

Traditional cuisine as a social symbol: A socio-cultural analysis of the collective identity of Indonesian society

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Abstract - This research explores the function of traditional Indonesian culinary arts as both a marker of cultural identity and a key instrument in the nation's international cultural diplomacy. The analysis centers on the ways in which regional cuisines are imbued with local values and histories, and examines their strategic deployment in global contexts – be that through festivals, diaspora-led restaurants, or ambitious national programs such as "Spice Up the World." Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the study investigates representations of Indonesian culinary traditions within the mass media, cultural policy frameworks, and contemporary digital platforms. Data sources include academic literature, case analysis in settings like Australia and Toronto, digital content such as culinary-focused TikTok accounts, and a range of interactive media campaigns. Findings from this research indicate that traditional cuisine serves not only to reinforce ethnic identity and collective memory at home, but is also instrumental in shaping international perceptions of Indonesia abroad. Digital media has significantly amplified visibility, yet at the same time introduces issues related to commodification and the simplification of cultural meaning. Diaspora restaurants have proven to be effective agents of gastrodiplomacy, while government initiatives continue to enhance Indonesia's national branding through food. In conclusion, this study finds that traditional cuisine operates as a strategic medium, connecting local heritage with global interests. If approached holistically and with sustainability in mind, culinary practices hold significant potential to strengthen Indonesia's cultural image and open more inclusive and competitive opportunities for diplomatic engagement.

Keywords: Traditional cuisine, collective identity, Indonesian society, digital media, food

1. Introduction

Culinary arts sit right at the heart of any society's culture, acting as a bridge that transforms raw, natural resources into something deeply cultural and steeped in meaning – a process highlighted

by Utami (2018). Food goes well beyond basic sustenance; it functions as an essential medium for social interaction and the expression of cultural values, as Wijaya (2019) notes. Over the years, dramatic changes have shaped the culinary world, ranging from innovations in presentation to radical shifts in ingredients—all rippling out from broader trends like globalization, technology, and rapidly evolving ways of living.

Even in the face of modernity's relentless expansion, traditional cuisine obviously retains a significant place within daily life and cultural memory. Traditional foods, in particular, do more than just preserve local flavours; they're also repositories of symbolic, historical, and philosophical values, intricately passed down through generations (Wijaya, 2019). These aren't just nostalgic artifacts for consumption; rather, they exist as living "cultural products," deeply embedded in the nation's tourism industry and the broader tapestry of national storytelling. In this context, every regional delicacy can be seen as a microcosm of local geography, environmental wisdom, and the complex relationship shared by humans and their natural surroundings. Soeroso and Susilo (2014) argue that these legacies constitute a form of intangible cultural heritage, demanding proactive strategies for protection and preservation.

Yet, the survival of traditional culinary arts is by no means guaranteed. Several factors pose a genuine threat. There's a tangible decline in younger generations' interest, escalating difficulties in sourcing authentic ingredients, and an ongoing commercialization that sometimes distorts or dilutes the original forms and flavours of these traditional dishes. Ardiansari et al. (2020) point out how traditional food consumption is slipping, especially among MSMEs, due to impracticality, lengthy preparation times, and stiff competition from the convenient, heavily packaged world of fast food. These pressures don't merely change recipes—they risk eroding the skills, knowledge, and cultural embeddedness that define these traditions. Arianto (2024) further observes that shifts in urban lifestyles are linked to diminished engagement with traditional foods, particularly among millennials and Gen Z. The result is a weakening chain of transmission: recipes and meanings passed down for centuries may soon face extinction without serious interventions focused on preservation and revitalization.

Preservation efforts are therefore absolutely essential in an environment dominated by global culture and the relentless speed of modernization. If society fails to act, a profound loss is at stake—not only in terms of unique flavours and cooking techniques, but also in the erosion of deeper cultural knowledge and collective memory. Documentation, education, and adaptive revitalization strategies must be prioritized to ensure that traditional culinary heritage remains both accessible and relevant to contemporary and future audiences.

Paradoxically, globalization brings opportunity as well as challenge. The rise of cultural and culinary tourism has led to a renewed awareness of local cuisine. Increasingly, traditional dishes are not mere meals but experiences—integrated into curated tour packages, regional festivals, and dynamic cultural performances. Such developments support Apriliani et al. (2025), who argue that culinary tourism is a powerful instrument for cultural education and economic creativity. It fosters not just appreciation for diversity, but also meaningful dialogue between visitors and host communities—effectively positioning cuisine as a tool for cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

Indonesia, with its astounding diversity of over 17,000 islands and hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, represents a vivid case in point. Here, the culinary landscape is almost endlessly varied. Andajani et al. (2024) underscore that culinary diversity is a mirror of social, historical, and spiritual values, with each region contributing its own flavour profile and linked stories. Far from being mere regional curiosities, these dishes have become vital symbols of national unity and sources of pride, reinforcing a sense of collective identity.

This research emerges out of an urgent concern: without robust documentation and active preservation, traditional culinary traditions will fade beneath the relentless tide of modernization. There is a real risk that ancient recipes, cooking techniques, and the broader storehouse of cultural knowledge will disappear. Thus, the current study seeks not only to rediscover the meaning and function of traditional cuisine but also to propose relevant strategies

for safeguarding this crucial element of cultural heritage for current and future generations.

National identity, in this framework, depends profoundly on the preservation of cultural touchstones such as culinary tradition. Food, much like language and the arts, weaves a foundation for collective awareness, social solidarity, and cultural resilience. In Indonesia, culinary traditions take on additional significance as instruments of diplomacy and as vibrant markers of national identity on the world stage (Untari, 2024).

Furthermore, this study is attentive to the evolving meanings and functions of traditional cuisine in a modern context. Increasingly, traditional foods have transcended their role as basic sustenance to become markers of status, expressions of regional pride, and strategic tools within the realm of cultural diplomacy. This transformation underscores a broader trend: traditional cuisine simultaneously preserves heritage and enables societies to adapt to—and actively shape—the complex realities of the global era. A robust corpus of scholarly literature demonstrates that the collective identity of a nation serves as a critical underpinning for cultivating national consciousness and fostering the persistence of social cohesion. In particular, collective identity doesn't merely provide a framework for unity—more than that, it creates space for the celebration and safeguarding of diversity within the broader national mosaic, thus enabling the continued flourishing of cultural development that is both sustainable and adaptive to change. Traditional cuisine is not merely a vestige of cultural heritage; it is also a living symbol of shared identity, demarcating one community from another in ways that are deeply embedded in everyday life and symbolic practice (Hidayati, 2024). Therefore, ensuring the survival of these culinary traditions carries direct implications for the ongoing evolution and sustainability of national identity itself.

Prior research further underscores the far-reaching significance of traditional culinary arts in consolidating and expressing a community's cultural identity. To cite Juniarti (2021), in her study of the Pasemah tribe in Kaur, traditional foods such as *lemang*, *bipang*, and *buak* are more than just staples of local fare—they are potent repositories of indigenous wisdom, transmitting spiritual values, fostering social harmony, and reinforcing communal solidarity. These foods operate as vital conduits for interpersonal interaction and as informal vehicles for cultural transmission, ensuring that collective knowledge and values are passed down across generations. Such research decisively moves the conversation beyond the notion of food as mere material artifact, instead positioning the culinary arts as dynamic components of a complex social system that both shapes and reflects the web of relationships and identities within a society.

Within discourse on collective societal identity, it has been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature that this identity performs an indispensable role in galvanizing social togetherness and promoting the long-term resilience of cultural traditions. Far from being solely a symbolic marker of group belonging, collective identity forms a crucial lens through which individuals navigate social expectations and relationships. Brewer (1991) offers a psychological perspective in which collective identity operates as a strategy for individuals to manage uncertainty, ultimately providing continuity and emotional security in everyday life. This view, therefore, reinforces the centrality of collective identity as the bedrock for the preservation of both social and cultural integrity.

Further, Brewer (1991) contends that collective values are not accidental acquisitions; they are cultivated from early life stages through a sustained process of socialization encompassing shared experiences, emblematic cultural symbols, and historical narratives that bind group members into a perceived whole. Building on this, Alexander and Seidman (2008) identify the pivotal role of cultural practices and the circulation of media in nurturing a heightened communal consciousness—what Benedict Anderson famously described as the “imagined community,” wherein individuals experience a powerful sense of national belonging and commonality with countless others whom they may never actually encounter. These frameworks collectively point to the inescapable need for deliberate, strategic intervention if collective identity—especially as expressed through traditional cuisine—is to be nurtured and preserved as a cornerstone of daily life.

The exploration of culinary tourism, cultural reflection, and environmental implementation in recent scholarship underscores the extensive impact that both ambiance and service quality exert upon the customer experience within the food industry. Notably, empirical case studies have consistently demonstrated that the overall environment in which food is served—encompassing everything from architectural aesthetics, interior décor, and lighting to the interpersonal aspects of staff behaviour—can dramatically shape, enhance, or in some cases, undermine, the tourism experience as a whole. For instance, a recent investigation into a culinary establishment revealed how the atmosphere—its visual design, lighting, and the conduct and engagement of the staff—functions not merely as a backdrop, but as a dynamic component integral to the guest's satisfaction. In this context, ambiance and service do not simply complement the culinary offering; rather, they are central determinants of whether a dining event becomes a memorable cultural encounter or remains forgettable. The implication is that any successful culinary tourism venture must regard these elements as indispensable (Sukartini et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the connection between cultural reflection and comfort in culinary spaces has emerged as an area of growing academic interest. Several studies have sought to analyse how venues such as coffee shops—often situated at the intersection of local lifestyle and the broader tourism sector—come to embody and project the values, identity, and even the social comfort of their communities. These spaces, by offering a welcoming and familiar atmosphere, serve as important loci for cultural transmission and informal intercultural exchange. Indeed, coffee shops provide a unique vantage point from which to examine how commercial hospitality venues participate in preserving, transmitting, and reshaping local culture. In doing so, they demonstrate that establishments within the food sector not only provide meals, but also foster environments that enable dialogue, a sense of place, and a feeling of belonging for travellers seeking authentic cultural engagement (Wajdi et al., 2024).

Moreover, the imperative for environmental sustainability within food tourism has become increasingly pronounced, especially in regions experiencing significant visitor pressure. Scholarly work examining sustainable practices within culinary markets—such as food courts—suggests that the integration of eco-conscious operations (including, but not limited to, responsible sourcing, waste reduction strategies, and environmentally friendly packaging) is both possible and necessary. These efforts must strike a balance between meeting tourists' demand for authentic, immersive gastronomic experiences and the long-term viability of local ecosystems. Studies highlight that the adoption of sustainable practices is no longer simply desirable, but essential, given the rising consumer consciousness regarding environmental responsibility within the hospitality industry. As such, sustainability is not auxiliary to culinary tourism; rather, it is foundational to its future success (Susanto et al., 2024).

An additional dimension to consider is the interplay of global gastronomic trends and cultural exchange within food courts. Contemporary food courts operate as microcosms of global diversity—spaces where culinary traditions from multiple cultures coexist and intermingle. This convergence invites both local residents and international visitors to sample, compare, and appreciate a multitude of culinary styles, thus facilitating cross-cultural learning and challenging enduring notions of what constitutes culinary authenticity. These environments, therefore, do not merely reflect diversity; they actively promote the fusion of traditions and the continual redefinition of culinary boundaries. As subjects of academic inquiry, food courts reveal much about the mechanisms of cultural hybridization within modern tourism and the food industry at large (Pugra et al., 2025).

Taken together, these scholarly findings demonstrate a growing recognition of the complex, multifaceted role that food now occupies at the intersection of tourism, culture, and sustainable practice. While progress has undoubtedly been made, the literature points to a significant need for integrative research strategies that simultaneously address the demands for sustainability, cultural authenticity, and exceptional service quality within culinary tourism. Such multifaceted approaches are deemed necessary to create tourism experiences that are both

ethically responsible and profoundly enriching for the modern, conscientious traveller. In summary, the strategic integration of sustainable measures, authentic cultural practices, and high-calibre service is not only advisable but critical for the continued advancement and relevance of the culinary tourism sector.

Drawing on this body of knowledge, the present study seeks to address several interrelated research questions: (1) How do urban and rural communities understand and value traditional culinary practices as signifiers of cultural identity? (2) In what ways do these culinary traditions contribute to the formation of local historical narratives across diverse Indonesian communities? (3) How are traditional culinary arts mobilized as instruments for Indonesian cultural diplomacy on the international stage? (4) What is the role of mass media and digital platforms in renegotiating and transforming the public perception and image of traditional culinary arts?

Accordingly, the overarching aim of this research is to critically examine the collective identity of Indonesian society through the prism of traditional culinary arts, regarded here as potent social symbols. The study's objectives are as follows: first, to analyse how urban and rural populations perceive and utilize traditional culinary arts as markers of cultural belonging; second, to investigate how the meanings attached to these culinary practices inform local historical narratives; third, to explore the instrumentalization of culinary heritage in advancing Indonesia's cultural diplomacy; and fourth, to assess the ways in which digitalization and new media are reshaping public understandings of traditional foodways.

By pursuing these lines of inquiry, the intended contribution of this work is to advance our understanding of traditional culinary arts not as static relics, but as dynamic and deeply social phenomena that fuel collective identity formation, community cohesion, and the continued preservation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study intends to illuminate the new adaptive strategies and tensions that arise as these traditions encounter the accelerating forces of modernization and globalization. Through such exploration, this research aspires to clarify the centrality of culinary practice as a locus for both continuity and innovation within Indonesian society.

2. Method

This research deploys a descriptive qualitative approach, focused on unravelling the intricate role of traditional Indonesian culinary arts as both a social symbol and a cornerstone of collective identity. Rather than relying on numerical proxies or statistical testing, this method allows for granular exploration into how food traditions carve out space in the Indonesian social imagination—how they interlink with history, culture, and shared values. Essentially, it is through these qualitative angles that deeper understanding of meaning, significance, and social function emerges.

Central to the methodology is documentary research: an analytical dive into secondary data sources, considered essential for contextualizing cultural phenomena in their proper historical and social frames (Scott, 2006). The rationale for employing a descriptive qualitative approach hinges on its attunement to context and perspective. Quantitative surveys alone can't map the emotional or symbolic resonance of, say, rendang or sate in shaping identity. Instead, qualitative inquiry reveals the lived experiences, subtle perceptions, and layered interpretations woven into everyday practice by individuals—from younger generations experimenting with fusion versions, to culinary professionals safeguarding tradition, and communities at large navigating changing tastes (Trisutaguna et al., 2025).

Alongside primary analysis, this study carried out a comprehensive documentation review, systematically curating material relevant to Indonesian culinary tradition and its social role. This included scholarly publications, archival records, and even contemporary digital content (from YouTube documentaries on street vendors to online recipe comment sections), enabling the researcher to capture how discussions around traditional food evolve over time and

across platforms. Documentary methods, in this sense, function not just to gather facts, but to surface the symbolic codes, norms, and narrative patterns particular to the Indonesian context (Scott, 2006).

For data analysis, the study employed a rigorous thematic approach. Collected documents and qualitative materials underwent careful categorization, interpretation, and coding, aimed at making sense of underlying patterns and extracting salient themes around the symbolism and identity work performed by traditional foods. Thematic analysis, as developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), is especially suited here, offering a structured pathway for grouping and distilling diverse social meanings into a clear, coherent synthesis. This analytic strategy also helps to differentiate prevailing strengths and gaps in how these foodways are preserved, celebrated, or contested in the contemporary moment.

Moreover, insights derived from this descriptive qualitative and documentary methodology generate more than just thick description—they set the stage for actionable recommendations. That might include strategies to reinforce traditional culinary preservation policies, foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, or guide cultural promotion both inside Indonesia and on the global stage. Sandelowski (2000) underscores this point: qualitative descriptive research is particularly effective when the aim is to capture authentic social realities in a relatively unfiltered manner, grounding findings in direct evidence free from excessive theoretical abstraction.

The combination of descriptive qualitative analysis and methodical documentation review not only strengthens the investigation's empirical base but also illuminates the processes by which traditional food practices act as both repositories and transmitters of Indonesian collective identity. This approach enables the present research to move from understanding to advocacy—providing substantive insights as well as contextually sensitive recommendations for safeguarding culinary heritage in an era of rapid cultural change. As such, the project aspires not just to describe, but to inform policy and enrich the ongoing conversation on cultural resilience and adaptation in Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Public perceptions of traditional cuisine vary considerably, shaped primarily by social and cultural contexts. Where individuals reside—urban or rural settings—plays a significant role, alongside their exposure to local customs, communal values, and available knowledge. In rural communities, traditional cuisine is not merely food; rather, it is interwoven with everyday life and local rituals. These dishes are routinely served during customary ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and family gatherings. In contrast, urban residents often view traditional food as something nostalgic or exotic—more of a cultural symbol than a daily necessity. Arsil et al. (2018) emphasized that spatial variables, such as rural versus urban residence, notably influence food preferences relating to tradition.

The rural context fosters strong emotional connections to traditional cuisine, in large part because food remains central to various social ceremonies, as well as the routine process of sustaining family ties and community history. Recipes and culinary practices are actively transmitted from one generation to another, making food a living medium for preserving and transmitting family values. Irawan et al. (2024) reinforce this perspective, arguing that traditional cuisine in rural settings serves as a manifestation of cultural continuity—sustained emotionally and woven into the daily rhythms of life.

In the urban environment, by contrast, traditional cuisine often shifts toward commodification. Dishes that once held ritualistic importance are now repurposed for commercial appeal and market consumption. Urban residents may rarely experience the communal aspects of traditional cooking due to diminished engagement with hands-on culinary rituals. Instead, traditional dishes are encountered through restaurants, food festivals, and specialized events. Mardatillah et al. (2019) discuss this shift, noting how traditional cuisine—

once regarded as intangible heritage – frequently becomes a product for sale, detached from its deeper communal context.

The process of acquiring culinary knowledge also diverges between rural and urban settings. Direct, intergenerational transmission of skills remains prevalent in villages, as children learn by observing and participating in meal preparation. Meanwhile, in urban centers, formal education and digital media have become the primary sources for discovering traditional foods. Haselmair et al. (2014) suggest that urbanization reduces the frequency and intensity of direct social interactions around culinary activities, undermining the interpersonal aspects vital for sustaining traditional knowledge.

Traditional cuisine remains an integral part of group identity within rural contexts, maintained as a daily fixture. In contrast, urban residents access these dishes selectively – often restricting their consumption to special occasions such as local festivals or cultural holidays. Even in metropolitan areas, some efforts persist to maintain culinary heritage, as observed by Colozza & Avendano (2019), who assert that practices like home-cooking and food sharing continue, reinforcing culinary culture despite environmental shifts.

Yet, the accelerating pace of urbanization poses a threat to the preservation of traditional cuisine. The homogenization of taste and the growing preference for convenient, ready-to-eat foods signal a transition away from time-intensive traditional meals. Increasingly, families in urban centers opt for packaged or restaurant-prepared options in lieu of cooking at home – a trend documented by Colozza & Avendano (2019).

Nonetheless, some urban-based community groups, especially among local diasporas and youth organizations, actively work to revitalize and sustain tradition through workshops, food festivals, and businesses centred on cultural identity. Such grassroots initiatives represent a conscious effort to counterbalance the erosion of culinary heritage.

As Sultani et al. (2020) demonstrate, traditional beverages such as Betawi's beer pletok exemplify the creative adaptations within culinary heritage – incorporating local spices while responding to foreign influences. These drinks are not simply refreshments; they function as symbols of spiritual and social bonds, helping to sustain group identity amidst modern pressures. Traditional cuisine regularly reflects this dynamic process of cultural integration: Indian influences are apparent in Acehnese curry, Arab innovations manifest in martabak, and Chinese culinary legacies appear in meatballs and spring rolls. This array of influences underscores that traditional cuisine evolves continually, shaped by multifaceted exchanges.

Moreover, food serves as a distinct marker of ethnic and communal identity. For example, rendang, within the Minangkabau community, encapsulates not only culinary technique but also the group's history and value systems. Fatimah et al. (2021) argued that rendang represents more than just a celebrated dish; it functions as an emblem of collective Minangkabau identity, symbolizing pride and establishing a direct connection to ancestral legacies.

3.2 Discussion

The above findings indicate that traditional cuisine occupies a complex and multifaceted position within both rural and urban frameworks. In rural communities, food customs are central to cultural continuity, operating as living repositories for collective memory and social values. The steady, everyday enactment of these culinary practices reinforces communal bonds and embeds heritage in commonplace routines. Food in these contexts is treated as both sustenance and a means of transmitting knowledge, traditions, and social cohesion across generations.

Urban settings, however, present a contrasting scenario. The pressures of modernity, increased pace of life, and a leaning toward convenience foods erode the regular transmission of traditional culinary knowledge. As traditional cooking becomes less frequent due to limited time and changing lifestyle priorities, food culture may risk detachment from its original context. Yet, this commodification and partial loss do not signal a complete disappearance; rather, what emerges is an adaptation. Urban residents often seek to retain connections to their heritage by

engaging with tradition during culturally significant events or through curated culinary experiences.

This divergence between rural and urban experiences underscores the importance of environment in shaping both the perception and persistence of traditional cuisine. Rural communities remain more closely tethered to historical practices and interpersonal methods of knowledge transfer. Urban communities tend to reconstruct their relationship to food through community events, digital engagement, and entrepreneurship – demonstrating adaptability even amid decreased daily practice.

At the same time, the ongoing transformation of traditional cuisine – evident in the adoption of foreign ingredients, fusion of techniques, and creative reinterpretations – highlights its resilience. Cultural exchange, whether through historical trade, migration, or global connectivity, has resulted in a shared yet diversified culinary heritage. Traditional dishes thus function as dynamic cultural artifacts, capable of encapsulating ethnic identity and philosophical values while integrating new elements.

Rendang's symbolic stature in Minangkabau society epitomizes this phenomenon. The dish is not only relished for its flavour but also regarded as a narrative vehicle – expressing group pride, historical continuity, and underlying philosophies of community life.

Ultimately, traditional cuisine persists as both a means of daily sustenance and a repository of intangible cultural wealth. Whether in rural villages, where it remains woven into daily life, or in cities, where it is selectively celebrated or adapted, it continues to scaffold identity and collective memory. The emergence of contemporary efforts – be it through workshops, businesses, or public events – demonstrates an ongoing commitment to safeguarding and reimagining tradition, ensuring that food heritage remains a living, evolving feature of cultural existence.

Rusmaniah et al. (2022) observed that within the Banjar community, the safeguarding of traditional culinary practices – *jengkol tahilala* being a notable example – embodies not merely a gastronomic choice but a continuation of inherited wisdom and cultural values. Crucially, the act of preserving and producing this dish transcends individual families: it morphs into a collective activity that anchors communal identity, functioning as an artifact of Pingaran Village's social memory and local history. The process of *jengkol tahilala* production itself is profoundly collaborative, embedded in the Banjar worldview through principles such as *bedingsanakan* (kinship solidarity), *betatulungan* (mutual assistance), and *bakalah bamanang* (shared benefit). These values are enacted both in the kitchen and beyond, underscoring the deeply ingrained ethos of togetherness. The reliance on ancestral recipes not only highlights the transmission of culinary technique but also ensures the narrative thread connecting past and present generations remains unbroken. Notably, commercial transactions involving *jengkol tahilala* are imbued with sincerity and gratitude: the sale of these foods becomes an avenue through which historical and social values are enacted and validated, positioning culinary practice as far more than a market transaction. Juniarti's (2021) research on the Pasemah Tribe further reinforces the notion of food as a conduit for intergenerational value transmission. Culinary traditions such as *lemang*, *bipang*, and *bipak* operate as vehicles for passing spiritual and social norms, reinforcing historical narratives and strengthening local social bonds. Through these foods, intangible cultural heritage is made tangible, and a sense of collective identity is nurtured across generations.

Visual representations of culinary heritage serve a symbolic purpose as well. In Kupang, signboards identifying local dishes such as *se'i babi* and *jagung bose* function as public markers of ethnic identity (Benu et al., 2025). These signifiers do more than simply market food: they narrate ethnic origin stories and anchor historical memory within the shared spaces of daily life. Taking a historiographical perspective, Rohmawati (2024) argues that cookbooks – produced from the colonial era to post-independence – hold crucial insights into shifting values and identity within Indonesian society. Early colonial cookbooks, for instance, were structured along lines of European versus indigenous culture, thus directly reflecting the entrenched social stratifications of the time. During the independence era, culinary writers such as Chailan Sjamsu contributed to the evolution of national identity through recipes that consciously blended local ingredients and

regional traditions. This shift in culinary literature not only provided practical instructional content but became an important component of nationalist discourse. Cookbooks, in this context, are positioned as instruments of intentional identity construction: they serve simultaneously as repositories of local heritage and as aspirational texts articulating a unified Indonesian identity, as suggested by Rohmawati (2024).

Traditional culinary arts have accordingly evolved into vital tools of cultural diplomacy. Significantly, the pivotal role played by women in the intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge cannot be overstated, even though it is often marginalized in dominant narratives. The kitchen – far from being a mere site of domestic labor – emerges as a principal locus for the perpetuation of values, techniques, and traditions. On a broader scale, state-sponsored initiatives such as Indonesia's "Spice Up the World" campaign exemplify the strategic deployment of culinary heritage to cultivate a positive national identity internationally. Through the global promotion of emblematic dishes such as rendang, fried rice, and satay, these programs endeavour both to elevate the stature of Indonesian cuisine and strengthen national branding.

Yayusman et al. (2023) offer further evidence from abroad, specifically in the Australian setting, where Indonesian dishes – including rendang, *satay*, *ayam betutu*, and *sate lilit* – act as vehicles for cultural diplomacy. Restaurants run by members of the Indonesian diaspora serve as vital nodes of gastrodiplomacy, providing platforms for sharing Indonesian customs and traditions with international audiences and constructing cultural spaces outside the homeland.

Supporting this, the application of Geographical Indications (GI) and coherent national branding – exemplified by "Kopi Indonesia" – provides concrete proof of how Indonesian food products serve as symbols of collective identity on the world stage. This approach is fundamentally integrative, unifying diverse regional products within a single, globally-recognizable framework and was highlighted by Trihartono and Ladiqi (2022) as particularly effective in the promotion of coffee varietals under a shared Indonesian banner.

The diplomatic potential of culinary heritage extends even further, as seen in the case study from Toronto, where the promotion of traditional Indonesian foods such as rendang and satay is linked to improvements in perceptions of Indonesia within Canadian society (Darma & Nuryanto, 2025). Such practices underscore the role of food in cultural exchange: the sharing of dishes is both a social and a diplomatic act, fostering intercultural understanding and strengthening bilateral relations. Foodways in Indonesia operate at the intersection of history, cultural identity, and diplomacy. Traditional cuisine constitutes not only a medium for preserving memory and transmitting values but also serves as a flexible tool for advancing both local solidarity and national interests, domestically and on the international stage.

The challenges facing the preservation of Indonesia's traditional culinary heritage are both significant and complex. Despite Indonesia's extraordinary array of regional dishes, there remains a striking lack of exposure for many traditional foods, especially those outside the well-trodden culinary paths of Java and Sumatra. This pattern, as Trihartono and Ladiqi (2022) discuss, isn't merely a matter of oversight – it reflects stark imbalances in how the national food identity is constructed and represented both within Indonesia and beyond its borders. As a result, numerous unique culinary traditions risk marginalization, which in turn restricts the scope of more comprehensive and inclusive socio-cultural strategies.

Addressing this issue is by no means simple and demands a multi-faceted, collaborative approach. Local communities, academic researchers, government entities, and digital media professionals all have essential roles to play. Programs such as regional culinary festivals can offer platforms for lesser-known dishes to gain visibility, while systematic audio-visual documentation can ensure that recipes and their stories aren't lost with time. Integrating culinary studies into school curricula – not just as a nod to home economics, but as a robust exploration of culture and identity – can encourage new generations to appreciate, preserve, and innovate upon this heritage. In this way, traditional cuisine ceases to be merely a matter of personal or regional consumption; it becomes a living educational tool, reinforcing awareness and pride in Indonesia's diverse cultural patrimony.

Contemporary mass and digital media have dramatically reshaped the public's perception of what traditional cuisine means. What was once seen as local heritage has transformed into a visual spectacle and a driver of economic activity. Food bloggers, digital storytellers, and social media influencers now wield remarkable power in elevating traditional cuisine to new audiences through compelling visuals and narratives. Their work doesn't just popularize particular dishes—it reshapes ideas about what foods represent 'authentic' Indonesia, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Indeed, recent studies underscore this shifting dynamic. Damayanti et al. (2025) identified a strong impact of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on platforms like Instagram and TikTok in shaping public perceptions of traditional foods in urban centers such as Jakarta. Interestingly, while international cuisine may continue to dominate some spaces, digital engagement with local dishes is spurring fresh consumer curiosity. Social media's interactive affordances—comments, shares, viral challenges—make it an especially potent tool for promoting traditional foods to broader, younger, and more globally connected audiences.

There is, however, a paradox inherent in this digital age. As Destriana et al. (2020) observe, the aestheticization of food on visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok can sometimes strip away the deeper ritualistic, symbolic, and communal meanings that these dishes historically carried. While #foodporn-worthy presentations dazzle viewers and make local cuisine enticing to urban and global audiences, there is a risk that such representations reduce complex cultural practices to surface-level visuals, losing much of the depth that originally defined them.

At the same time, the digital turn offers undeniable benefits. Rohman and Avika (2024) discuss how innovations like geospatial culinary tourism applications provide enhanced access to information for tourists and locals alike, broadening the reach and sustainability of regional culinary practices. Such tools can foster opportunities not just for preservation but also for innovation and economic development, enriching collective cultural representation through technology. Finally, targeted digital marketing initiatives, as demonstrated by Oktaviany et al. (2024) in their analysis of the TikTok account @jihannnpp, illustrate how strategies such as hashtag campaigns, interactive reviews, and cross-platform promotion can effectively reshape and modernize the branding of traditional dishes. These efforts translate local culinary knowledge for new urban and digital audiences, turning long-established food traditions into trending phenomena that both honour history and adapt to new forms of cultural consumption.

The intersection of traditional culinary preservation and modern digital practice is marked by both opportunities and challenges. The task of maintaining Indonesia's culinary heritage requires not only nostalgia and pride but also strategic adaptation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a willingness to embrace both the risks and rewards of the digital age.

4. Conclusion

Traditional Indonesian cuisine, far from being a matter solely of sustenance, is deeply interwoven with the nation's fabric of cultural identity, collective memory, and local historical narratives (Wijaya, 2019). Beyond filling plates, culinary practices act as repositories of ancestral wisdom, encode social norms, and embody the ethnic symbolism intrinsic to the archipelago's diverse communities. For example, time-honoured dishes such as *rendang*, *jagung bose*, *lemang*, *gipang*, and *barusak* are not merely provisions but are, in fact, edible vessels for intergenerational cultural transmission. These foods encapsulate the worldviews, rituals, and social values inherited from previous generations and continually reinterpreted by successive ones.

A closer examination through socio-cultural analysis underscores the role of food as a living archive, preserving the unique narrative of each region. Regional specialties like Cirebon's *nasi jamblang* and *empal gentong*, Kupang's *se'i babi*, and *jengkol tahilala* from Pingaran Village serve as tangible documentation of regional histories and shifting socio-cultural landscapes. They reflect not only local ingenuity in utilizing available resources but also the adaptations necessitated by external influences—whether from colonial encounters, migratory flows, or

transformations in societal structure. Rohmawati (2024) notes that the foodways of Indonesia bear traces of these encounters, observable in ingredient choices, culinary techniques, and the social contexts in which meals are consumed. The case of Betawi's *bir pletok*, as analysed by Sultani et al. (2020), exemplifies the ability of traditional foods to assimilate global modernity while maintaining a distinct cultural essence. Here, culinary innovation and adaptation underscore that tradition, rather than being static, is dynamic—constantly reimagined and recontextualized to remain relevant within contemporary social realities. The reinvention of taste and presentation styles not only signal heritage preservation but also enable cultural forms like Betawi culinary traditions to serve as a conduit for social harmony—captured in the concept of

This dynamic role positions food as a vital bridge, connecting historical consciousness to current lived experience. Importantly, culinary arts have moved beyond being markers of local identity to become instruments of national unification, often intentionally cultivated by the state. Such state-driven efforts utilize popular food practices as platforms for cultural diplomacy, elevating Indonesian foods to symbols of soft power (Rohmawati, 2024). Through this process, local dishes transcend their origins, emerging as shared national signifiers capable of uniting diverse populations and representing Indonesian identity on the global stage. Food, in this context, acts almost as a lingua franca whose symbolism is accessible and evocative across domestic and international boundaries.

Despite these progressive developments, significant challenges persist—most notably concerning the equitable representation of Indonesia's vast culinary diversity. There is a marked imbalance in the official and popular recognition of dishes from regions beyond Java and Sumatra (Trihartono & Ladiqi, 2022). This disparity is apparent in media coverage, cultural policymaking, and public consciousness, effectively marginalizing many culinary traditions from Eastern Indonesia and remote regions. Such inequality not only limits the full realization of Indonesia's multicultural identity but also risks further entrenching hierarchical cultural narratives. If left unaddressed, these disparities may lead to the dominance of select traditions to the detriment of others, eroding the pluralism that is foundational to the nation's culinary and cultural heritage.

To mitigate this, it is essential to adopt preservation strategies premised on inclusive representation and cultural justice. Practical measures could include the organization of regional culinary festivals, expansion of audio-visual documentation projects, and the formal integration of diverse food traditions into educational curricula. Furthermore, cross-cultural culinary education—particularly when initiated at the primary and secondary school levels—can inculcate a sense of shared ownership and pride among younger generations. Through such educational initiatives, the preservation of culinary diversity becomes not merely a conservation project but an active process of cultural formation and civic engagement.

When traditional cuisine is acknowledged not just as a static heritage but recognized as a site of dynamic transformation, its social and cultural significance is vastly amplified. Incorporating food studies into formal education and cultural diplomacy initiatives opens avenues for Indonesian cuisine to serve as a living testament to adaptability, resilience, and unity in diversity. The sustained synergy of grassroots participation and top-down policy support is crucial in this endeavour. By fostering both community-driven innovation and state-level support, Indonesia can ensure that traditional culinary arts thrive—not merely as nostalgia-laden artifacts, but as an integral part of cultural policy, historical consciousness, and the evolving collective imagination of the nation. In essence, the realm of food extends beyond daily sustenance, resonating deeply as both a symbol and a mechanism of national identity in the modern era.

The proliferation of mass media and the sweeping tide of digitalization have undeniably forged new avenues for representing and interpreting traditional culinary practices. Specifically, digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and an endless stream of vlogs have effectively widened the global exposure and allure of Indonesian culinary arts. These visual media do not merely broadcast appetizing images—they play a pivotal role in building contemporary culinary branding and in capturing the engagement of younger generations.

Oktaviany et al. (2024) examined this phenomenon through the lens of the Cirebon culinary TikTok account @jihannnpp, which serves as a striking example of how digital storytelling can transform local culinary traditions – recasting them as dynamic, urban, and visually captivating, thus attracting audiences far beyond their original context.

Digital channels like YouTube and TikTok operate as powerful tools for both the introduction and documentation of localized culinary practices. Admittedly, these media provide unprecedented opportunities for communities to archive their culinary heritage, share techniques, and engage in cultural exchange. Nonetheless, these same platforms pose a significant risk: the reduction or oversimplification of complex culinary narratives into viral, surface-level visual content. When the emphasis tips towards shareability over substance, there is a real danger of eroding the embedded cultural, historical, and social contexts that give these practices their true meaning. This challenge underscores the urgent need for heightened cultural literacy – not only among content creators but also among viewers – so that digital culinary promotions transcend mere entertainment and continue to reflect substantive educational and ethnographic narratives, as Tanggur et al. (2024) emphasize.

Furthermore, regulation and policy intervention emerge as indispensable mechanisms in ensuring the sustainable recognition and preservation of culinary arts as part of national cultural heritage. Robust institutional and legal frameworks – ranging from the formal recognition of Geographical Indications to certification as cultural heritage – provide not only legitimacy, but also protection against cultural misappropriation and commercial exploitation. The state, therefore, occupies a critical position by integrating culinary traditions into broader national cultural and educational strategies, solidifying their role in shaping collective identity.

Within this landscape, the issue of culinary commodification has become increasingly apparent. The digitization of food culture, with its relentless focus on visual aesthetics, can uncouple dishes from their sociocultural moorings. The authentic meanings – whether related to ritual, intergenerational kinship, or spiritual significance – risk marginalization or even disappearance within algorithm-driven digital narratives. A critical, reflexive approach to using digital media is, then, not merely desirable but essential to ensure that the expression of traditional culinary values remains intact and authentic.

At the global level, traditional Indonesian cuisine's role has expanded far beyond the kitchen, positioning itself as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy. State-backed initiatives such as "Spice Up the World," Indonesian Gastronomy Week, and targeted diaspora activities in cities like Toronto and Sydney demonstrate the multi-layered deployment of food as a medium both for projecting national identity and fostering a positive international image. Research by Yayusman et al. (2023), conducted among Indonesian diaspora communities in Australia, confirms that diaspora-run restaurants do much more than serve familiar dishes – they are active agents of cultural diplomacy, blending local traditions with global culinary expectations through a sophisticated gastronomic approach. Trihartono and Ladiqi (2022) further emphasize how national branding strategies, such as the use of Geographical Indications for products like coffee and spices, not only safeguard authenticity but also construct culinary arts as emblematic of national quality and a globally recognized cultural identity. These moves remind us that the significance of Indonesia's culinary arts is not circumscribed to domestic appreciation, but reaches outwards, actively shaping international perceptions of the country and its people.

In synthesis, the accumulated findings make clear that Indonesia's traditional culinary arts constitute complex cultural entities, carrying layers of historical, social, and diplomatic meaning. Preserving their status as living cultural representations requires a sustained and collaborative effort – uniting local communities, academics, state institutions, and media professionals. It is only through such cross-sectoral engagement that Indonesia's food heritage can move beyond fleeting viral trends, continuing to serve as a profound repository for the nation's values and identities, rather than merely an ephemeral spectacle in the digital realm.

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