

VISUAL DIPLOMACY AND VERNACULAR CITIES: INTEGRATING EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT IN HERITAGE-LED NATION BRANDING IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of visual diplomacy, vernacular urbanism, educational management, and digital nation branding in Indonesia. As global public diplomacy increasingly relies on visual narratives, Indonesia's architectural heritage and historic cityscapes emerge as strategic assets for both cultural messaging and educational empowerment. This paper investigates how heritage elements such as colonial facades, traditional townscapes, and sacred architecture are visually framed and disseminated through digital platforms as part of Indonesia's effort to shape its global image. Simultaneously, it highlights how educational institutions can function as key actors in narrating, managing, and sustaining these heritage narratives through curriculum integration and civic learning. Using qualitative content analysis of social media campaigns (e.g., Wonderful Indonesia, city-level promotions), combined with interviews involving urban planners and education managers, the study reveals a growing trend of aestheticising heritage in digital diplomacy. Cities like Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Bandung are not only presented as tourism sites but as learning environments that reinforce cultural identity. However, fragmented messaging and limited integration across institutional levels remain challenges. The paper proposes a heritage-driven diplomacy framework that aligns city branding with public diplomacy and educational goals, offering a novel pathway for cultural continuity, policy coherence, and soft power consolidation in the digital era.

Keywords: : architecture heritage; educational management; digital branding; public diplomacy; vernacular urbanism

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has redefined the way nations construct and project their identities. While diplomacy was traditionally confined to state-to-state interactions, public diplomacy now extends to direct engagement with global audiences through

visual, narrative, and cultural strategies. In this transformation, the urban fabric, especially cities imbued with heritage architecture, has emerged as a key tool in the exercise of soft power. Cities are no longer just administrative centres; they have become symbolic and strategic platforms in a country's digital nation branding and public diplomacy arsenal.

Indonesia, with its deep repository of cultural and architectural heritage, presents a compelling case of how vernacular cities are mobilised in digital diplomacy efforts. From the colonial elegance of Semarang's Old Town to the sacred spatiality of Yogyakarta's Kraton, these environments are more than aesthetic artefacts; they are storied places that embody Indonesia's historical continuity, religious diversity, and socio-political resilience. The construction and digital projection of these narratives represent an increasingly prominent dimension of Indonesia's public diplomacy.

City branding—particularly heritage-driven city branding—has grown in importance as urban areas compete for attention, investment, and tourism in a globalized economy. As Nursanty et al. (2024) demonstrate in their study of Surakarta, traditional architecture integrated with contemporary placemaking reinforces authenticity, which strengthens the city's image and international appeal. (Nursanty, 2024). Authenticity, once thought to be a constraint in modern development, is now a strategic asset. When leveraged correctly, it becomes a soft power tool that enhances cultural diplomacy and nation branding.

The Indonesian government, especially under the administration of President Joko Widodo, has strategically incorporated heritage assets into national branding programs. The designation of Borobudur as a Super Priority Tourism Destination, supported by the establishment of Badan Otorita Borobudur, illustrates a policy-level commitment to align heritage with diplomacy. (Adiba, 2022). However, many of these efforts remain heavily top-down, with limited integration between local city branding strategies and national diplomatic messaging.

The concept of visual diplomacy explores how images are used by diplomatic actors to influence relations and shape public perception. (Constantinou, 2018). This intersects with the role of cities in international relations, where urban spaces serve as platforms for transcultural dialogue and diplomatic activities. (Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz & Ratajczak, 2019; Zarghani et al., 2014). Cities are increasingly recognised as important actors in global governance and diplomacy. (Acuto, 2013; La Porte, 2013). The visual aspects of urban landscapes, including architecture and public spaces, contribute to the spatial semiotics of global cities and reflect social differences. (Krase & Shortell, 2011). Historical memory and cultural diversity play crucial roles in

shaping city identities and diplomatic narratives. (Ratajczak & Ryniejska-Kiełdanowicz, 2021). The intersection of visual elements and urban law is explored through various lenses, including historical maps, aesthetics in city planning, and visual zoning codes. (Miller, 2013).

In the global arena, nation branding operates on multiple levels: visual, symbolic, and narrative. Digital platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok serve not just as marketing channels but as public spheres where nations compete for attention and narrative authority. Within this context, architecture becomes more than background scenery; it becomes visual rhetoric. Heritage cities offer ready-made symbolic capital that can be digitally curated and projected to international audiences, crafting a perception of cultural richness, stability, and rootedness. (Yapp, 2020).

However, the translation of heritage into digital public diplomacy is not without challenges. Heritage assets often face issues of over-commercialisation, aesthetic dilution, and narrative simplification. In Pangkalpinang, for example, the construction of the Tin Dome Grand Mosque as a city branding strategy demonstrates how heritage, religion, and modernity are blended into a singular identity symbol (Rezeki, 2024). While such projects can boost local pride and visibility, they also risk homogenising complex histories into marketable images.

Moreover, the fragmentation between local government initiatives, national ministries, and private tourism operators often results in inconsistent messaging. As Pamungkas (2015) noted, the "Wonderful Indonesia" campaign despite its global reach, has not always synchronized with local city branding efforts. (Pamungkas, 2015). Cities like Malang, which promote their colonial heritage through initiatives like Kampoeng Heritage Kajoetangan, often do so independently of national frameworks. (Prasetya, 2019).

In this context, integrating educational management into digital public diplomacy becomes increasingly vital. Educational institutions, especially universities and vocational schools, serve not only as knowledge centers but also as community anchors that can sustain and disseminate heritage values through curriculum design, civic education, and cultural outreach. The inclusion of place-based learning strategies and heritage-driven pedagogy has proven effective in enhancing students' place attachment, cultural literacy, and participatory citizenship. These approaches enable students to engage with their urban environment critically, transforming heritage cities into living classrooms that support national branding and identity formation. Moreover, a well-managed educational ecosystem facilitates cross-sectoral collaborations between city governments, tourism boards, and cultural institutions,

ensuring continuity and coherence in digital storytelling and diplomacy. Thus, educational management emerges as a strategic dimension in aligning cultural heritage, urban branding, and soft power projection in the digital era.

This paper argues for a more coherent integration of city-level heritage branding into Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy. Rather than treating urban heritage as a passive backdrop for tourism, we propose recognising it as an active agent in soft power projection. The concept of "visual diplomacy" is central to this proposition. Visual diplomacy refers to the strategic use of imagery, architecture, landscapes, and monuments to communicate identity and values across cultural and political boundaries.

Using qualitative content analysis, this study examines social media content, tourism campaigns, and urban promotional materials from Indonesian heritage cities to understand how architectural aesthetics are visually framed, which cultural narratives are prioritised, and how these portrayals align or diverge from national diplomacy goals. The study focuses on Yogyakarta, Surakarta, and Semarang cities, rich in historical and symbolic capital, while incorporating interviews not only with urban planners, branding consultants, and ministry officials, but also with educational managers to uncover how learning ecosystems contribute to heritage-based storytelling. This integrated lens spanning content, policy, and education enables us to identify institutional gaps and opportunities where city branding can be reinforced through heritage education and civic curriculum. The research contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on digital nation branding, heritage governance, and educational diplomacy, asserting that urban narratives, when embedded within educational management, can serve as long-term instruments of soft power and identity formation in the global sphere.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in interpretive and constructivist paradigms, which are particularly well suited to uncovering meanings embedded in cultural representations and digital narratives. The research is designed to examine how architectural heritage and city identities in Indonesia are visually constructed and mobilized as part of public diplomacy and nation branding strategies in the digital age. The methodological framework draws on visual content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and policy document review to triangulate findings across media, actors, and institutional narratives.

The primary data consists of curated visual materials from official tourism campaigns such as Wonderful Indonesia and the social media accounts of cities known for their vernacular architecture, including Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Surakarta. These visuals are analyzed for architectural framing, spatial symbolism, and narrative consistency using a framing Theory lens adapted from Entman. In parallel, city-level promotional materials such as tourism brochures, video campaigns, and branding strategy documents are evaluated to explore their alignment with national identity narratives.

To contextualize the visual data within a governance and educational framework, the study includes interviews with stakeholders from local government tourism boards, urban planning departments, and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, as well as with academics and institutional leaders in the field of educational management. This inclusion aims to assess how city branding and heritage narratives are integrated into learning processes, civic identity formation, and curriculum development at the local and national levels. Interview data are coded thematically to identify recurring motifs, institutional bottlenecks, and opportunities for educational alignment.

The methodology also incorporates a policy analysis component, using key national directives on heritage tourism and creative economy strategies as benchmarks. This enables the identification of policy gaps and disjunctures between city-level narratives and national branding objectives. Through this triangulated approach, the study not only deciphers the visual language of Indonesia's city branding but also interrogates the institutional and pedagogical processes that shape it.

The validity of the findings is enhanced by data triangulation across visual, verbal, and documentary sources, following precedents set by similar qualitative studies on urban branding and digital diplomacy. (Özbek, 2023; Fahrizal, 2022; Luerdi, 2023; Santoso, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to the visual, narrative, and institutional dimensions explored, this study identifies a fourth critical component in the success of heritage-led diplomacy: the role of education as both a content driver and a continuity mechanism. The findings show that the intersection of visual diplomacy and educational management holds transformative potential for sustaining national identity narratives.

1. Visual Framing of Heritage: Architecture as Cultural Narrative

Visual aesthetics play a crucial role in shaping digital diplomacy narratives. Cities like Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Surakarta have developed distinct visual languages grounded in their architectural heritage. Yogyakarta projects ceremonial and royal aesthetics through its Kraton and traditional festivals, emphasizing continuity and cultural depth. Semarang utilizes colonial imagery and sepia-toned visuals to evoke historical cosmopolitanism, while Surakarta blends market life and palace architecture to create a vibrant sense of place.

These visuals not only attract tourism but also act as "soft icons" of national identity. As seen in Table 1, each city selectively mobilizes architectural symbols to frame its cultural uniqueness. This aligns with Nursanty et al. (2024), who highlight that architectural authenticity strengthens the emotional resonance and storytelling power of urban branding. (Nursanty, 2024). However, without a guiding narrative structure, visual diplomacy risks becoming superficial ornamentation rather than an effective diplomatic tool.

The visual framing of heritage elements plays a central role in branding efforts. Cities like Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Surakarta strategically use architecture as narrative anchors. Yogyakarta emphasizes the Kraton and classical Javanese forms to assert cultural continuity and spiritual depth. Semarang, in contrast, foregrounds its colonial Old Town with sepia-toned visuals that evoke resilience and cosmopolitanism. Surakarta blends festive market life with royal symbolism to depict tradition within everyday modernity. These visual strategies conform to the growing trend of aesthetic diplomacy, where curated images and cultural motifs serve as instruments of soft power (Nursanty et al., 2024). As shown in Table 1, each city frames its architectural heritage to emphasize different cultural values, from spiritual symbolism to colonial nostalgia.

Table 1. Visual Framing of Heritage Elements in Indonesian City Branding

| City | Architectural Symbol Used | Visual Style | Key Message/ Theme | Primary Platform |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Yogyakarta | Kraton, Tugu Monument | Classical, ceremonial | Cultural legacy, royal heritage | Instagram, YouTube |
| Semarang | Old Town (Kota Lama) | Colonial, sepia-toned | Dutch heritage, historical resilience | Website, Instagram |

| | | | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Surakarta | Traditional markets, palaces | Warm-toned, festive | Cultural intimacy, traditional arts | Instagram Reels, TikTok |
|------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|

Source: Content analysis of tourism and branding campaigns (2022–2024)

2. Narrative Coherence and City-Level Messaging

Narrative consistency is essential for maintaining credibility and symbolic clarity in international communication. Analysis of digital campaigns reveals that Yogyakarta and Surakarta demonstrate moderate to high narrative coherence across social media platforms. In contrast, Semarang exhibits fragmented messaging and lacks thematic continuity across content.

Table 3 supports this observation, showing discrepancies in identity clarity and message consistency across cities. These findings underscore the importance of having a coherent narrative framework, as suggested by Entman's (1993) Theory of strategic framing. A fragmented message not only weakens brand impact but can also confuse international audiences, especially when narratives shift drastically across platforms or actors.

Despite this visual richness, narrative consistency remains uneven. While Yogyakarta and Surakarta have built sustained cultural messages over time, Semarang's portrayal is sporadic and lacks unified storytelling. The concept of "narrative coherence" is essential for effective diplomacy: disconnected or contradictory visuals can erode credibility and dilute the intended national message. (Entman, 1993; Yapp, 2020). Findings from digital content analysis suggest that many visuals overemphasise surface beauty while neglecting historical complexity or socio-cultural context. Table 2 illustrates the degree of alignment between local city branding initiatives and national tourism diplomacy frameworks.

Table 2. Institutional Integration Between City Branding and National Policy

| City | Local Branding Strategy Exists | Alignment with Wonderful Indonesia | Policy Coordination Level | National Actor Involved |
|------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
|------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|

| | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| Yogyakarta | Yes | Partial | Medium | Ministry of Tourism & Culture |
| Semarang | No formal branding | Minimal | Low | Local tourism office only |
| Surakarta | Yes | Strong | High | Kemendparekraf, Creative Economy Dept |

Source: Interviews and policy document review

Institutionally, the coordination between local city branding initiatives and national public diplomacy frameworks is inconsistent. Yogyakarta and Surakarta show moderate alignment with the Wonderful Indonesia campaign, reflecting stronger ties with national tourism agencies. Semarang, however, operates with relative autonomy and minimal policy integration. This confirms earlier critiques of fragmented governance in Indonesia's branding strategy. (Pamungkas, 2015; Ariwibowo, 2023). The Borobudur case exemplifies what can be achieved through integrated governance. When designated a Super Priority Tourism Destination, Borobudur received institutional support through Badan Otorita Borobudur to coordinate cross-sector messaging. (Adiba, 2022).

3. Institutional Alignment: Bridging Local and National Diplomacy

Institutional coordination is another challenge in Indonesia's digital diplomacy. Although national campaigns such as *Wonderful Indonesia* provide overarching branding frameworks, many heritage-rich cities develop independent messaging strategies. This disconnect results in missed opportunities for unified cultural projection and cohesive diplomatic branding.

As shown in Table 2, only Surakarta demonstrates high alignment between local initiatives and national frameworks. Yogyakarta aligns partially, while Semarang remains largely independent. This finding aligns with Pamungkas (2015) and Ariwibowo & Prasetyo (2023), who criticise the fragmented governance of city branding in Indonesia. The case of Borobudur, where government intervention established the Borobudur Authority Agency, demonstrates that institutional alignment can significantly enhance narrative control and branding effectiveness (Adiba & Satyawan, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of architectural heritage as both a narrative and an asset is gaining recognition in city branding discourse. Ariwibowo and Prasetyo (2023) propose that city branding strategies should include not only visual image objects but also cultural infrastructure and artefact management. However, this study shows that such frameworks have yet to be systematically applied across Indonesian cities. Placemaking that embraces architectural authenticity, as demonstrated in Surakarta, offers a path forward for embedding heritage within sustainable urban identity (Nursanty et al., 2024).

While Yogyakarta and Surakarta display strong coherence between their urban identities and digital narratives, Semarang's storytelling appears fragmented and less strategically framed. This pattern is supported by the narrative coherence assessment shown in Table 3, where Semarang scores lower on both identity clarity and narrative consistency. These inconsistencies suggest a gap between visual presentation and underlying cultural messaging, potentially undermining diplomatic credibility. In contrast, Surakarta stands out as an example of integrated city identity, with high ratings across all narrative dimensions, indicating effective heritage-based storytelling within its digital diplomacy efforts.

Table 3. Narrative Coherence in Heritage-Led Digital Diplomacy

| Dimension | Yogyakarta | Semarang | Surakarta |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Identity Clarity | High | Moderate | High |
| Narrative Consistency | Medium | Low | High |
| Cultural Depth in Messaging | High | High | High |
| Visual Engagement Quality | High | Moderate | High |

Rating based on qualitative coding of social media content and city campaigns

In terms of digital engagement, platforms like Instagram and YouTube have become the primary stage for visual diplomacy. The rise of influencer-based campaigns, user-generated content, and visual storytelling has democratized participation but also made message control more difficult. This supports findings from Pamungkas (2015), who noted that national campaigns often fail to synchronize with local content creators and city-level efforts.

4. The Role of Digital Platforms and Content Creators

Digital platforms have transformed the landscape of public diplomacy by enabling decentralized storytelling and participatory content creation. In Indonesia, cities increasingly rely on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to communicate identity narratives rooted in architecture, culture, and community life. However, the strategic potential of these platforms is undermined by the absence of clear institutional roles and policy frameworks. Local governments, tourism boards, and influencers operate in parallel rather than in coordination, resulting in fragmented and sometimes conflicting messages.

To better understand how these actors and platforms function in practice, Table 4 presents a comparative matrix of city-level content ecosystems. It maps out which actors dominate content production, the types of narratives conveyed, and the level of coordination observed with national diplomacy frameworks. This table reveals that while cities like Surakarta exhibit structured collaboration with content creators and tourism agencies, others, such as Semarang, demonstrate a more ad hoc approach. This differentiation highlights the need for policy interventions that foster digital governance in storytelling, aligning aesthetic output with diplomatic purpose.

Table 4. Actor-Platform-Narrative Matrix in Indonesia's Heritage-Based Digital Diplomacy

| City | Primary Content Actors | Dominant Platforms | Narrative Focus | Coordination Level |
|-------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Yogyakarta | Tourism Office, Creators | Instagram, YouTube | Tradition, spirituality | Medium |
| Semarang | Individual influencers | Instagram, TikTok | Colonial heritage, lifestyle | Low |
| Surakarta | City Gov + Creative Agencies | YouTube, Reels, Websites | Cultural preservation, royalism | High |

Source: Author's observation and platform analytics (2022–2024)

Digital platforms serve as both amplifiers and disruptors in public diplomacy. On one hand, platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok democratize participation and allow cities to project their narratives globally. On the other hand, they create challenges in message control and consistency. Influencer-led content and

user-generated visuals often diverge from government narratives, leading to potential brand dilution.

Findings suggest that Yogyakarta and Surakarta engage more consistently with digital aesthetics and platform-specific storytelling formats. However, none of the cities has formal mechanisms to evaluate the impact of their visual diplomacy efforts. This gap reflects the broader absence of a performance evaluation framework in Indonesia's nation branding apparatus (Ariwibowo & Prasetyo, 2023). Without feedback loops, even the most aesthetically compelling campaigns may fail to achieve diplomatic objectives.

Finally, the lack of a unified evaluative framework for visual content and its diplomatic impact hinders strategic planning. The findings suggest that although digital media effectively projects aesthetic values, it remains unclear whether such content shifts international perceptions or fosters deeper intercultural understanding. As Ariwibowo and Prasetyo (2023) highlight, successful branding requires outcome measurement mechanisms, an area still underdeveloped in Indonesian public diplomacy.

To address the fragmented and inconsistent use of heritage narratives in Indonesia's digital diplomacy, a structured pathway is needed that connects narrative production with institutional coordination and policy design. While many cities exhibit aesthetic richness in their visual campaigns, these remain largely unmeasured and unintegrated into national diplomacy objectives. The absence of an evaluative framework weakens the strategic potential of city branding in advancing diplomatic goals. A holistic model that incorporates assessment tools, narrative coherence, and policy innovation is therefore necessary to transform cultural capital into a measurable diplomatic impact.



Figure 1. Strategic Framework for Strengthening Indonesia's Digital Diplomacy through Heritage-Led Narratives

As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed framework begins with recognising inconsistent digital narratives as a barrier to effective public diplomacy. The next step involves establishing a unified evaluation framework to measure content performance and audience perception. This foundation enables more coherent storytelling that aligns with national identity narratives. Through narrative coherence and institutional collaboration, policy innovation can emerge, providing mechanisms for sustained and adaptive branding. The ultimate goal is to achieve effective diplomatic impact, where digital heritage campaigns not only enhance national visibility but also foster mutual understanding and international legitimacy. Bridging these stages requires deliberate coordination across government levels, content creators, and urban stakeholders.

In summary, Indonesia's vernacular cities are rich in heritage narratives and visual potential. However, the strategic use of these assets in digital diplomacy demands stronger narrative coherence, institutional integration, and evaluative rigour. Bridging the gap between architectural storytelling and diplomatic impact will require both policy innovation and cross-level coordination.

5. Heritage as a Medium for Public Education

Urban heritage, when approached beyond commodified tourism, has high potential to become a platform for public education. Historic cityscapes and vernacular architecture can be leveraged as place-based learning environments, where students and communities engage with their cultural landscape through guided interpretation, school field programs, and co-curricular activities. In cities like Yogyakarta and Surakarta, several schools and universities have begun incorporating heritage trails and thematic projects into their local curricula, allowing learners to experience "living history" directly within their neighborhoods. This place-based pedagogical model strengthens spatial identity and civic awareness, especially when aligned with values in the national curriculum (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. Educational Integration of Urban Heritage in Indonesian City Diplomacy

| City | Educational Program | Institutional Actors | Learning Model | Cultural Impact |
|------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
|------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|

| | | | | |
|-------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Yogyakarta | Heritage trail projects & Kraton curriculum | Local high schools, UGM, ISI | Outdoor learning + interpretive modules | Strengthens royal heritage identity and historical empathy |
| Semarang | Colonial district mapping & storytelling | UNTAG, community schools | Digital archive + civic engagement | Builds intergenerational knowledge of urban history |
| Surakarta | Batik-based entrepreneurship & palace tours | UNS, vocational training centers | Skill-based learning + site immersion | Promotes cultural pride and economic empowerment |

Source: Field observation, institutional interviews, and educational reports (2022–2024)

Moreover, the use of outdoor classroom models such as heritage walks, museum collaborations, and digital storytelling contests can deepen emotional connections to local culture while reinforcing messages promoted in tourism branding campaigns. These models support dual objectives: enhancing public cultural literacy and reinforcing international diplomacy narratives via educated, engaged citizenry.

6. Educational Institutions as Diplomacy Actors

Higher education institutions have emerged as strategic allies in narrating and sustaining city diplomacy. Through research centers, student exchange programs, and collaborations with tourism boards, universities play a dual role as knowledge producers and cultural ambassadors. Initiatives such as Kampus Merdeka enable cross-disciplinary student involvement in regional branding, where students intern in local tourism offices, produce heritage promotional content, or conduct ethnographic studies that feed directly into municipal storytelling, see table 6 below.

Table 6. University-Based Contributions to City Diplomacy in Heritage Branding

| City | University Involved | Academic Program | Form of Engagement | Diplomatic Outcome |
|------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|

| | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Semarang | UNTAG, Diponegoro Univ. | Architecture, Communication | Documentation of colonial facades; exhibitions | Reinterpretation of history for public narrative |
| Surakarta | UNS, Batik Institute | Cultural Studies, Visual Arts | Student-led research on batik; seminar presentations | Soft power reinforcement through cultural diplomacy |
| Yogyakarta | UGM, ISI Yogyakarta | Anthropology, Urban Design | Ethnographic studies, tourism internship | Narrative enrichment & policy input via Kampus Merdeka |

Source: Institutional documentation and faculty interviews (2022–2024)

For instance, in Semarang, architecture and communication students from local universities have worked with city planners to document colonial facades and reinterpret them for public exhibitions. In Surakarta, student projects on batik and royal heritage have been featured in international seminars, aligning academic outputs with soft power diplomacy. These academic engagements not only fill narrative gaps but also ensure generational transfer of cultural knowledge, institutionalizing Indonesia's heritage diplomacy within the country's educational fabric

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Indonesia utilizes digital platforms to construct and project heritage-based city narratives as instruments of public diplomacy and nation branding. By analyzing the cases of Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Surakarta, the research demonstrates that vernacular cities possess significant architectural and cultural capital that contributes meaningfully to the country's soft power. However, the strategic deployment of these assets remains fragmented and underutilized due to inconsistencies in narrative coherence, institutional alignment, and evaluative frameworks.

A key contribution of this study lies in introducing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates visual diplomacy with educational management. By incorporating the expertise of Prof. Rini Werdiningsih in public sector and educational management, this research identifies the educational ecosystem, particularly

universities and curriculum frameworks, as a central actor in sustaining and institutionalizing city-level cultural narratives. Through programs such as Kampus Merdeka, urban heritage becomes not only a tourism asset but also an educational resource that shapes civic identity, public awareness, and long-term cultural diplomacy outcomes.

The novelty of this paper is the formulation of "educationally integrated visual diplomacy," a concept that positions learning institutions as both curators and conveyors of heritage narratives in the digital public sphere. Unlike existing models that treat city branding as a marketing exercise, this framework advances the notion that heritage-based storytelling must be embedded within formal and informal educational systems to ensure continuity, resonance, and legitimacy.

To fully harness the diplomatic potential of vernacular cities, Indonesia must move beyond aesthetic display toward integrated policy innovation that bridges visual strategy, institutional collaboration, and educational implementation. This holistic alignment not only strengthens the nation's global image but also empowers future generations to inherit, understand, and promote Indonesia's cultural identity on the world stage.

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