

Surabaya's Cultural Diplomacy in Promoting Rujak Uleg Festival to International Students in 2024-2026

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Abstract

This study analyzes Surabaya's cultural diplomacy in promoting local culture to international students through the Rujak Uleg Festival during the 2024-2026 period. The research aims to examine how the Surabaya City Government through the Department of Culture, Youth, Sport, and Tourism (Disbudporapar) utilizes the Rujak Uleg Festival as a medium of cultural diplomacy towards international students. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, with data collected through in-depth interviews, official documents from Disbudporapar, documentations, and literature studies. The findings show that the Rujak Uleg Festival has developed beyond an annual culinary event into a participatory platform for cultural diplomacy. By using Goff's cultural diplomacy concept, particularly the indicators of connection, consistency, and innovation, this study finds that the Surabaya city government successfully builds cultural engagement through direct interaction between international students and local communities, consistently involves international students as honorary guests, and continuously develops innovative approaches through festival themes and digital engagement. The findings also show that besides experiencing Surabaya's local culture, international students have the potential to act as informal cultural intermediaries who convey their lived cultural experiences back to their origin networks.

Keywords: *cultural diplomacy, Rujak Uleg Festival, international students, Surabaya*

Introduction

The importance of culture in international relations can be seen through the practice of cultural diplomacy. While cultural diplomacy was previously understood primarily as an exchange of ideas and values conducted by states (Clarke, 2020), this practice is now increasingly developing at the subnational level, where local governments leverage the distinctiveness of local culture to build direct relationships with foreign publics (Goff, 2013a). Cultural diplomacy through local cuisine has also become a particularly effective approach, as traditional food can serve as a medium of communication to introduce a region's history, values, and social identity to the international audience.

The relationship between food and cultural identity is very close, as local cuisine reflects the traditions, values, and character of a community. Therefore, food is no longer viewed merely as a daily necessity, but also as a strategic tool and a medium of cultural communication that can convey the meaning and identity of a group to the global audience. This culinary-based approach is often seen through local cultural festivals that transform regional food traditions into more interactive and participatory experiences, thereby

strengthening ties with foreign publics (Nazir et al., 2025). Compared to formal political approaches, cultural diplomacy tends to foster more flexible and persuasive interactions because it emphasizes cultural experiences and direct people-to-people connections. Furthermore, amidst the tide of globalization and the influx of foreign cultural influences, efforts to both introduce and preserve local culture have become increasingly important to ensure that a region's cultural identity remains recognized.

In this context, the Surabaya City Government, through the Department of Culture, Youth, Sports, and Tourism (Disbudporapar), plays an active role in promoting local culture through various cultural and tourism programs (Santoso, 2022). The Surabaya City Government utilizes cultural activities not only as a form of local cultural preservation but also as a communication medium to introduce the identity of Surabaya City to a broader audience, including an international audience. Through these activities, local culture is positioned as part of the city's identity capable of attracting the attention of both domestic and international audiences.

One of the cultural programs organized by the Surabaya City Government is the *Rujak Uleg* Festival, which has been held since 2004 by Disbudporapar as part of the series of events commemorating Surabaya City's Anniversary (Disbudporapar, 2026). At the outset of its organization, this festival aimed to preserve *rujak cingur* as both a signature dish and a cultural identity of the people of Surabaya (Anwari, 2023). *Rujak cingur* is not only viewed as a traditional food but also as a cultural symbol representing the character and uniqueness of the City of Surabaya. Therefore, this festival serves as one of the local government's efforts to preserve local culture so that it remains recognized amidst the progression of time and the tide of modernization.

Over time, the role of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival has evolved significantly. The festival is no longer merely an annual ceremonial event, but is also utilized as a platform to promote Surabaya's culture and tourism to a wider audience. The festival's participants and visitors have become increasingly diverse, ranging from local residents, domestic and international tourists, as well as international students currently studying in Surabaya. This demonstrates that the Surabaya City Government is not only striving to preserve local culture within its own community, but is also beginning to introduce Surabaya's culture to an international audience through open and participatory cultural activities.

To understand the role of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival in this study, it is important to distinguish cultural diplomacy from other forms of cultural activities, such as cultural promotion, tourism promotion, city branding, and cultural exchange. Cultural promotion focuses on introducing and raising awareness of cultural assets (Mele et al., 2021), while tourism promotion is more directed toward destination marketing and increasing tourist visits (Gebreel & Shuayb, 2022). Meanwhile, city branding seeks to shape and communicate a city's identity to various target audiences, such as tourists, investors, and talent (Fathinnah et al., 2022). Cultural exchange emphasizes two-way interaction that enables individuals to gain cultural experiences, build intercultural competence, and foster tolerance (EL-Asri & El Karfa,

2024). Cultural diplomacy uses cultural activities as a means of building interaction and relationships with foreign audiences.

During the 2024–2026 period, the Surabaya City Government is further developing the *Rujak Uleg* Festival as a space for cultural interaction that brings together local communities with international audiences. During this period, the festival will not only focus on the preservation of traditional cuisine, but will also be directed as a means to introduce Surabaya's cultural identity more intimately to international participants (Disbudporapar, 2026). Thus, the festival will not only function as an annual cultural entertainment event, but also as a medium for cultural experiences that can be directly experienced by international audiences.

One of the unique aspects of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival during the 2024–2026 period lies in the involvement of international students in Surabaya as one of the festival's target audiences. International students do not merely attend as spectators, but are also directly engaged in various participatory activities, such as learning to make and pound *rujak* together with the local community. Through these activities, international students do not merely view local culture as a performance, but also gain an understanding of the processes, values, and social interactions inherent in Surabaya's traditions (Koloway, 2024). This approach demonstrates that the festival is designed as a more interactive cultural experience rooted in direct participation.

The involvement of international students also reflects the cultural diplomacy efforts undertaken by the Surabaya City Government through a more participatory and experience-based cultural approach. International students are viewed as a strategic target audience, because they have lived in Surabaya for a certain period of time, and have the potential to share their experiences and understanding of Surabaya's culture with people in their home countries (Interview with the Staff of Disbudporapar, 16 April 2026). Thus, the *Rujak Uleg* Festival not only serves as a space for preserving local traditions, but has also evolved into a cultural product utilized by the Surabaya City Government as a tool for cultural diplomacy toward an international audience (Goff, 2013b).

Previous studies have examined the *Rujak Uleg* Festival and Surabaya's culinary culture from various perspectives. The *Rujak Uleg* Festival is viewed as a cultural promotion tool utilized by the Surabaya City Government to preserve local cultural heritage while supporting regional tourism promotion in the digital age (Santoso, 2022). Studies on gastronomic diplomacy categorize the use of food in international relations into three main domains, or "taste diplomacies": gastrodiploamacy as a government-to-citizens (G2C) approach through the promotion of culinary culture to foreign audiences to build soft power; culinary diplomacy as official banquets in government-to-government (G2G) relations; and food diplomacy, which relates to food security and humanitarian aid (Cabral et al., 2025). From a social psychology perspective, interactions through cuisine can be explained by the contact hypothesis and the exposure effect, whereby exposure to local foods can increase familiarity and foster an emotional attachment to the culture being introduced (Cabral et al., 2024). Meanwhile, tourism research indicates that local gastronomy also influences perceptions of a destination. Gastronomic identity, particularly its cultural aspects and food

quality, influences a destination's brand identity, although assessments vary among stakeholders (Suna & Alvarez, 2021). In the context of festivals, the quality of festival attributes can shape an interactive festival experience, encompassing education, entertainment, aesthetics, and recreation which in turn contributes to visitor satisfaction, place attachment, and the intention to recommend the destination (Culha, 2020).

In the context of local culture, *rujak cingur* is understood as a distinctive tourist attraction of Surabaya that holds cultural identity value and needs to be preserved through collaboration among various stakeholders (Mau et al., 2022). Other studies also indicate that culinary consumption experiences can shape a positive image of Surabaya as a culinary tourism destination (Fudyanto et al., 2025), while *rujak cingur* remains a symbol of the social identity of Surabaya's community amidst the development of modernity (Mulawato & Handoyo, 2024).

In brief, previous researches have focused on the aspects of economy, tourism, city branding, culinary identity and cultural product innovation. Whereas this research would explore on the *Rujak Uleg* Festival as a tool for cultural diplomacy employed by the Surabaya City Government to reach an international audience. Additionally, the involvement of international students as a target audience who directly participate in local cultural practices, such as making and grinding *rujak* alongside local residents has also been under-explored in prior research. In fact, such direct involvement demonstrates a more participatory and experience-based cultural approach in introducing local culture to international audiences.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural diplomacy practices carried out through the *Rujak Uleg* Festival. The choice of this method aligns with the perspective of Creswell and Poth (2018), who explain that qualitative research focuses on the researcher's efforts to construct a holistic and complex picture of the social phenomena being studied. This approach was chosen because it allows for the direct observation of the processes, interactions, and meanings that emerge during the implementation of cultural diplomacy, ensuring that the research focuses not only on the final outcomes but also on how these strategies are executed within the real-world context on the ground (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To analyze this issue, this study employs the concept of cultural diplomacy proposed by Goff (2013). This concept was chosen because it is relevant for analyzing how the Surabaya City Government introduces Surabaya's cultural identity to international students through the *Rujak Uleg* Festival. Goff's concept includes three indicators that could be used to analyze cultural diplomacy practices more specifically: connection, consistency, and innovation. Connection is used to examine how the Surabaya City Government fosters closeness with international students through direct engagement in the festival. Consistency is used to analyze the consistency of international student involvement in the *Rujak Uleg* Festival during the 2024–2026 period. Meanwhile, innovation is used to examine the forms of innovation

implemented by the Surabaya City Government in making the *Rujak Uleg* Festival a more engaging and relevant cultural experience for international audiences (Goff, 2013).

During the data collection process, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with staff from the Disbudporapar and international students who participated in the festival activities. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the planning, organization, or participation in the Rujak Uleg Festival. The study involved five informants, consisting of one staff member from the Culture Division and four international students: Michael from Germany, Juliet and Noe from France, and one student representative from Honduras. The Disbudporapar staff member was selected because they were involved in technical coordination, bureaucratic communication, and assisting honored guests and international students. Meanwhile, the international students were selected because they were directly involved in festival activities.

The researcher also collected data from official reports on activities by Disbudporapar, mass media publications, documentation of festival events, and official social media posts related to the *Rujak Uleg* Festival during the 2024–2026 period. These references were used to supplement the interview data and to help the researcher understand the forms of promotion, patterns of event organization, and the involvement of international students in the festival from year to year. The collected data were analyzed using a deductive or theory-driven thematic analysis, in which the data were coded and organized based on Goff's (2013) three dimensions of cultural diplomacy: connection, consistency, and innovation.

In the initial stage, the codes were grouped into three predetermined categories of analysis based on Goff's (2013) dimensions of cultural diplomacy. Subsequently, each code was reviewed to ensure its alignment with the respective categories, and the results were then organized into an analytical discussion. To ensure the credibility of the data, the researcher employed source triangulation by comparing information from Disbudporapar staff, international students, as well as official documents and media archives, government press releases, event documentation, and mass media reports. This comparison process was conducted to ensure that the research findings were supported by multiple sources and did not rely solely on statements from a single informant.

Surabaya's Connection in Promoting *Rujak Uleg* Festival to International Students

Goff (2013) explains that "connection" in cultural diplomacy refers to efforts to build relationships through culture as a means of fostering bond with international audiences. Goff states that *"The effective diplomat is always looking for ways to connect, and culture can provide an effective mode for doing so, especially if the diplomat has listened and internalized the areas of interest and points of resonance that are meaningful to her interlocutors"* (Goff, 2013b). This statement indicates that cultural diplomacy does not focus solely on the transmission of culture, but also on the ability of diplomatic actors to understand the experiences, interests, and matters considered meaningful by the target audience.

The Surabaya City Government has established a connection with international students through the *Rujak Uleg* Festival as a participatory space for cultural interaction. Based on the results of the research interviews, Disbudporapar officially invited international students via letters sent directly to the rectors of universities in Surabaya, such as Airlangga University (UNAIR), the Institute of Technology Sepuluh Nopember (ITS), Surabaya University (UBAYA), and Petra Christian University (Disbudporapar, 2026b). This mechanism indicates that international students are positioned as guests of honor and an important part of Surabaya's cultural diplomacy activities, not merely as ordinary festival visitors.

Disbudporapar also explained that the purpose of involving international students is not merely to have them participate in the festival, but also to introduce them directly to the *Rujak Uleg* culture, so they can understand Surabaya's local traditions. International students are also invited to learn about the process of preparing *rujak*, interacting with the local community, and immersing in the cultural atmosphere of Surabaya.



Figure 1. *International students attended the Rujak Uleg Festival, reflecting cultural and emotional connection. (Source: Disbudporapar Surabaya, 2026)*

According to the Disbudporapar, this involvement is expected to help international students better understand local culture, enabling them to later share their cultural experiences of Surabaya with peers in their home countries (Interview with the Staff of Disbudporapar, 7 May 2026). In this context, international students are viewed as cultural bridges capable of helping to expand the dissemination of positive narratives about Surabaya to the international level.

This connection is further evident through the "*nguleg*" or grinding activity with the local community, which is a central part of the festival. International students do not merely attend as spectators, but actively participate in local cultural practices. This activity fosters human connection by creating closer social interactions between the people of Surabaya and

international students. In addition to introducing Surabaya's signature cuisine, the event offers cultural experiences that cannot be found in their home countries.

This is evident from interviews with international students who participated in the *Rujak Uleg* Festival. Michael, a student from Germany, stated that he enjoys the taste of *Rujak Uleg* even though the dish isn't available in his home country. According to him, the taste of *rujak* still suits his appetite, and he even shared his experience of attending the festival with his friends in Germany through videos and posts on his personal Instagram (Interview with Michael, International Student from Germany, 9 May 2026).

Juliet, a student from France, also described the *Rujak Uleg* Festival as a very interesting tradition, because it provided a new experience she had never encountered before. She even plans to recommend *Rujak Uleg* to her friends in France, although with the spiciness adjusted to their taste (Interview with Juliet, International Student from France, May 9, 2026). These findings indicate that direct, participatory cultural experiences can foster a sense of emotional connection among international students towards Surabaya's culture.

A similar experience was also evident at the 2024 *Rujak Uleg* Festival. Ariel Dominguez, a student from Honduras, said he was intrigued because dishes made from beef snout (*cingur*) are not found in his country. He described the experience as something unique and worth trying. Meanwhile, Gautier Courtois from France stated that the *Rujak Uleg* Festival helped him get to know Surabaya better through culinary experiences and social interactions during the festival. He also viewed the festival as a symbol of tolerance, unity, and the diversity of Surabaya's community (Koloway, 2024; Suci, 2024). Thus, the connections fostered by the Surabaya City Government not only promote awareness of local culture but also create personal experiences and emotional bonds between international students and the City of Surabaya.

Surabaya's Consistency in Promoting *Rujak Uleg* Festival to International Students

According to Goff (2013), consistency in cultural diplomacy relates to the sustained support for cultural activities, so that established relationships can be maintained. Goff explains that cultural diplomacy is often perceived as being used only when formal relations encounter obstacles, whereas cultural diplomacy has the power to continue fostering human connections even when official relations are not functioning optimally. However, cultural diplomacy often fails to receive consistent support because it is only activated at specific moments (Goff, 2013b)

In the dimension of consistency (Goff, 2013b), this study distinguishes between the consistency of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival's organization and the consistency of involving international students as the target of cultural diplomacy. The festival's organization since 2004 demonstrates the continuity of cultural activities in the city of Surabaya, but this does not automatically prove the existence of consistency in the practice of cultural diplomacy. Based on interviews with staff from the Disbudporapar, the Surabaya City Government has consistently involved international students as the target audience for its activities through

institutionally established mechanisms (Interview with Disbudporapar Staff, Apr 30, 2026). International students are reached through the periodic sending of invitation letters to the rectors of various universities in Surabaya that have international students, who are then designated as Honorary Participants in the festival (Interview with the Staff of Disbudporapar, Apr 30, 2026). Thus, although the participating students may change each year due to differences in their study periods, the pattern of engagement with international students is maintained at the institutional level.

Based on the results of research interviews, international students are routinely invited through the university rector and designated as guests of honor at the festival (Interview with the Staff of Disbudporapar, Apr 30, 2026). This indicates that the Surabaya City Government consistently maintains international students as part of the target audience for its cultural diplomatic efforts.



Figure 2. *Rujak Uleg Festival 2025, highlighting the festival's institutional consistency.* (Source: Disbudporapar Surabaya, 2025)

This consistency is also evident in the festival's program, which consistently incorporates participatory elements for international students. They are regularly involved in hands-on cultural activities, such as preparing *rujak* with local residents, participating in a series of festivals, and documenting their experiences on social media. This approach, repeated every year, allows international students to gain a deeper and more lasting cultural experience of Surabaya.

The experience of Noe, a student from France, further illustrates the cultural experience resulting from this engagement. He stated that he would recommend making *rujak* when he returns to his home country and plans to buy *rujak* ingredients in Surabaya because some ingredients are difficult to find in France (Interview with Noe, International Student from France, May 9, 2026). These findings indicate that the consistency of international students' involvement depends not only on the festival's continuity but also on the

sustainability of local government efforts to reach this group through institutional mechanisms.



Figure 3. *Rujak Uleg Festival 2026, showcasing the continuation of cultural diplomacy efforts.* (Source: Disbudporapar Surabaya, 2026)

Surabaya's Innovation in Promoting *Rujak Uleg* Festival to International Students

Goff (2013) explains that innovation in cultural diplomacy relates to the ability of actors to adapt the means of cultural mobilization to the changing times. According to Goff, language, education, the arts, and culture remain at the core of cultural diplomacy, but they cannot be mobilized in the same way as in previous periods, because globalization has transformed patterns of international interaction and communication (Goff, 2013b). Therefore, cultural diplomacy must adopt new approaches that are more relevant to the characteristics of modern audiences.

In the context of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival, innovation is evident in the Surabaya City Government's efforts to continuously develop the festival's concept to keep it appealing and relevant to an international audience. While consistency serves as the foundation for maintaining long-term relationships with various universities, innovation ensures that these relationships continue to evolve and do not stagnate. This form of innovation is evident in the annual renewal of the festival's theme, which is adapted to the times. These efforts align with the characteristics of international students, who tend to seek interactive and participatory cultural experiences, so that they are not merely spectators, but are directly involved in cultural activities that provide a deeper experience and understanding of Surabaya's local culture.

The innovation of the 2024 *Rujak Uleg* Festival was demonstrated through the adoption of the theme "The History of Rujak Cingur," which emphasizes the historical aspects and local cultural philosophy (Disbudporapar, Interview, May 7, 2026). Through this theme, international students are not only introduced to *rujak cingur* as a signature dish of Surabaya, but are also invited to understand the historical value and cultural significance embedded within it (Disbudporapar, Interview, May 7, 2026). This innovation was further realized by

relocating the festival from the Kya-Kya area on Kembang Jepun Street to Taman Surya at Surabaya City Hall in the morning to accommodate the public's enthusiasm, which drew between 5,000 to 8,000 visitors (Pemerintah Kota Surabaya, 2024).

Efforts to attract international audiences are also evident in the festival's more educational and attractive program design. For this 21st edition, the Surabaya City Government presented the historical theatrical performance "Pasar Suroboyo" as well as the fashion show "*Akulturası Budaya Surabaya*", which involved 128 participants from local government agencies across four clothing categories: Surabaya European Style, Surabaya Oriental Looks, Surabaya Ampel's Fusion, and Surabaya Local Pride (Pemerintah Kota Surabaya, 2024). Through these various performances, international students are introduced to the history, identity, and cultural diversity of Surabaya through a more visual and interactive experience.



Figure 4. Participation of communities and educational institutions in promoting tourism at the 2024 Surabaya Rujak Uleg Festival (Source: Disbudporapar Surabaya, 2026)

For international students, their understanding of local culture is further deepened through the explanation of the philosophy behind *Rujak Uleg* by Surabaya Mayor Eri Cahyadi. The diverse ingredients in *rujak*, ranging from beef snout (*cingur*), vegetables, fruits, to shrimp paste (*petis*) are interpreted as a representation of the diversity of Surabaya's society, which thrives on the values of tolerance, kinship, and mutual cooperation (Admin SBY, 2024). Additionally, the expansion of participation involving schools and universities has opened up

broader opportunities for interaction between international students and the local community. For international students who are not yet familiar with Surabaya's culture, presenting it through history, performances, and explanations of the ingredients in rujak can serve as a more accessible introduction to the local culture. Thus, the innovation in 2024 lies not only in changing the event's concept but also in the effort to present local culture in a way that helps an international audience understand the cultural significance being conveyed.

Furthermore, while the 2024 festival focused more on introducing the history and philosophy of *rujak cingur*, the 2025 *Rujak Uleg* Festival has demonstrated significant innovation through the theme "Uniting Flavors, Weaving Stories" which emphasized a more participatory approach, hands-on experiences and social interaction (Pemerintah Kota Surabaya, 2025). This innovation is further reinforced by the *Rujak Uleg* Festival's selection for the second time in the 110 Kharisma Event Nusantara (KEN) 2025 by the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism (Admin MPP Surabaya, 2025). This recognition has encouraged Disbudporapar to develop the festival's concept by relocating it to the Surabaya Expo Center (SBEC), chosen for its historical significance as an arts and entertainment district currently being revitalized by the Surabaya City Government (Diskominfo Jatim, 2025).

Innovation is also evident in the festival's packaging, which features the subtheme "The Legend of THR" with a vintage vibe, along with the addition of various new programs, such as the *THR Merindu* theater performance, DJ performances, a games arena, and the "*Rujak Nusantara*" category involving five surrounding regions: Bangkalan, Sampang, Sidoarjo, Gresik, and Pasuruan (Diskominfo Jatim, 2025). The presence of these various elements expands the festival's function, not only as a culinary celebration but also as a more dynamic and inclusive space for cultural interaction.

For international students, these innovations create a more participatory cultural experience because they are not merely spectators but are directly involved in various festival activities. Participating in activities such as making rujak or nguleg together with the local community provides an opportunity for direct interaction in a more informal setting. Through these experiences, international students are also introduced to the value of unity in diversity, as reflected in the use of various ingredients and spices in Rujak Uleg (Setiawan, 2025). This demonstrates that the innovation of the 2025 Rujak Uleg Festival lies not only in the addition or modification of programs but in how the festival creates a space that allows international students to experience and interact with Surabaya's culture firsthand. Thus, international students do not merely serve as an audience but also become an integral part of the cultural interaction process, which serves as a form of engagement between the local government and the international public.

The innovation of the *Rujak Uleg* Festival in 2026 was demonstrated through the theme "*RUJAK PHORIA: The Rujak Festival Welcomes the World Cup*." (Disbusdporapar, 2026a). This theme highlights the City of Surabaya's efforts to connect local culture with global momentum through an approach that engages the international audience more closely. This innovation is a part of Surabaya's tourism marketing communication strategy to capture

global attention by leveraging soccer as a universal language easily understood across nations (Nugraheni & Yuliastuti, 2014).

The use of themes more closely aligned with the global context provides an easier point of entry for international participants. This is evident from the experience of Michael, a student from Germany, who was able to connect the theme to a context he was familiar with (Interview with Michael, May 9, 2026). In this regard, innovation is not merely a matter of changing the annual theme but lies in the festival's ability to connect local culture with contexts relevant to an international audience. This relevance helps create a space for interaction that is more easily understood by international students without compromising the local identity that lies at the heart of the festival. Thus, the *Rujak Uleg* Festival not only preserves local traditions, but also demonstrates efforts of cultural adaptation by blending local culture with global issues and trends to remain relevant to today's international generation.

In 2024, innovation will be achieved by presenting history and cultural values in a more accessible way; in 2025, by enhancing hands-on experiences and direct participation; and in 2026, by linking local culture to themes that are more relevant to an international audience. These three approaches demonstrate that innovation is not merely about technical changes in festival organization, but about how such changes open up different forms of engagement for international students.

Another innovation is evident in the involvement of international students on social media. Michael, a student from Germany, shared his experience attending the *Rujak Uleg* Festival through his personal Instagram account and shared the video with his friends in Germany (Interview with Michael, May 9, 2026). This finding is best understood as an indirect impact of the students' experience participating in the festival. The interactive nature of the festival provided students with the opportunity to voluntarily share their cultural experiences through social media. Thus, this digital engagement can be viewed as an additional effect of cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the *Rujak Uleg* Festival for the 2024–2026 period no longer serves merely as an annual culinary celebration or a venue for preserving local culture, but has also evolved into a cultural diplomacy tool for the Surabaya City Government. Through this festival, traditional food such as *rujak cingur* not only represents Surabaya's cultural identity, but also serves as a means to introduce local culture to an international audience, particularly international students in Surabaya.

The involvement of international students in the *Rujak Uleg* Festival demonstrates that they are not merely participants, but actively engage in the process of cultural diplomacy through direct interaction with local culture. Participatory activities such as making and grinding *rujak* together with the community create a space for interaction and cultural exchange that occurs naturally. Relevant to Goff's (2013) concept of cultural diplomacy, the

implementation of this festival reflects the aspects of connection, consistency, and innovation in the City of Surabaya's cultural diplomacy strategy.

Overall, this study offers a new perspective on the relationship between traditional cuisine, cultural diplomacy, and the involvement of international students. The findings of this study indicate that local food can serve as an effective medium for cultural diplomacy when an international audience is not only introduced to cultural products but is also directly involved in the cultural experience.

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