communication*, maps gastrodiplomacy campaigns in six countries and demonstrates how

food serves as an effective medium for constructing national narratives through government programs, diaspora restaurants, and culinary festivals. As he notes, “food is a medium through which nations communicate cultural values, authenticity, and cosmopolitanism.” In other words, food acts as a cultural text that negotiates identity between nations and global publics.

Western scholarship also highlights the diversity of approaches in gastrodiplomacy. South Korea, for instance, integrates cuisine into the Hallyu Wave by promoting kimchi and other Korean dishes to support its entertainment industry and tourism. Japan advances Washoku diplomacy, emphasizing harmony, simplicity, and health as national characteristics (Zhang, 2015). Peru’s “Cocina Peruana Para el Mundo” campaign seeks to position the country as the culinary hub of Latin America (Wilson, 2011). These practices demonstrate that gastrodiplomacy is not merely economic promotion but a form of cultural politics that ties taste to identity.

Unlike these countries, Indonesia’s gastrodiplomacy has only begun to evolve systematically in the past decade. Yet Indonesia possesses a long history of culinary exchange dating back to the spice trade and colonial periods. Implicit forms of culinary diplomacy existed as early as President Sukarno’s era, for example when Indonesian dishes were served to foreign delegates at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung as symbols of solidarity and postcolonial friendship (Alinea.id, 2020). However, policies that explicitly position cuisine as a diplomatic tool emerged only under President Joko Widodo with the launch of the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program in 2021.

ISUTW was initiated by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy in collaboration with other ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade, and the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs. The program aims to increase spice exports to USD 2 billion and establish 4,000 Indonesian restaurants abroad by 2024 (Kemenparekraf, 2021). In addition to its economic goals, ISUTW seeks to reaffirm Indonesia’s identity as a “spice nation” and a “center of tropical gastronomy.” According to Yayusman (2024), the strategy represents a significant transformation in Indonesia’s public diplomacy from passive cultural promotion to active, inclusive, and collaborative diplomacy involving the diaspora, microbusinesses, and international communities.

Beyond ISUTW, several other gastrodiplomacy practices in Indonesia have gained relevance. For example, Nasi Padang Diplomacy was promoted during the Dubai Expo 2021 as part of Indonesia's tourism and cultural identity campaign (Saputra, 2021). Indonesian diaspora restaurants in Australia, the Netherlands, and the United States also serve as frontline agents spreading Indonesia's flavors to the world (Trihartono et al., 2020). Through initiatives such as Indonesia Spice Week, Nusantara food festivals, and social media content by food influencers, Indonesian cuisine is positioned not only as a cultural product but also as a narrative of identity reflecting national values of hospitality, diversity, and creativity.

Despite these developments, academic studies on Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy remain relatively limited, particularly from an IR theoretical perspective. Most existing research focuses on program descriptions and economic policy outcomes, while aspects of identity and meaning construction are rarely explored. Yet constructivism in IR offers a powerful framework to understand gastrodiplomacy as a social practice that shapes and reproduces national identity. From a constructivist standpoint, international political actions are driven not only by material interests but also by ideas, norms, and meanings constructed socially (Wendt, 2012). Food, in this context, can be understood as a social symbol that produces representations of "Indonesianness" in the eyes of the world.

Accordingly, this study examines Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy through a constructivist lens to explain how culinary-based diplomacy contributes to the formation and reinforcement of national identity in the international arena. A constructivist approach is particularly suitable because it emphasizes how ideas, meaning, and identities are socially produced through interaction rather than determined solely by material interest or institutional arrangements. By viewing gastrodiplomacy as a constructive practice—one that generates meaning through interactions among state and non-state actors—this study goes beyond policy analysis to explore the discursive space in which Indonesia's national identity is negotiated, exchanged, and recognized by global audiences.

Literature Review

Studies on gastrodiplomacy have emerged as part of a broader paradigm shift in International Relations (IR), particularly through increased recognition of non-material forms of influence in global affairs. Two major theoretical perspectives—realism and liberalism—

initially offer contrasting understandings of the relevance of cultural elements, including food, in international politics.

From a realist perspective, international relations are dominated by material power calculations and rational pursuit of national interests. Realists view states as rational actors seeking to maximize power (Morgenthau & Nations, 1948). Because their focus lies on military, economic, and security capabilities, cultural diplomacy—including gastrodiplomacy—is considered secondary and even irrelevant in shaping state behavior. Food, within this view, lacks substantive political capacity because it does not directly contribute to the distribution of power within the international system. Thus, the role of gastrodiplomacy under realism is limited to symbolic value that does not significantly affect global power structures (Nye, 2004).

In contrast, liberalism argues that international interaction is shaped not only by military power but also by cooperation, institutions, and norms. Within this framework, gastrodiplomacy becomes a component of public diplomacy and soft power, where states cultivate a positive image to gain legitimacy and global influence. Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion.” Through this lens, food becomes a symbolic means of communicating national values and identity to international audiences. This concept has been widely adopted in the foreign policy of several Asian countries. Thailand, for example, utilized restaurants and culinary promotion through its Global Thai Program (2002) to enhance national branding and increase food-related exports (The Economist, 2002). Rockower (2011) describes this initiative as “gastrodiplomacy: winning hearts and minds through stomachs,” emphasizing that modern diplomacy extends beyond negotiation tables to everyday cultural experience.

Zhang (2015) reinforces liberal arguments by showing that gastrodiplomacy operates at the intersection of statecraft and nation branding, where governments use cuisine to foster peaceful relations and build cross-cultural understanding. Japan’s Washoku diplomacy, South Korea’s Hansik Globalization Project, and Peru’s Cocina Peruana Para el Mundo demonstrate how culinary diplomacy supports creative economies and tourism industries. Yet, these studies still conceptualize food as an instrument deployed by the state to advance external strategic goals, rather than as a social practice that actively constructs national identity.

Both realism and liberalism therefore interpret gastrodiplomacy within a rationalist framework: realism dismisses it due to its non-material nature, while liberalism considers it useful as a soft power tool to influence others. However, both perspectives overlook the social dimension of gastrodiplomacy—its role in creating ideas, meanings, and identity through practice. This gap is where constructivism offers a deeper analytical lens. Constructivism emerged in the late 1980s as a critique of the material determinism of realism and liberalism. Its leading thinkers, such as Alexander Wendt (2012), argue that the international system is not made solely of material forces, but of ideas, norms, and identities constructed through social interaction. In this view, “anarchy is what states make of it,” meaning that global political realities are the result of shared interpretations (Renyoet et al., 2025). Within this context, gastrodiplomacy can be understood as a social practice that constructs meanings of nationhood through food. National identity is not fixed; it is produced and negotiated through cultural symbols and practices. Food functions as a central medium through which meanings of “Indonesianness,” “hospitality,” “plurality,” and “spice heritage” are communicated and exchanged internationally.

Zhang (2015) notes that gastrodiplomacy is not merely about taste, but about constructing “cultural scripts” that shape how other nations perceive identity. Through a constructivist lens, programs such as Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) are not simply economic strategies, but symbolic articulations that reaffirm Indonesia’s identity as a spice nation. According to Yayusman (2024), interactions between government actors, diaspora communities, and global audiences create networks of meaning in which national identity is socially produced and recognized. Constructivism also broadens the scope of diplomacy by giving agency to non-state actors, such as diaspora communities, chefs, and culinary practitioners. These actors contribute to meaning-making and identity formation beyond formal state channels. Rockower (2012) characterizes gastrodiplomacy as a social practice that “humanizes states,” where individuals act as informal ambassadors who strengthen national values through culinary interactions. From this perspective, the significance of gastrodiplomacy lies not only in promotion, but in its ability to mediate identity and emotion. It becomes a communicative process that produces mutual understanding, solidarity, and symbolic recognition of a nation in the global arena. Constructivism thus enables an interpretation of gastrodiplomacy as a dynamic process of meaning-making rather than merely a foreign policy strategy.

Research on Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy remains relatively recent and is dominated by descriptive studies focusing on cultural promotion and economic aspects. Much of the existing work examines diaspora practices or state programs, but rarely addresses identity formation and the construction of meaning. Yet, in contemporary diplomacy, identity serves as a key element that determines the legitimacy and sustainability of soft power. Moreover, existing scholarship tends to portray gastrodiplomacy as a global phenomenon driven by major campaigns from countries like Thailand, Korea, and Japan. Narratives of developing states such as Indonesia remain marginal, leaving open academic space to interpret Indonesian gastrodiplomacy through social theories such as constructivism (Yayusman et al., 2023; Prameswari & Yani, 2023; Meganingratna & Anugrahningtyas, 2023; Adawiyah & Rais, 2023; Baskoro, 2022; Kania, 2021; Shanaz, 2021; Imanuela & Aryani, 2020; Trihartono et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study occupies an important position in enriching gastrodiplomacy literature by offering two key contributions. First, it interprets Indonesian gastrodiplomacy as a social practice that shapes national identity through culinary symbols and cross-cultural interaction. Second, it expands the discussion of cultural diplomacy by conceptualizing cuisine as a space of meaning construction connecting the state, society, and global communities. Within a constructivist framework, this study integrates analysis of the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program to examine how culinary diplomacy function not only to enhance national image, but also as a process of re-imagining the nation within international setting. Existing studies on Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy have primarily examined its policy orientation, economic objectives, and the role of diaspora and culinary actors in supporting national branding and export promotion (e.g., Yayusman et al., 2023; Yayusman and Mulyasari, 2024; Kemenparekraf, 2021). While these works provide valuable insights into the implementation and outcomes of Indonesia's culinary diplomacy, they tend to emphasize instrumental and programmatic aspects. Limited attention has been paid to gastrodiplomacy as a social practice through which national identity is constructed, negotiated, and communicated in international relations. This study addresses this gap by adopting a constructivist perspective to analyze Indonesian gastrodiplomacy—particularly through the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program—as a process of meaning-making and identity formation in the international arena.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a library research method to analyze Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy within a constructivist framework. The research relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from academic journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and official government documents related to gastrodiplomacy, public diplomacy, and national identity. The primary case examined in this study is the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program, which represents Indonesia's most systematic gastrodiplomacy initiative in the contemporary period. The sources analyzed include official publications, policy briefs, and reports issued by institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as international and national academic publications that discuss gastrodiplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and identity formation.

Key academic literature informing the analytical framework of this study includes Rockower (2011; 2012) on gastrodiplomacy as a form of public diplomacy, Zhang (2015) on culinary diplomacy and national narrative construction, Nye (2004) on soft power, and Wendt (1999) on constructivist theory and identity formation in international relations. In addition, Indonesia-focused studies such as Yayusman et al. (2023) and Yayusman and Mulyasari (2024) are used to contextualize gastrodiplomacy practices within Indonesia's policy environment and diaspora engagement. These works provide the conceptual and contextual foundation for interpreting gastrodiplomacy as a social practice through which meanings and national identity are constructed and reproduced.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis was applied to identify recurring themes, concepts, and narratives related to national identity, cultural representation, and diplomatic practices within the selected sources. Discourse analysis was employed to examine how meanings, symbols, and representations of Indonesia as a "spice nation" are constructed, articulated, and communicated through gastrodiplomacy practices in the international arena. This analytical approach is consistent with the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and shared meanings in shaping international relations.

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative library-based research, the analysis relies solely on secondary sources and does not incorporate primary data such as interviews, surveys, or field observations. Consequently, the findings are interpretative in nature and do not aim to measure public perception empirically. Second, the focus on the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program may limit the generalizability of the findings to other forms of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, this methodological approach remains appropriate for the study's objective of providing a theoretically grounded and interpretive understanding of gastrodiplomacy as a process of national identity construction.

Result and Discussion

Trends of Indonesia's Gastrodiplomacy under the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) Program

The Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program was launched in 2021 as part of the Indonesian government's efforts to integrate creative economy, public diplomacy, and culinary heritage into a unified strategic framework (Datau, 2021). The program constitutes a milestone in Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy because, for the first time, culinary diplomacy was institutionalized at the national level and implemented through inter-ministerial collaboration involving the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, and the Presidential Staff Office.

ISUTW is designed to promote Indonesia's spice and culinary wealth as an identifiable component of national identity at the global level. It outlines two key strategic targets: (1) increasing the export value of Indonesian spices and seasoning products to USD 2 billion by 2024, and (2) expanding the number of Indonesian restaurants abroad to 4,000 units. These targets are both symbolic and substantive. Symbolically, they reaffirm Indonesia's identity as a "spice nation." Substantively, they create opportunities for a culinary-based creative economy that strengthens national competitiveness.

As explained by Ranti (2023), ISUTW aims to revive Indonesia's historical narrative as a global spice hub while utilizing culinary diplomacy to enhance the country's positive image

internationally. Through this program, the government seeks to reawaken collective memory of the spice route, which for centuries positioned Indonesia as a center of economic and cultural interaction. In contemporary diplomacy, ISUTW represents a form of soft power implementation that relies on cultural attraction, rather than military or economic coercion, to influence international perceptions.

Importantly, ISUTW is not limited to food promotion. It endeavors to build a global culinary ecosystem that involves spice industries, microenterprises, diaspora communities, restaurants, and public diplomacy conducted by Indonesian missions abroad. As an inter-ministerial initiative, ISUTW embodies a whole-of-government approach integrating cultural diplomacy and the creative economy under a unified strategic framework.

Restaurant Expansion and Export Indicators

Available data show that ISUTW's achievements up to 2024 reveal a gap between targets and realization, yet also indicate meaningful progress in mapping Indonesia's global culinary ecosystem. Regarding the number of Indonesian restaurants abroad, different data sets exist across sources due to varying definitions. As of August 2022, 1,177 Indonesian restaurants were operating in various countries (Owo, 2022). Several months later, in March 2023, the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga Uno, reported that approximately 1,300 restaurants had "adopted the ISUTW theme," meaning that these establishments not only sold Indonesian dishes but also used official ISUTW branding and were part of Indonesia's culinary diplomacy network (Sinaga, 2023). Meanwhile, a 2024 survey by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded 1,221 Indonesian restaurants abroad based on a more conservative and verified data collection. Although variation exists, it stems mainly from differing definitions between "Indonesian restaurants in general" and "restaurants registered under the ISUTW program." Viewed as a trend, these figures illustrate the first nationwide data consolidation effort, signaling the government's increasing seriousness in measuring gastrodiplomacy as a public diplomacy indicator.

In addition to restaurants, economic performance can be observed through spice and processed seasoning exports. According to data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS) released by Indonesia Eximbank, the export value of Indonesian spices from January to November 2023 reached USD 564.12 million, with a volume of 148.22 thousand tons, an increase of 29.77%

in volume but a decrease of 4.16% in value compared to the same period in the previous year. Although this figure remains below the ISUTW target of USD 2 billion, the increase in export volume indicates market diversification and growing demand for processed seasoning products (Indonesia Eximbank, 2023).

These indicators—restaurant growth and export performance—demonstrate that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy under ISUTW is still in a consolidation and network-expansion stage. Nevertheless, the achievements reflect a paradigmatic shift: diplomacy is no longer oriented solely toward intergovernmental relations but increasingly incorporates social, cultural, and creative economy dimensions as instruments for shaping national image and identity.

Actors Involved in Indonesia's Gastrodiplomacy

The implementation of ISUTW represents a shift in Indonesia's diplomatic paradigm from elitist and state-centric practices toward social, participatory, and meaning-based diplomacy. Two major groups of actors form the gastrodiplomacy network: state actors, who formulate institutional frameworks and produce identity narratives, and non-state actors, who act as social agents translating and reproducing "Indonesianness" through everyday culinary practices. State actors include central government institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, and the Presidential Staff Office. Within ISUTW, these institutions collaborate to build policy structures that are both administrative and discursive—meaning that they generate language, symbols, and narratives constructing Indonesia's identity as a "spice nation." The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy serves as the primary architect of this narrative, designing global promotion strategies, integrating branding activities through the slogan "Indonesia Spice Up the World," and preparing roadmaps for strengthening Indonesian restaurant networks abroad. The ministry's mission is not merely economic; it positions cuisine as an instrument of nation branding, a form of soft power that leverages cultural attraction to strengthen Indonesia's standing in the global arena.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducts public diplomacy through Indonesian embassies and consulates worldwide, operating as frontline actors in expanding

gastrodiplomacy. They organize culinary festivals, cultural weeks, and cooking demonstrations, such as Taste of Indonesia in Tokyo or Indonesian Culinary Week in Seoul. In such activities, food functions as a symbol communicating Indonesia's diversity, warmth, and hospitality to global audiences (Kemlu RI, 2023). The Ministry of Industry and Ministry of Trade reinforce the economic dimension of this narrative. The Ministry of Industry ensures the standardization of seasoning and processed products to meet export requirements, while the Ministry of Trade opens international market access through trade promotion and bilateral cooperation. Together, these efforts ensure that gastrodiplomacy is not limited to symbolic representation but supported by tangible economic infrastructure.

If state actors develop the institutional framework and official narrative, non-state actors perform the practical, interpretive, and experiential dimensions of gastrodiplomacy in the global arena. Within a constructivist framework, these actors function as meaning-makers who bring the state narrative to life through everyday social interactions. This category consists of Indonesian diaspora communities, restaurant owners, culinary entrepreneurs, microbusinesses, business associations, as well as media and international communities. Collectively, they serve as cultural mediators between Indonesia and international publics.

The Indonesian diaspora plays a particularly central role. They act as informal culinary diplomats who introduce Indonesian flavors across different cultural contexts. Through restaurants, whether Rendang establishments in Australia and the United States or Satehaus in Germany, diaspora actors not only sell food but also convey stories, values, and identity. As shown by Yayusman (2023), diaspora communities often adapt recipes and presentation styles to suit local tastes while retaining core elements of authenticity. This process of cultural negotiation exemplifies constructivist logic: identity is not static, but continuously shaped and reinterpreted through social interaction.

Culinary entrepreneurs and microbusinesses reinforce the material dimension of identity representation. They produce, package, and export spices, sambal, and processed foods to international markets. Business associations such as GAPMMI contribute to quality improvement and product certification, working with the Ministry of Industry to ensure the global competitiveness of Indonesian products (Kemenperin, 2022). Here, culinary

materiality; from packaging to the label “Made in Indonesia” functions as a cultural signifier that supports the broader narrative of national identity.

Media and international digital communities also play a significant role. Coverage by outlets such as CNN Travel and BBC Good Food, which rank rendang and nasi goreng among the world’s best dishes (Cheung, 2017; BBC Good Food, 2020), contributes to widening the resonance of Indonesia’s gastrodiplomacy. Social media platforms, influencers, and food vloggers serve as amplifiers that disseminate Indonesian culinary experiences to global audiences, reinforcing associations between taste, culture, and identity. From a constructivist standpoint, this diffusion process shapes how national narratives are perceived, adapted, and validated by international communities.

Thus, non-state actors are not merely supportive agents of state policy; they participate in constructing Indonesianness at the social level. They negotiate identity through culinary practice, cross-cultural encounters, and participation in global networks. Within the constructivist framework, such interactions form a process of co-construction of identity, in which the meaning of “Indonesia” emerges, evolves, and is collectively recognized.

The interplay between state and non-state actors reveals that Indonesia’s gastrodiplomacy operates within a dialectical relationship between structure and practice. The state provides symbolic frameworks and policy narratives that assert national imagery, while non-state actors animate these frameworks through social, economic, and cultural practices in international settings. Their interaction produces a dynamic ecosystem in which gastrodiplomacy functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a dialogical and participatory arena of national identity formation.

Discussion

Within the constructivist paradigm, international relations are shaped not only by material power such as military or economic capacity, but also by ideas, norms, and social constructions that emerge through interaction among actors. Alexander Wendt (2012) emphasizes that the international system is a product of socially constructed meanings; global political reality is not merely the result of competing interests but a reflection of how states understand and interpret both themselves and others. In this context, Indonesia’s

gastrodiplomacy can be understood as a social practice that constructs and reaffirms national identity through ideas, symbols, and cultural experiences transmitted to the world.

The Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program exemplifies how this meaning-making process is institutionalized. Launched in 2021, the program is not simply a culinary campaign, but a political project of meaning—a deliberate attempt to revive Indonesia's historical narrative as a global spice center. Under the coordination of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and other ministries, the state represents itself not only as an economic actor, but as a civilization that has contributed to global history through spice trade, cultural exchange, and diversity of taste. Thus, ISUTW does not merely promote culinary products; it articulates who Indonesia is in the eyes of the world: a creative, open, and culturally rich nation.

From a constructivist standpoint, this illustrates how states deploy ideas and norms as forms of non-material power. As Nye (2004) explains, soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy operates within this framework—its influence derives not from pressure or force, but through symbolic persuasion, in which culinary experiences and taste shape positive perceptions of the nation. In every promotional event, festival, or diaspora restaurant, there is an embedded effort to express national values such as hospitality, diversity, and collective harmony. These values are translated into sensory experiences: the aroma of spices, the color of sambal, or the ritual of communal eating that reflects Indonesia's inclusiveness.

Through these practices, the state produces a discourse of national identity. The slogan “Indonesia Spice Up the World” functions not merely as a commercial tagline, but as a cultural narrative. It reactivates collective memory of Indonesia's historical position in global trade—long before the modern nation-state existed, the archipelago was already a crossroads of civilizations and spice exchange. Gastrodiplomacy thus becomes a tool for bridging continuity between past and present, between historical identity and modern aspirations. The state uses this project to reaffirm that being Indonesian means belonging to a wider global network of cultural encounters.

However, as constructivism emphasizes, meaning is never static or singular. National identity is not simply engineered by the state; it is negotiated and reproduced through

everyday practices by non-state actors. Here, diaspora communities, culinary practitioners, and global audiences become crucial. They function as agents of meaning who translate state narratives into lived social experiences. Indonesian restaurants in Melbourne, Berlin, or New York, for example, do not merely sell food; they perform cultural diplomacy on a micro scale. They interact with patrons, adapt flavors to local tastes, and nonetheless retain elements of authenticity that differentiate Indonesianness. This process of culinary adaptation illustrates identity as co-construction shaped from above (top-down) but also from below (bottom-up) through cross-cultural interaction.

From a constructivist lens, these interactions are the spaces where meaning is produced and negotiated. Indonesian dishes served abroad function as signifiers—cultural symbols that convey identity. When international audiences enjoy rendang or sambal and associate them with warmth, uniqueness, and cultural plurality, they join in shaping Indonesia's national image. As Zhang (2015) argues, gastrodiplomacy creates culinary scripts—symbolic narratives that define how nations are seen through food. In Indonesia's case, these narratives communicate not only richness of flavor but also richness of meaning: a nation situated between East and West, past and present, local and global.

Furthermore, Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy demonstrates that social power can be productive rather than coercive. In Foucauldian terms, power does not only repress it produces subjects, discourses, and new forms of knowledge (Foucault, 2013). Through gastrodiplomacy, Indonesia not only presents itself but shapes how the world understands it. The discourse of a “spice nation” becomes a form of soft symbolic power, positioning Indonesia as a center of culinary creativity and spice heritage rather than merely a supplier of raw commodities. Such symbolic power is increasingly critical in a competitive global environment, as it determines a state's capacity to negotiate influence without using force.

Gastrodiplomacy also generates strategic added value for Indonesia in international relations. In an era when national reputation and branding play decisive roles, the ability of a country to project a cohesive and attractive identity constitutes a new form of power. Indonesia, through its culinary narratives, presents itself as strong yet welcoming, traditional yet modern, and distinctive without being exclusionary. This type of image cultivates trust, facilitates economic and political cooperation, and expands transnational social networks.

At the domestic level, gastrodiplomacy reinforces internal identity cohesion. When Indonesian cuisine is promoted globally, citizens at home are reminded of their own cultural richness. Culinary diplomacy thus operates in dual directions: it builds external recognition while fostering internal pride. This reciprocal dynamic strengthens Indonesia's position both in the international arena and in the collective self-understanding of its society. Through a constructivist lens, these processes demonstrate that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy constitutes a form of collective identity-making involving the state, society, and international communities within a shared network of meanings.

To further situate Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy within broader global practices, a brief comparison with countries often regarded as successful in gastrodiplomacy provides useful analytical context. Thailand's Global Thai Program exemplifies a highly centralized and standardized approach, in which the state actively regulates restaurant quality, branding, and menu consistency to ensure a coherent national image abroad. South Korea's gastrodiplomacy is closely integrated with the Korean Wave (Hallyu), linking cuisine with popular culture, tourism, and entertainment to generate strong emotional attachment and global recognition. Japan's Washoku diplomacy emphasizes cultural values such as harmony, simplicity, and health, supported by long-term institutional commitment and international recognition.

Compared to these cases, Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy through the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program reflects a more pluralistic and participatory model that involves a wide range of state and non-state actors, including diaspora communities, culinary entrepreneurs, and microenterprises. While this inclusiveness aligns with Indonesia's diverse identity and constructivist notions of identity as socially negotiated, it also presents challenges in terms of coordination and narrative consistency. This comparison suggests that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy could be strengthened by enhancing strategic coherence and long-term institutional support, while preserving its distinctive emphasis on diversity and social participation. These Asian cases are not presented as regional generalizations, but as analytically relevant examples that illustrate how gastrodiplomacy operates as a socially constructed practice of identity formation within comparable historical and cultural contexts.

Consequently, gastrodiplomacy is not merely a soft power instrument but a constructive practice that reinforces Indonesia's national identity. It demonstrates that a nation's strength is not determined solely by material resources or political capacity, such as military power, but by its ability to define itself and implant meaning in the minds of global audiences. Indonesia's culinary diplomacy shows that the power of ideas and norms can provide a foundation for legitimacy and influence in world politics. In a fragmented global environment marked by competing interests and ideologies, the ability to build shared meanings through taste, culture, and social experience becomes a new form of power that does not coerce, but is felt, enjoyed, and mutually acknowledged.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy, particularly through the Indonesia Spice Up the World (ISUTW) program, represents a contemporary diplomatic practice that operates at the intersection of culture, identity, and international politics. From a constructivist perspective, gastrodiplomacy reveals how states engage in international relations not only through material power or formal institutions, but also through the production of meaning, symbols, and shared understanding. Indonesian cuisine, as a cultural medium, functions as a vehicle for communicating national identity, historical narratives, and social values to global audiences.

In the broader context of international relations, Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy illustrates the growing relevance of non-material forms of power in shaping state influence and legitimacy. It shows that international engagement is increasingly mediated through cultural experience and social interaction, where identity and recognition play a central role. By positioning itself as a "spice nation," Indonesia contributes to contemporary debates in international relations regarding soft power, public diplomacy, and the social construction of national identity. Gastrodiplomacy thus expands the analytical boundaries of diplomacy beyond state-centric and materialist approaches, offering insight into how ideas and cultural practices shape global politics. Although changes in presidential and ministerial leadership may affect the implementation and branding of specific programs, the analytical findings of this study remain relevant as they focus on gastrodiplomacy as a broader social and identity-building practice that extends beyond particular administrative periods.

This study also opens several avenues for future research. Further studies could examine the reception of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy among foreign publics through empirical methods such as interviews or audience analysis. Comparative research could explore differences in gastrodiplomacy strategies among developing countries to assess how identity is constructed across diverse political and cultural contexts. In addition, future research may investigate the role of digital media and food influencers in amplifying gastrodiplomacy narratives, or analyze the long-term sustainability of culinary diplomacy as a tool of national identity formation. These directions would deepen understanding of gastrodiplomacy as an evolving and multifaceted phenomenon in international relations.

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