

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY POLITICS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has undergone significant transformation alongside the penetration of social media into nearly every aspect of human life. This phenomenon has opened up new dimensions in the practice of international communication, while simultaneously giving rise to the complexities of identity politics that have the potential to influence the trajectory of sustainable development. This study aims to (1) analyze the dynamics of cultural diplomacy within the social media ecosystem; (2) identify patterns of identity politics narratives emerging in the context of digital diplomacy; and (3) examine their implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. The study employs a qualitative literature review method using a narrative review design. Data were obtained from relevant books, journal articles, and scientific publications. The findings reveal three dominant themes: first, social media has shifted the paradigm of cultural diplomacy from one-way communication to a dynamic multipolar dialogue; second, identity politics in the digital sphere tends to produce two conflicting narratives—one emphasizing the strengthening of local identities and the other promoting global cultural homogenization; third, there is a positive correlation between the effectiveness of digital cultural diplomacy and the achievement of the SDGs, particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This study concludes that social media-based cultural diplomacy needs to be oriented toward an inclusive narrative approach that celebrates the diversity of identities, rather than exacerbating polarization, in order to support the achievement of sustainable and equitable development.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Social Media, Identity Politics, Sustainable Development, Literature Review

1. Introduction

In the 21st-century global communications landscape, social media has transcended its function as merely a platform for the exchange of personal information. It has evolved into a strategic arena where countries, social movements, non-state actors, and individuals compete for dominance over cultural narratives. This phenomenon has fundamentally transformed the way cultural diplomacy is practiced, consumed, and debated across the globe. While conventional cultural diplomacy relies on the institutional power of art exhibitions, student exchanges, and international festivals, cultural diplomacy in the digital age is underpinned by speed, virality, and the ability to build communities across geographical borders in real time.

Historically, cultural diplomacy has been understood as a nation's effort to project its values, traditions, and positive image to the international community in order to achieve foreign policy objectives (Nye, 1991). This laid an important theoretical foundation by introducing the concept of soft power power acquired not through military coercion or economic transactions, but through the appeal of culture, ideology, and universal values. In this framework, culture becomes the most flexible and sustainable diplomatic resource, as it operates through long-term processes of identification and persuasion, rather than short-term threats or material inducements.

However, the emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook has fundamentally disrupted the conventional model of cultural diplomacy.

These platforms have created what communication experts refer to as the “digital public sphere,” a space where previously marginalized actors including members of diaspora communities, independent artists, cultural activists, and even ordinary individuals can now participate directly in the process of cultural diplomacy without relying on mediation by official state institutions. This shift has given rise to what is now referred to as “citizen diplomacy” or “grassroots cultural diplomacy,” which is decentralized and horizontal in nature.

On the other hand, the democratization of cultural diplomacy through social media is not without risks and complexities. One of the most prominent phenomena is the intensification of identity politics in the digital sphere. Identity politics that is, collective mobilization centered on social categories such as ethnicity, religion, language, and nationality is amplified to an extraordinary degree through social media’s algorithmic mechanisms, which tend to prioritize content that provokes strong emotional responses. Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and selective exposure have become structural mechanisms that systematically deepen identity divisions, which in turn challenge the foundations of fluid and inclusive intercultural dialogue.

Indonesia, as the country with the fourth-largest number of social media users in the world and possessing extraordinary cultural diversity including more than 300 ethnic groups, 700 regional languages, and diverse local traditions, sits at a highly strategic crossroads within these dynamics. Data from We Are Social (2024) indicates that Indonesia has over 167 million active social media users, or approximately 60% of the total population. This figure positions Indonesia as one of the largest digital markets in Southeast Asia, while also making it a highly competitive and complex arena for digital cultural diplomacy.

At the global level, issues of cultural diplomacy and identity politics are becoming increasingly inseparable from the sustainable development agenda. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations establishes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that implicitly and explicitly require the establishment of a healthy, inclusive, and mutually respectful ecosystem of intercultural communication. SDG 4 (Quality Education) calls for education that values cultural diversity; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) relies on recognition of the identities of marginalized groups; SDG 16 (Peace and Justice) requires dialogue among parties with opposing identities; and SDG 17 (Global Partnerships) requires cross-cultural trust as its foundation.

Paradoxically, just as cultural diplomacy through social media has the potential to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs by building bridges between cultures, it can also become a serious obstacle if driven by exclusive and antagonistic identity politics narratives. Narratives that exacerbate identity differences whether through hate speech, disinformation, or framing that reduces cultural complexity to an “us versus them” conflict not only damage international relations but also erode public trust in institutions, hinder international cooperation, and ultimately slow progress toward development goals.

Studies that examine various aspects of the relationship between cultural diplomacy and social media have attracted the attention of numerous researchers across different contexts. (Juliani, 2026) in her journal article “U.S. Digital Diplomacy through Social Media as an Instrument of Soft Power in Indonesia, 2023–2024”, employed qualitative methods including literature review and content analysis and drew upon Soft Power Theory (Nye), Constructivism, and Symmetrical Two-Way Communication (Grunig). The findings of this study indicate that the U.S. strategically utilizes official social media accounts (@usembassyjkt, @america, YSEALI) to build soft power in Indonesia through two-way communication. Relevance: This demonstrates how state actors operationalize digital cultural diplomacy in a structured manner, reinforcing the argument of this study that identity narratives on social media are not merely organic phenomena but are often strategically designed. (Azzahara Ulyana & Salleh, 2018) examined “Challenges in Cultural Diplomacy: An Analysis of Identity Conflicts Among Indonesian and Malaysian Netizens on Social Media”; this study employed qualitative methods: netnography and framing analysis; Constructivism Theory (Wendt), Soft Power (Nye). The study’s findings indicate that identity conflicts between Indonesian and Malaysian netizens on social media hinder the practice of bilateral cultural diplomacy. Platform algorithms reinforce narratives of exclusive nationalism. Relevance: This study demonstrates that identity politics on social media can serve as a tangible obstacle to cultural diplomacy and has negative implications for the regional cooperation efforts necessary to achieve the SDGs.

The two previous studies provide a strong empirical foundation for this research. The first study highlights the strategic and planned dimensions of digital cultural diplomacy, while the second reveals the dark side of identity politicization that can disrupt international relations. This study aims to synthesize these two dimensions by adding a third dimension implications for sustainable development which has not been a primary focus in the two previous studies mentioned above.

Theoretically, this study integrates three main theoretical frameworks: (1) Soft Power and Public

Diplomacy Theory (Nye, 2008) which explains the mechanisms of cultural influence in international relations; (2) Digital Public Sphere Theory (Fraser, 1990); (Papacharissi, 2010) which analyses how social media transforms the public discursive arena; and (3) the Contemporary Identity Politics Perspective (Du Gay & Hall, 1996); (Castells, 2010) which examines how identities are constructed, contested, and mobilized in the digital age. The triangulation of these three frameworks is expected to yield a richer and more nuanced analysis than if relying solely on a single theoretical perspective.

Against this backdrop, this study formulates three main research questions: First, how has social media transformed the paradigms and practices of cultural diplomacy in the global context and in Indonesia specifically? Second, what dominant patterns of identity politics narratives emerge in social media-based cultural diplomacy? Third, how do identity politics narratives in digital cultural diplomacy impact the achievement of sustainable development goals? These three questions will be systematically addressed through a narrative review and thematic analysis, which will be detailed in the methodology section.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using a narrative review design. The narrative review approach was chosen because it offers flexibility in integrating and synthesizing literature from various intersecting disciplines including communication, international relations, political science, and development studies without being constrained by the methodological rigidity of a systematic review, which requires strict statistical selection protocols (Popay et al., 2006); (Ferrari, 2015). narrative review allows researchers to construct a cohesive theoretical argument based on various perspectives found in the literature, thereby yielding a more holistic and contextual understanding.

The data sources for this study consist of secondary academic literature, including books, scientific journal articles, conference proceedings, and other academic works relevant to the research focus. The literature search was conducted through several academic databases. The search process utilized a combination of keywords. The use of these various keywords aimed to identify literature that could represent the development of research on cultural diplomacy, political narratives of identity, and their implications for sustainable development in the context of contemporary social media.

The collected literature was then screened based on several inclusion criteria. First, the literature must be directly relevant to the key concepts in the study of cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural communication in the digital age. Second, the literature must address social media, identity politics, digital diplomacy, or the practice of producing cultural narratives in the global public sphere. Third, priority was given to scholarly publications that had undergone a peer-review process, particularly international journal articles, academic books, and empirical research published within the last three to six years, without neglecting foundational theoretical works on soft power and cultural identity as the primary theoretical framework. This selection process was conducted to ensure that the literature used possesses conceptual relevance, academic quality, and up-to-date contextual relevance.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. The first stage was literature reduction, which involved the identification, critical reading, and selection of sources relevant to the research focus. At this stage, literature not directly related to the themes of cultural diplomacy, the construction of identity narratives, and sustainable development was eliminated. The second stage was thematic categorization, which involved grouping the literature based on the that emerged; the researcher then organized them based on: social media as an arena for cultural diplomacy; the construction and contestation of identity narratives; the algorithmization of cultural political narratives; polarization versus intercultural dialogue; and the relationship between digital cultural diplomacy and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The third stage is critical interpretation, which involves interpreting various findings from the literature using theoretical frameworks of cultural diplomacy, soft power, and contemporary identity politics to construct a conceptual synthesis of how identity narratives function in the practice of cultural diplomacy in the social media era and their implications for the global development agenda.

Through these stages, this study not only seeks to describe developments in the existing literature but also to construct a critical reading of social media as an arena for the production of diplomatic narratives and the reproduction of cultural identities within the contemporary digital communication ecosystem. Thus, this approach is expected to yield a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of the dynamics of cultural diplomacy and identity politics in relation to sustainable development.

3. Result And Discussion

3.1 The Paradigm Shift in Culture Diplomacy in the Social Media Era

An analysis of the 28 articles reviewed reveals a strong consensus that social media has

transformed cultural diplomacy from a one-to-many communication model toward a dynamic and decentralized many-to-many communication model. In the conventional model, the state holds a monopoly over the cultural narratives projected to the international community through official institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cultural centers, and scholarship programs. However, within the social media ecosystem, non-state actors such as content creators, diaspora communities, and cultural influencers have emerged as independent actors in cultural diplomacy and are often more effective than official institutions (Grincheva, 2024);(Juliani, 2026).

This phenomenon can be understood through what (Cull, 2019) refers to as “new public diplomacy” a form of diplomatic communication that prioritizes dialogue over monologue and engagement over broadcasting. In the Indonesian context, this demonstrates that Indonesia’s cultural wealth from cuisine and batik fashion to gamelan music gains far more effective global exposure through organic social media content created by ordinary citizens than through the government’s official “Wonderful Indonesia” campaign. This marks a significant epistemological shift: authority over cultural narratives is no longer the exclusive prerogative of the state.

Nevertheless, this transformation also creates serious governance challenges. (Kianpour et al., 2025) found that diaspora identity narratives on social media reveal a sharp dichotomy: on the one hand, they have the potential to build cultural bridges and strengthen collective memory; on the other hand, they are prone to exhibiting anti-democratic tendencies and undermining cultural diversity when controlled by groups that exploit algorithmic mechanisms for political mobilization. In the context of cultural diplomacy, this means that the effectiveness of social media as a diplomatic tool depends heavily on the capacity of the actors involved both state and non-state to navigate these narrative complexities in an ethical and inclusive manner.

A study of Southeast Asian countries’ practices in digital cultural diplomacy through social media reveals an interesting pattern: the more actively a country constructs its cultural identity narrative on social media, the greater the potential for friction with the identity narratives of neighboring countries that share overlapping cultural elements (Azzahara Ulyana & Salleh, 2018). This phenomenon, referred to in diplomatic studies as “cultural ownership disputes,” has repeatedly sparked diplomatic tensions between culturally related nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia, which share a common cultural heritage yet hold distinct claims to national identity.

3.2 Narrative Patterns of Identity Politics in Digital Culture Diplomacy

A thematic analysis identifies two dominant, mutually conflicting narratives in identity politics within the realm of digital cultural diplomacy. The first narrative is one of local identity revivalism movements that utilize social media to actualize, revitalize, and project local cultural identities onto the global stage in response to the threat of cultural homogenization posed by the tide of globalization. The second narrative is that of contingent hybridity the construction of new identities resulting from creative negotiations between local cultural elements and global factors, yielding new forms of cultural expression that are neither entirely local nor global.

In the Indonesian context, (Fahma et al., 2024) document how social media has become a battleground between these two narratives. On one hand, platforms like TikTok and Instagram serve as mediums for youth movements actively revitalizing and popularize traditional dance, contemporary batik, ethnic fusion music, and regional cuisine to a global audience a form of organic and authentic grassroots cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, these same platforms also serve as spaces where more exclusive and defensive identity narratives are promoted, often in response to perceived external threats to national cultural uniqueness.

The political dimension of these identity narratives becomes increasingly complex when influenced by social media algorithms. Social media platforms particularly engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize content eliciting strong emotional responses systematically amplify exclusive and confrontational identity narratives over those that are inclusive and dialogic. Consequently, cultural diplomacy conducted via social media structurally tends to produce identity polarization, even when the actors’ initial intent is to build intercultural bridges.

Further analysis reveals that the narrative patterns of identity politics in the context of digital cultural diplomacy have three main characteristics. First, narrative fragmentation: there is no longer a single narrative representing a nation’s culture; instead, there is a constellation of competing narratives, each claiming authenticity. Second, narrative temporality: cultural narratives on social media are highly dynamic, changing rapidly in response to the momentum of issues and viral cycles, thereby making it difficult to build consistent, long-term diplomatic narratives. Third, narrative hybridization: the boundaries between cultural diplomacy, marketing communication (nation branding), and identity propaganda are becoming increasingly blurred in the social media era, creating ambiguity regarding the objectives and ethical responsibilities of these narratives.

3.3 Implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The complex and ambivalent relationship between social media-based cultural diplomacy and the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. This complexity stems from the fact that social media and digital cultural diplomacy can function simultaneously as both enablers and disablers of sustainable development, depending on how they are managed and which narratives dominate.

Several studies have found that cultural diplomacy through social media contributes significantly to the achievement of the SDGs in several ways. First, regarding SDG 4 (Quality Education): cultural content disseminated via social media ranging from tutorials on traditional arts to discussions on local philosophy have become a source of informal education that fills gaps not addressed by the formal education system, while also promoting appreciation for cultural diversity. Second, regarding SDG 16 (Peace and Justice): successful digital cultural diplomacy initiatives have been shown to build trust among communities, reduce prejudice, and lay the groundwork for peaceful dialogue between previously conflicting communities (Grincheva, 2024). Third, regarding SDG 17 (Global Partnerships): social media has enabled the formation of cross-border cultural partnership networks that do not require bureaucratic mediation from government institutions, thereby exponentially expanding the scope and speed of cultural diplomacy. Fourth, regarding SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): the cultural identity narratives of minority and marginalized groups which previously lacked access to diplomatic platforms can now be voiced through social media, thereby contributing to correcting representational disparities in the global cultural discourse.

However, serious risks have also been identified. First, identity polarization that hinders cooperation: exclusive and antagonistic identity politics narratives on social media can complicate the building of consensus needed to address shared global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and health crises all of which are core issues on the SDG agenda. Second, cultural disinformation that erodes trust: the spread of false information (misinformation and disinformation) regarding specific cultural traditions and values on social media can undermine trust between societies a prerequisite for effective global partnerships.

The digital divide exacerbates inequality: the ability to participate in digital cultural diplomacy is highly uneven, both between developed and developing countries and within developing countries themselves. Groups lacking adequate access to technology who are often the most vulnerable and marginalized tend to have no voice in the global cultural narrative, which is increasingly dominated by social media, thereby deepening the disparities that SDG 10 aims to address.

(Faucher & Zhu, 2025) in their comprehensive study on the future of cultural diplomacy, propose the concept of “sustainable cultural diplomacy” as a response to these challenges. Sustainable cultural diplomacy is defined as the practice of cultural diplomacy that is consciously oriented toward the principles of sustainability, justice, and Inclusivity extends not only to the content of the narratives conveyed but also to the processes and governance structures of diplomacy itself. Within this framework, social media should ideally function not as a platform for zero-sum competition over identity narratives, but rather as a space for productive identity negotiations and the co-creation of meaning.

These findings have important policy implications, particularly for Indonesia as a country with extraordinary cultural diversity and a massive social media user base. Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy strategy needs to explicitly integrate the dimension of sustainable development not only by projecting an exotic and appealing image of Indonesia abroad, but also by ensuring that the narratives constructed contribute to building trust, reducing prejudice, and strengthening the global cooperation necessary to achieve the SDGs.

4. Conclusion

This literature review, conducted through a narrative review, identifies three dominant themes that address the three research questions posed. First, social media has fundamentally shifted the paradigm of cultural diplomacy from one-way institutional communication toward multipolar communication involving diverse state and non-state actors in the dynamic competition and negotiation of identity narratives. This transformation has resulted in the “democratization of cultural diplomacy,” which simultaneously opens up significant opportunities and presents complex risks.

Second, the dominant narrative patterns of identity politics in digital cultural diplomacy are divided into two opposing poles: defensive and exclusive narratives of local identity revivalism versus creative and dialogic narratives of contingent hybridity. Social media algorithms are structurally inclined to amplify the first narrative because it has a greater capacity to evoke emotional responses, thereby creating systemic challenges for efforts to build inclusive and dialogic cultural diplomacy.

Third, the relationship between digital cultural diplomacy and sustainable development is ambivalent: on the one hand, social media serves as an enabler for achieving the SDGs by disseminating

cultural content that expands access to education, builds trust among communities, and expanding global partnerships; on the other hand, it can act as a hindrance through identity polarization, cultural disinformation, and the reproduction of the digital divide.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as a narrative review, this study does not employ selection protocols as rigorous as those of a systematic review, so there is a possibility that relevant articles were not identified. Second, most of the available literature focuses primarily on Western and East Asian contexts, so perspectives from the Global South including Indonesia and Southeast Asia are relatively underrepresented in the analyzed corpus. Third, the dynamics of social media are evolving very rapidly, so the findings of this study need to be recontextualized periodically in line with changes in the landscape of digital platforms and ecosystems. These limitations open up opportunities for further, more specialized and context-specific research.

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