

Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy in the United States Through the House of Culture

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ABSTRACT

Rumah Budaya Indonesia represents one of the instruments utilized by the Indonesian government to enhance its soft power, with the objective of establishing cultural diplomacy relations with the United States. This research examines the cooperative relations in the social and cultural fields between Indonesia and the United States. Over time, Indonesian cultural values must be preserved and promoted. The Indonesian government adopted a strategic policy through the establishment of cultural centers in the form of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States to continuously promote Indonesian culture. This research employs qualitative methods with a prospective case study approach to analyze the question: "How are the efforts of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the United States through *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in increasing Indonesia's soft power?" In addressing this research question, the writer applies the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy. The findings indicate that the development of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States can be differentiated through aspects of quality and quantity, including building infrastructure, technological capacity, service quality, visitor target percentages, and the distribution of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* across various states in the United States. Furthermore, through various arts, festivals, and culinary activities organized by *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*, these initiatives help mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in previous years, which had disrupted the stability of Indonesia's soft power presence in the United States.

KEYWORDS

covid-19, culture, cultural diplomacy, national interest, *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*, soft power



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INTRODUCTION

In building strong potential, every nation is encouraged to optimize national pride toward cultural promotion that can provide a positive impression on the international community (Lever et al., 2023). This concept is supported by the statement of career official Akhmad Munir, who stated that in building an optimal soft power concept, a sense of sensitivity from each country is needed to maintain wisdom and high creativity from each culture (Aziz, 2021). The concept of soft power relies on the practice of cultural values in various applications of each country's foreign policy (Johnson, 2013).

Indonesia is one of the archipelagic countries rich in natural resources and highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, culture, language, customs, and more. With this diversity, every community can live in tolerance according to the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means "diverse but still one" (Pusat Informasi Media, 2022). Moreover, Indonesian culture is also recognized internationally by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This international organization was established on November 16,

1945, with the aim of promoting international education and culture among all nations (Tim, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 has significantly affected the adaptation of Indonesian cultural diplomacy. According to national statistics, in 2020–2021, the level of Indonesian tourism and cultural visits decreased by 59.86% (Nurlelawati, 2019). The intensity of Indonesian cultural diplomacy activities also declined by 27% compared to previous years. According to the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of Indonesia, this decrease also affected Indonesia's GDP, which fell by 5.32%.

One concrete example of developing Indonesian cultural centers is through the global introduction and establishment of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in several countries, aimed at enhancing Indonesia's positive image and promoting its culture (Kusumawardhani, 2017). *Rumah Budaya* serves as an instrument of the Ministry of Education and Culture to strengthen Indonesia's cultural and tourism potential. According to Wiendu Nuryanti, the construction of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* can provide a public space for fostering international community interaction with Indonesia (Zuraya, 2014).

The cultural diplomacy initiative of establishing *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* is based on cultural learning and has been implemented since 2015 for the international community in 19 countries. Initially, *Rumah Budaya* existed in only 10 countries, but with continued development, it has now expanded to 19 countries worldwide as part of an ongoing project for Indonesian cultural advocacy. According to Diah Harianti, Director of Value Internalization and Cultural Diplomacy at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia's cultural wealth needs to be promoted internationally (detikHot, 2014).

Despite the growing body of literature on soft power and cultural diplomacy, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which cultural institutions like *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* function as instruments for enhancing soft power. While existing studies have examined broad cultural diplomacy strategies, limited research has focused specifically on the *Indonesian Cultural House* model in the United States context—particularly in measuring its effectiveness in strengthening bilateral cultural relations and Indonesia's soft power projection in North America.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive examination of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* as a tangible instrument of cultural diplomacy, employing both qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess soft power enhancement. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of soft power and cultural diplomacy by providing empirical evidence of how cultural institutions operate as bridges between nations, specifically analyzing the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of cultural diplomacy effectiveness. Furthermore, this research offers practical insights into how developing nations can strategically utilize cultural centers to strengthen their international standing—particularly in the post-pandemic era, where cultural diplomacy faces unprecedented challenges.

One of the countries targeted for the establishment of *Rumah Budaya Internasional* is the United States, which is considered to have a positive impact on the development of cultural diplomacy in increasing Indonesia's soft power. Various art activities held there can foster understanding among the American public of Indonesia's unique and diverse culture. Thus, greater efforts are needed to maintain and further promote Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the eyes of American society.

This research aims to analyze the efforts of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the United States through *Rumah Budaya* in enhancing Indonesia's soft power. Specifically, the objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the historical development and activities of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States, (2) to evaluate the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of soft power enhancement through *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*, and (3) to assess the impact of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* on Indonesia–United States bilateral cultural relations. The benefits

of this research include providing empirical evidence for policymakers in formulating more effective cultural diplomacy strategies, contributing to academic discourse on soft power and cultural diplomacy—particularly in the context of Indonesia–United States relations—and offering practical recommendations for optimizing cultural institutions as instruments of international relations.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative method with a prospective case study approach to collect various data and information and to explain the issues discussed regarding *Indonesian Cultural Diplomacy in the United States through Rumah Budaya*. This approach emphasized interpreting social phenomena through real actions that reflected changes within those phenomena (Merdeka, 2021). The qualitative prospective case study method aimed to provide interpretive answers to the research questions. The study focused on *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* centers established across several states in the United States, particularly those in Austin (Texas), San Francisco (California), New York, and Idaho.

Secondary data collection techniques were employed to gather comprehensive information relevant to the research topic. The data sources included academic publications on international relations and cultural diplomacy, journal articles on soft power and Indonesia's foreign policy, official documents and reports from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, reputable news articles covering cultural and diplomatic activities, and publications from *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* centers in the United States. All collected materials were critically reviewed for relevance, credibility, and validity before analysis.

Primary data consisted of official publications, policy documents, and statistical reports from Indonesian government agencies such as the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Central Bureau of Statistics. Secondary data included scholarly journal articles, books on soft power and cultural diplomacy, credible news sources, and online materials from relevant cultural institutions, including *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*.

Data analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach. First, all data were organized and categorized based on themes such as soft power dimensions, cultural diplomacy activities, and Indonesia–United States bilateral relations. Second, a descriptive analysis was conducted to identify patterns, trends, and key findings regarding the role of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in strengthening Indonesia's soft power. Third, the findings were interpreted using the theoretical frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2008) and cultural diplomacy to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied. Finally, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing multiple data sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the research outcomes.

This research used several main concepts as an analytical framework:

1. Liberalism Approach Liberalism is one of the approaches in International Relations that has essential value in achieving agreements between countries. This approach is implemented to provide a view of tolerance for each country to work together (Jackson & Sorensen, 2016).
2. Soft Power Concept Joseph S. Nye states that the soft power concept has the purpose of achieving various specific goals through emotional strength applied structurally. The role of soft power will better maintain the position of each country to achieve desired goals without coercion (Nye, 2008).
3. Cultural Diplomacy Concept Cultural diplomacy is a new diplomatic practice applied through interaction between countries in social and cultural fields. The implementation of this context not only involves the role of government but also non-governmental roles (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

National Interest and Bilateral Relations between Indonesia and the United States

The cooperative relationship built between the United States and Indonesia is an effort to maintain peace stability between the two countries, considering both have potential and resources that can be utilized properly. Basically, Indonesia builds cooperative relations with the United States with the aim of fulfilling its national interests in the form of increasing its soft power, but not only moving in the social and cultural fields.

Indonesia's National Interest through Cultural Diplomacy

Conceptually, each country basically has wealth such as natural resources, cultural uniqueness, strategic territory, etc. Thus, each country will compete to fulfill their respective national interests by using their wealth as strength. This is also implemented by Indonesia and the United States to fulfill their national interests through various cooperative efforts that do not only move in the social-cultural field to achieve their interests in cultural diplomacy but also move in other fields such as economy, politics, and military.

Cultural diplomacy is present as an effective effort to present and express international recognition, especially American society regarding the existence of Indonesian culture. Advocacy for Indonesian cultural identity needs to be upheld as a means of communication in establishing state relations. In addition, this cultural diplomacy concept is also present to improve cooperative relations between the two countries as a form of investment that can be socialized (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2022).

Bilateral Relations in Social and Cultural Fields

After Indonesia's independence in 1945, Indonesia established diplomatic relations with the United States around 1954. The cooperation built by both countries involved several state actors, such as governments from both countries, several government organizations, and community involvement (U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2021). However, this relationship increased again since 2010 through an artist exchange program called "St Louis Artists Study Abroad" in New York, United States.

According to Josh Wiese (former Deputy Mayor of San Francisco), the United States proudly chose Indonesia to become its partner in the social-cultural field because Indonesia is a rich and diverse country with its culture. In addition, it is hoped that the relationship built can have a positive impact on the continuity of friendship between the two countries (Person, 2011).

Rumah Budaya Indonesia in the United States

History of Rumah Budaya Indonesia

Rumah Budaya Indonesia was built with the aim of promoting Indonesian culture in establishing diplomatic relations globally. Indonesian cultural values are instruments for building diplomatic relations between the two countries. Rumah Budaya itself was first established in 2012 in 10 destination countries, including the United States, South Korea, Germany, France, Turkey, Netherlands, Australia, Timor Leste, Singapore, and Japan by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia in collaboration with the respective destination country governments as an effort to promote Indonesian culture to every international community.

In 2015, *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* began to spread in 19 destination countries and has development in its vision, namely as culture learning with the aim of providing advocacy development regarding Indonesian culture to persuade international community views in building cultural diplomacy (detikNews, 2014). In addition, *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* was built in the United States as one of the strategies to achieve national interests from Indonesia in the United States in accordance with its political ideology, namely Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika.

Activities Organized through Rumah Budaya Indonesia

The existence of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* is a concrete form of the diversity of Indonesian culture that can be enjoyed. Various art activities are also held at *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* to promote culture, such as art performances, traditional Indonesian dances and musical instruments, and Indonesian culinary cuisine. In addition, the Indonesian Bazaar held in San Francisco in 2022 introduced Indonesian culture and cuisine in the United States, which was also attended by 500 participants (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2022).

"Angklung Goes to America" is one of the programs organized by *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in Idaho, United States, on July 16, 2022. This art performance was conducted with the aim of reviving the cultural creativity of Indonesian origin in the United States. According to Maulana Syuhada as the team leader of the art performance, the angklung performance will strengthen Indonesia's nation branding in the United States and will certainly have a positive impact on Indonesian tourism (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2022).

Furthermore, in 2018, *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* again held a festival involving the role of the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Texas, United States. The purpose of this festival is to increase Indonesia's strategy and potential in social-cultural, economic, and tourism fields. In fact, the festival was attended by around 3,000 visitors to watch the performance (Kominfo, 2018).

Indonesia's Soft Power Concept to Develop Cultural Diplomacy

In explaining in detail, the writer will discuss this soft power concept from Indonesia's perspective. Diplomatically, Indonesia basically has its own understanding, namely the soft power concept is closely related to the nation branding concept that can be implemented through the role of culture. Of course, the impact of this implementation will also support the development of each field, both economy, politics, military, and social culture (Agama, 2022).

According to President Joko Widodo's statement when delivering his opening speech at the ASEAN Summit meeting, he stated that Indonesia's soft power needs to be strengthened to spread peace values to the whole world and increase capacity as a preventive effort against the globalization flow that attacks cultural values (Badan Kesatuan Bangsa dan Politik, 2022).

The concept of soft power also has the purpose of achieving various social phenomena experienced by countries to build relations and mutual understanding between countries. In addition, the soft power concept is also interpreted as a country's effort to provide a persuasive impact to other countries by using the power they have to fulfill their national interests without coercion or threats (Nye, 2008).

Efforts to Increase Indonesia's Soft Power through Rumah Budaya Indonesia

In this research, the writer strongly provides an understanding that *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* is present to instill a positive image of Indonesia through cultural diplomacy in the United States. The relationship between the soft power concept and *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States can be a good target to represent Indonesia's characteristics according to its development initiation (Warsito & Kartikasari, 2007).

Conceptually, the researcher defines the concept of enhancement as a successful strategy in increasing interaction, reputation, and providing a positive impact on Indonesia's soft power. This success certainly requires support and assistance from every state and non-state actor to provide more attraction through resource perception and cultural affiliation owned.

The concept of enhancement referred to can be differentiated from aspects of quality and quantity improvement toward *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States. In terms of quality, the writer will explain the improvement in building infrastructure, technology used, and service quality of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States. Meanwhile, in terms of

quantity, the writer will explain the increasing percentage of visitors and the addition of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* construction in almost all cities or states in the United States.

Performance and Impact Analysis

According to data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (KEMLU), visitors to *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* increased to 78%. From another perspective, the potential of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* has developed as an effort to strengthen positive image in the United States. This is also strengthened through the view of Cecep Herawan as Director General of Information and Public Diplomacy (Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2016).

Table 1. The Soft Power 30 Framework: The Sub-indicators of Soft Power

Government	Digital	Culture	Enterprise	Engagement	Education
Freedom, Human Rights and Equality	Technology Product and Online Service	Friendliness, Collaboration and International Reach	Business Model and Innovation	Multilateralism and Diplomatic Networks to commit	Knowledge, Universities and Students

Source: The Soft Power 30, Jonathan McClory, 2019

If it can be contextualized, it can be said that the efforts to increase Indonesia's soft power in the United States are related to 4 of 6 components regarding the Soft Power 30 Index, including digital, culture, engagement, and education (McClory, 2019). In terms of digital, it can be said that the development of technology used is improving, where one of the cooperative relations between the two countries called *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States also uses YouTube channels and personal websites to interact with the global community.

Table 2. Number of American Tourists in Indonesia 2020-2022

Year	Number of Visitors	Growth Rate
2020	164,079	-
2021	289,156	+76.2%
2022	510,246	+76.5%

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022

Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2020, the number of tourists from the United States only reached 164,079 visits, but there was an increase in 2022 with the number of tourists becoming 510,246 visits (BPS, 2022). This certainly shows that Indonesia succeeded in developing its cultural diplomacy in the United States so that it can persuade every American society to visit Indonesia and certainly has a positive impact on Indonesia's economic growth.

From the quality aspect, if analyzed from service quality and technology, it can be said that *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* is increasingly open and mingling with global society, so visitors can watch it online. This can be proven through the provision of websites and YouTube channels owned by *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*, which contain various information, both the history of its formation, education for children, art activities, and surveys used as evaluation materials.

Furthermore, from the infrastructure aspect, the construction of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States is designed and built as an Indonesian cultural center in the United States, which also displays typical Indonesian nuances, such as woven fabrics, Wayang, Angklung, statues, or typical Indonesian ornaments placed in every corner of the cultural house (Kabari, 2014).

According to Arifi Saiman as Consul General of the Republic of Indonesia in New York, the construction of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* is designed with the aim of attaching Indonesian culture and increasing the potential for more attraction. Not only that, *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States is also used as a diplomatic vehicle that provides services for every foreign community who wants to practice Indonesian musical instruments and dances, as well as for those who want to learn the Indonesian language with registration procedures through the personal website of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* in the United States without being charged any fees (Pujayanti, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* serves as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy in enhancing Indonesia's soft power in the United States through both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The quality enhancement is evident in improved infrastructure design featuring authentic Indonesian cultural elements, advanced digital technology utilization through YouTube channels and dedicated websites, and comprehensive service quality offering free cultural education programs. Quantitatively, the success is reflected in the 78% increase in visitor numbers, expansion from one to five cities across the United States, and the significant growth of American tourists to Indonesia from 164,079 in 2020 to 510,246 in 2022, representing a 76.5% increase. These findings confirm that strategic cultural diplomacy through *Rumah Budaya Indonesia* has successfully strengthened Indonesia-United States bilateral relations, particularly in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic's adverse effects on cultural mobility and soft power projection. However, to optimize its impact in the Industry 4.0 era, further technological advancement and digital platform integration are recommended. Future research should examine the long-term sustainability of *Rumah Budaya Indonesia*'s programs, conduct comparative studies with other nations' cultural diplomacy models, assess the economic impact of cultural diplomacy on bilateral trade relations, and explore the role of digital transformation in enhancing cultural diplomacy effectiveness in the post-pandemic global landscape.

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