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Practicing Asian Gastrodiplomacy through UTY Growpath Expo #3: Culinary Culture, Soft Power, and Nation Branding

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ABSTRACT

In the globalization era, cultural identity has become a strategic resource for strengthening national image and international influence through non-coercive means. Gastrodiplomacy is increasingly relevant because food can convey cultural values, collective identity, and social meanings in ways accessible to wider publics. This study aims to analyze UTY Growpath Expo #3 as a medium of gastrodiplomacy, soft power, and nation branding through the introduction of traditional Asian foods. The research used a qualitative approach with an action research design. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving student organizers, supervising lecturers, culinary presenters, and visitors who participated in the expo. The data were analyzed inductively by identifying themes related to planning, implementation, interaction, cultural communication, and evaluation. The findings show that UTY Growpath Expo #3 served as a micro-level arena for practicing gastrodiplomacy through culinary products from Afghanistan, China, South Korea, and Vietnam. Food presentation, cultural storytelling, traditional attire, sustainable packaging, and direct interaction enabled visitors to understand cultural identities beyond taste and consumption. Positive visitor responses indicated that culinary-based activities can promote intercultural understanding, strengthen cultural attraction, and connect entrepreneurship education with public diplomacy practices. The study concludes that educational exhibitions can serve as alternative spaces for implementing gastrodiplomacy and nation branding at the local level. The novelty of this study lies in positioning a university-based expo as a non-state arena in which students serve as cultural communicators, translating Asian culinary diversity into soft-power practice within an applied, participatory, and locally grounded learning context.

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■ INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, a country's reputation has become a strategic asset that shapes its ability to gain recognition, build trust, and compete within the international system. International competition is no longer determined solely by military strength, economic capacity, or formal diplomacy. It is also shaped by the ability of a state, institution, or society to communicate identity, values, and cultural distinctiveness to wider audiences. Nation branding has emerged as a deliberate and strategic effort to construct, communicate, and manage the branding of a country across political, economic, social, and cultural domains (Akotia, 2010). A nation's global branding does not emerge naturally. It is produced through continuous communication, symbolic representation, and public engagement that gradually influence how external audiences perceive the country. Anholt (2011) explains that nation branding is shaped by six interrelated dimensions: tourism, exports, people, governance, culture and heritage, and investment and immigration. These dimensions indicate that national branding is constructed not only through state policy but also through everyday cultural encounters that allow foreign publics to experience a nation's identity directly and memorably (Anholt, 2011).

The discussion of nation branding is closely related to the concept of soft power. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Culture

constitutes one of the most important sources of soft power because it provides symbolic resources that can foster familiarity, admiration, and emotional proximity among societies (Nye, 2004). Food is particularly significant in this regard. Culinary practices not only represent consumption but also carry meanings related to history, identity, memory, social values, and collective belonging. Food can serve as an instrument of soft power because it conveys cultural identity in a subtle, accessible, and widely acceptable form. This argument is also consistent with Vuving's understanding of soft power, particularly in its dimensions of beauty and brilliance. Cultural attraction and culinary richness can shape positive perceptions without explicitly projecting political interests (Vuving, 2009). Gastrodiplomacy is a cultural strategy that uses food to communicate national identity, generate public attraction, and strengthen international recognition through non-coercive means.

Food should be understood not only as fulfilling biological needs but also as a cultural element carrying social meaning, historical memory, and collective identity. Beyond nutrition, food embodies traditions, symbols, and practices that shape how communities understand themselves. Ingredients, preparation methods, and rituals connect people, place, history, environment, and identity, making food a cultural text of memory, belonging, and distinction. As a cultural product, food represents national identity because culinary practices contain narratives about migration, colonial encounters, religion, agriculture, class relations, and wisdom. A dish may symbolize pride and inheritance. Because cuisine is sensory, it becomes a medium for perception and understanding (Ranta & Ichijo, 2022).

Globalization has made culinary traditions visible across borders. Migration, tourism, trade, and restaurant networks circulate food beyond boundaries. People encounter foreign cultures through diplomacy, tourism, and culinary experience. Food can communicate stories about geography, climate, religion, relations, and history. Online culinary patterns show that recipes, ingredients, and taste preferences reflect cultural similarities (Sajadmanesh et al., 2016). Food is significant because it is familiar, sensory, and accessible. Unlike formal diplomacy, it invites people to taste, observe, ask, and converse. Taste, atmosphere, storytelling, and participation create curiosity and understanding of national identity (Lee, 2021).

Gastrodiplomacy uses food as a diplomatic instrument to introduce a country's culture, values, and identity to international publics. It relates to soft power because it relies on attraction, persuasion, and recognition rather than coercion. Food becomes a nonverbal language that subtly communicates identity. The literature links gastrodiplomacy to national cuisine, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and brand-building (Maosul, 2025). It is connected to nation branding, or efforts to shape a country's branding internationally. Food can become a national symbol. Through festivals, exhibitions, banquets, restaurants, and campaigns, actors communicate identity accessibly. Culinary heritage can strengthen national branding, diplomacy, and recognition (Lee, 2021; Corzo & Castro, 2026).

Previous studies have examined gastrodiplomacy as part of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. Rockower explains that gastrodiplomacy uses food as a medium to communicate national culture to foreign publics and to build emotional closeness beyond formal diplomatic channels (Rockower, 2012). Pham also shows that gastrodiplomacy has become an important strategy in Asia, where culinary traditions are deeply connected to communal values, local identity, historical interaction, and regional diversity (Pham, 2013). Several Asian countries have promoted traditional foods as cultural symbols, such as Bolani from Afghanistan, Wonton from China, Mandu from South Korea, and Nam Ren from Vietnam. These examples show that food can serve as a cultural representation, connecting local identity to international audiences. In the broader framework of International Relations, gastrodiplomacy demonstrates that diplomacy is no longer monopolized by state officials. Cultural actors, educational institutions, students, communities, and public events may also contribute to the production and circulation of national branding.

In addition to culinary diplomacy, expos or exhibitions have also been discussed as important instruments for public communication, promotion, and branding formation. Chusnu in Kusuma argues that exhibitions provide a strategic platform for disseminating information, introducing innovation, and strengthening an entity's brand before a broader audience. Exhibitions enable direct interaction between organizers and visitors through product demonstrations, cultural performances, and educational experiences (Kusuma, 2016). Echsanullah and Wulandari further emphasize that exhibitions can create sensory experiences that strengthen public memory of the messages being communicated (Echsanullah & Wulandari, 2018). This point is important because nation branding and soft power do not operate only

through formal narratives. They are also shaped by affective, visual, and sensory encounters that allow audiences to experience culture directly. Food-based exhibitions, in particular, combine taste, visual presentation, storytelling, and interpersonal interaction. These elements make culinary exhibitions a potentially effective medium for communicating cultural identity in an accessible and persuasive manner. The role of students in organizing, representing, and communicating foreign culinary cultures also remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025 as an educational and cultural platform that applies gastrodiplomacy by introducing traditional Asian foods.

UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025 is relevant to study because it provides an open forum for ideas, products, culture, and society. The event does not merely display student works. It also encourages interaction, knowledge exchange, creativity, and direct cultural experience between organizers and visitors (Growpath UTY, 2025). In this context, the expo becomes a medium through which students communicate social and cultural values in a flexible and participatory manner. The use of food as the main medium of representation strengthens the relevance of gastrodiplomacy as an analytical framework. Through culinary products, students are able to introduce cultural identities, explain the meaning behind traditional foods, and create emotional proximity between visitors and the represented cultures. This shows that gastrodiplomacy can operate not only at the level of state policy but also within educational spaces where cultural learning, public interaction, and symbolic communication intersect.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on university-based gastrodiplomacy as a micro-level practice of soft power and cultural representation. Unlike previous studies that mainly examine government-led gastrodiplomacy or national branding campaigns, this research places a student-organized expo as the central object of analysis. It argues that educational exhibitions can become alternative spaces for practicing cultural diplomacy, particularly through culinary representation. This perspective expands the discussion of gastrodiplomacy by highlighting the role of higher education institutions and students as cultural communicators. It also contributes to the study of International Relations by showing that soft power is not only exercised through formal state institutions but can also be reproduced through social, educational, and cultural practices at the local level. The underexplored position of students in gastrodiplomacy is evident in the tendency of previous studies to treat students primarily as respondents, participants, or audiences, rather than as active cultural communicators. Luša and Jakešević examine food diplomacy through the perceptions of diplomats and students of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb. However, their study focuses on the perception and recognition of food as a diplomatic tool rather than on student-led culinary practice. (Luša & Jakešević, 2017). Nadofah and Rosida examine culinary diplomacy as cultural learning by introducing Indonesian traditional snacks to Thai students at Thammasat University; however, their study focuses on Indonesian culinary promotion in an international community service context, rather than on student-organized gastrodiplomacy within a campus expo that integrates entrepreneurship education, cultural representation, and green economy values (Nadofah & Rosida, 2026). These studies are important because they confirm the relevance of food in educational and intercultural settings and reveal a specific gap regarding students' agency as planners, presenters, and evaluators of gastrodiplomacy practice.

Specifically, this study differs from previous works in three aspects. First, it examines students not only as recipients of cultural learning, but as active actors who design, narrate, and communicate culinary culture. Second, it situates gastrodiplomacy within a campus expo that integrates cultural representation, entrepreneurship education, public engagement, and green-economy values. Third, it analyzes gastrodiplomacy as a micro-level practice of soft power that is produced through direct encounters between students and visitors in a local educational setting.

Based on the explanation above, the main objective of this research is to analyze how UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025 functions as a medium of gastrodiplomacy, soft power, and cultural representation through the introduction of traditional Asian foods. This study seeks to answer the following research question: “How does UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025 represent gastrodiplomacy as a micro-level practice of soft power and nation branding within an educational exhibition?” By addressing this question, the research aims to explain the relationship among culinary representation, public interaction, and the formation of cultural branding in the context of a university-based expo. The study also seeks to demonstrate that educational exhibitions can serve as alternative

arenas for introducing cultural identity, strengthening intercultural understanding, and expanding the practical meaning of gastrodiplomacy in contemporary International Relations.

METHOD

Informants / Research Subjects

The research was conducted at Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta, Indonesia, during the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025. The research subjects consisted of participants directly involved in the expo, including student organizers, culinary presenters, supervising lecturers, and visitors who interacted with the exhibition. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct knowledge of, experience with, and involvement in the gastrodiplomacy practices being studied. The main criteria for participant selection were involvement in planning the expo, presenting culinary and cultural materials, supervising the activity, or participating as visitors who experienced the culinary exhibition.

Participants were selected through purposive and criterion-based sampling. Student informants were chosen because they directly planned, prepared, presented, and sold Asian culinary products during UTY Growpath Expo #3. Visitor informants were included based on clear criteria: visiting one of the four culinary booths, interacting with student sellers, receiving cultural explanations, purchasing or tasting a product, and agreeing to provide brief responses. This technique was appropriate because the study examined direct visitor responses to culinary presentation, cultural meaning, and gastrodiplomacy practices. Although data were collected during the natural flow of the expo, participant selection remained relevant to the research objectives overall.

The research subjects were informants directly involved in implementing and evaluating UTY Growpath Expo #3. A total of 154 informants were involved in this study, comprising 18 students from four culinary groups who served as sellers and 136 visitors who interacted with the food stalls during the expo. The students were selected because they were directly involved in preparing, presenting, and selling Asian culinary products. At the same time, visitors were included because they provided direct responses to the culinary exhibition and gastrodiplomacy practices. The demographic composition of the research subjects is presented in Table 1 below.

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach with an action research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research did not aim to measure gastrodiplomacy practices through statistical indicators, but to understand the planning, process, implementation, and evaluation of gastrodiplomacy within UTY Growpath Expo #3 in 2025. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meanings, experiences, social interactions, and contextual practices that cannot be adequately explained through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Action research was selected because this study involved direct collaboration between researchers and practitioners to identify practical problems, design actions, implement improvements, observe the process, and reflect on the results. This design follows the action research cycle, which consists of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting as a continuous process for improving social and educational practices (Kemmis et al., 2014). In this study, the action research cycle was applied through three main stages: the preparation of culinary and cultural narratives before the expo; the implementation of gastrodiplomacy practices during the expo; and the evaluation of visitor responses and participant reflections after the expo.

This study used action research in a bounded single-cycle format. This design is appropriate because UTY Growpath Expo #3 is an annual campus event with a fixed schedule and cannot be held in the same period. The research does not seek long-term classroom intervention but examines a single student's

Table 1. Demographic profile of research subjects

No.	Category of Informants	Number of Informants	Description
1	Students from four culinary groups	18	Students are involved in preparing, presenting, and selling Asian culinary products at the expo.
2	Visitors	136	Visitors who interacted with the food stalls and provided responses to the culinary exhibition
Total		**154**	

practice in planning, implementing, and evaluating gastrodiplomacy through an educational exhibition. The cycle consists of preparation, implementation, observation, and reflection. The reflection stage was used to evaluate the event and formulate improvements for future expos, not to repeat the same action within the same event. The adequacy of this single cycle was assessed using observable indicators, namely student participation in selling culinary products, product availability at each booth, visitor transactions, total product sales, and sales recapitulation. Profit and loss were evaluated by comparing capital expenditure and sales revenue. These indicators show whether the planned gastrodiplomacy practice was implemented and whether students actively participated as cultural and entrepreneurial actors within a measurable, reflective, and context-bound local higher education learning setting.

The success of the activity was assessed by examining multiple parameters across the preparation, implementation, and evaluation stages, including activity implementation, group attendance, product availability, visitor transactions, interview data during transactions, and sales recapitulation. The checklist was used to document the implementation process, while interview notes captured visitor responses during transactions. The sales recapitulation sheet was used to compare capital expenditure and sales revenue from each group. Through these instruments, the evaluation did not rely solely on general impressions but was based on observable indicators of implementation, participation, visitor response, and financial outcomes (Suryaningrum et al., 2023; Ilyas et al., 2024).

Data Collection

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to record the implementation of culinary presentation, cultural communication, visitor interaction, and the use of food as a medium of cultural representation. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and reflections on the activity. Documentation was collected from event materials, photographs, activity records, reports, and other relevant documents related to UTY Growpath Expo #3. The observation focused on booth activities, food presentation, visitor interaction, cultural explanation, and transaction processes. Interviews were conducted during and after visitor interaction at the food stalls, while documentation was used to support and verify the field findings.

Data Analysis and Validity

The data were analyzed inductively by organizing field notes, interview results, and documents into thematic categories related to planning, implementation, interaction, and evaluation. The interpretation was carried out by connecting the findings with the research objective, namely to understand how the expo functioned as a micro-level practice of gastrodiplomacy. The analysis involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing to produce a contextual and reflective understanding of the research problem (Miles et al., 2014). In this process, data from observation, interviews, and documentation were first reduced by selecting information relevant to gastrodiplomacy, soft power, cultural representation, visitor response, and green economy practices. The selected data were then displayed in thematic categories to identify patterns of meaning. Conclusions were drawn by examining the relationships among culinary presentation, student participation, visitor interaction, and the expo's role as an educational space for micro-level gastrodiplomacy.

Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from students, visitors, and supervising lecturers. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of observation, interviews, and documentation. This process was used to ensure that the interpretation of gastrodiplomacy practices was not based on a single source of information but on converging evidence from different participants and data-collection techniques. Ethical considerations were also applied during the research process. Before interviews and the use of visitor interaction data, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, and the academic use of the findings. Consent was obtained verbally from visitors and participants before their responses or interactions were used as research data. The research did not use identifiable facial photographs, personal identities, or sensitive personal information. Documentation was limited to activity materials, booth displays, products, and non-identifiable interaction records. This procedure was implemented to protect participant privacy while maintaining the data's academic validity.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Food as a Form of Diplomacy

Gastrodiplomacy connects soft power and nation branding through attraction and



Figure 1. Gastrodiplomacy practices from all groups

recognition. Soft power makes others interested, while nation branding constructs a favorable image. Through food, a country may appear rich, hospitable, creative, diverse, and rooted. This makes gastrodiplomacy relevant in International Relations, where influence is shaped by perception, reputation, visibility, and interaction (Suntikul, 2019). In practice, food supports diplomacy through banquets, dinners, receptions, festivals, and exhibitions. Eating together creates familiarity. Culinary interaction can influence mood, perception, and engagement. Food becomes a diplomatic environment for interpreting identity (Hilmi, 2023).

Gastrodiplomacy is not only implemented by states. Non-state actors such as universities, communities, restaurants, diasporas, students, cultural organizations, and local businesses also participate. Contemporary diplomacy involves broader social actors who circulate cultural branding. Educational institutions can introduce culinary culture through exhibitions and expos, building intercultural learning. These practices contribute to the formation of communication and soft power (Li, 2025). Within this framework, food bridges local identity and global interaction. Through gastrodiplomacy, culinary culture introduces values, emotional proximity, and positive branding. Its significance lies in representing identity, creating dialogue, and shaping perception. Gastrodiplomacy shows that international relations are shaped not only by power, security, and economics but also by symbols, emotions, experiences, and everyday encounters (Corzo & Castro, 2026).

UTY Growpath Expo #3 2025 Expo

UTY Growpath Expo #3, with the theme Jagadita Adikarya, was held on December 4–5, 2025, at Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta's Campus 1. The event featured students taking entrepreneurship-related courses who presented various culinary booths, creative products, and student-developed innovations. This is important because food in an exhibition space can function as a cultural sign that communicates identity, taste, values, and social meaning to visitors. Culinary presentation in this context suggests that food can extend beyond consumption to become part of public communication, cultural learning, and identity representation (Growpath UTY, 2025).

As an applicative learning means, a campus expo provides a practical space for implementing gastrodiplomacy at the micro level. This expo shows that an expo does not merely operate as a promotional arena. It also functions as an educational space that facilitates interaction, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and public engagement. Experiential learning in higher education is particularly important because students gain knowledge not only from classroom instruction but also from direct practice, reflection, and social interaction (Araújo et al., 2025).

The implementation of UTY Growpath Expo #3 also strengthened students' practical experience in organizing an exhibition, managing business activities, and developing entrepreneurial capacity. Through this activity, students were required to design products, prepare narratives, communicate with visitors, and evaluate public responses. These processes

are relevant to entrepreneurship education because they encourage students to connect creativity, innovation, market awareness, and communication skills. The event connected academic learning with social practice and business development, making entrepreneurship education more contextual, participatory, and experience-based (Xie et al., 2022).

During the gastrodiplomacy practice at UTY Growpath Expo #3, four types of Asian food were showcased. The first was *Bolani*, a traditional Afghan dish. *Bolani* is a stuffed flatbread filled with various ingredients, such as potatoes, scallions, pumpkin, or lentils, and then baked or fried until cooked. *Bolani* is usually served as a snack, appetizer, or side dish in family gatherings and social activities. The simplicity of its ingredients and preparation process reflects Afghan social life, which values togetherness, family warmth, and cooperation (Foodtasia, 2024). At this booth, students framed *Bolani* through a narrative of simplicity, family warmth, and communal life. The explanation given to visitors emphasized that the dish was commonly associated with informal gatherings, household practices, and social closeness in Afghan society. This narrative helped visitors understand *Bolani* not only through its ingredients and method of preparation but also through the values it embodies. The use of a simple presentation, direct verbal explanation, and visitor interaction enabled students to translate Afghan food culture into an accessible cultural experience.

The second was *Wonton*, a Chinese dish consisting of dumplings made from thin, flour-based wrappers filled with meat or vegetables. *Wonton* can be cooked using various techniques, including boiling, steaming, and frying. Fried wontons, served with chili oil, offer a crispy exterior and a soft filling, making them a popular choice among lovers of Chinese cuisine (Cambridge Dictionary, 2026; Visit Richmond BC, 2016). At this booth, the students framed *Wonton* through the narrative of simplicity, practicality, and familiarity in Chinese food culture. The students used its crispy outer layer and soft filling to invite visitors to understand how Chinese cuisine values balance in preparation and enjoyment. The direct explanation given by the presenters made the food easier to connect with everyday cultural practices, especially because visitors could immediately taste it, ask questions, and relate the dish to Chinese culinary images already familiar to them.

The third was *Mandu*, a traditional South Korean food that is already quite familiar among younger generations. The popularity of Korean culture has made *Mandu* more effective in attracting expo visitors, especially students and young people. *Mandu* was selected as a practical snack because it is easy to eat and requires little time to consume (Lestyanto, 2024; Wicaksono, 2016). The booth narrative connected *Mandu* with the popularity of K-pop, K-drama, and Korean lifestyle, making the food more recognizable and emotionally closer to student visitors. This strategy showed that the students understood the cultural appeal surrounding Korean cuisine and used it to attract attention before introducing *Mandu* as part of South Korea's culinary identity. *Mandu* was also selected because its practical form suited the rhythm of the expo: it was easy to serve, easy to consume, and effective for initiating short cultural conversations between booth presenters and visitors.

The fourth was *Nem rán*, also known as Vietnamese spring roll, as a representation of traditional Vietnamese food. *Nem rán* not only offers the distinctive taste of Vietnam but also reflects the values of balance, simplicity, and diversity of ingredients that characterize Vietnamese society and culture (Delightful Plate, 2021; Legend Travel Group, 2026). The narrative developed by the students connected the texture, filling, and presentation of *Nem rán* with the broader image of Vietnamese society as a community that values harmony in daily life. Through direct explanations to visitors, *Nem rán* was framed as a cultural symbol representing not only taste but also the social meanings of togetherness, modesty, and balance in Vietnamese culinary practice.

Stages of Gastrodiplomacy Practice

Planning

Prior to the activity, the group conducted a series of preparatory stages to ensure the gastrodiplomacy practice could be presented in an organized, informative, and academically relevant manner. The preparation included assigning responsibilities among group members, developing the booth concept, creating educational materials on gastrodiplomacy, and preparing food ingredients, utensils, posters, banners, and supporting media.

Each member was assigned a specific role, including food presentation, the design of educational visual materials, and the explanation of gastrodiplomacy concepts to visitors. The group also coordinated with campus authorities regarding the location, technical arrangements, and operational rules during the expo. This planning stage was important not only for logistical readiness but

also for ensuring that culinary presentation could function as a medium of cultural communication within the framework of International Relations.



Figure 2. Planning process during asian gastrodiplomacy class

Implementation

During the implementation stage, the activity proceeded in accordance with the initial plan (Rizky et al., 2022). The gastrodiplomacy practice was carried out through booth preparation, food presentation, and direct educational interactions with visitors. The introduction of culinary products as an instrument of gastrodiplomacy was applied effectively. Visitors did not merely consume the food provided, but were also introduced to the broader meaning of cuisine as a form of cultural diplomacy. Through short explanations and informal discussions, the group emphasized that food can represent identity, history, cultural values, and people-to-people engagement in international relations. The interaction with visitors was conducted in accordance with the division of tasks established during the planning stage.

Several challenges emerged during the activity. The expo's limited duration and the high number of visitors made it difficult to provide in-depth explanations to every participant. This condition was confirmed by one student informant who stated:

> *"The number of visitors was quite high, while the available time was limited. We could explain the origin and meaning of the food only to visitors who asked directly because we also had to serve buyers at the same time" (Student Informant 3, interview, 2025).*



Figure 3. The process of making and selling during gastrodiplomacy practice

The statement above indicates that the educational function of gastrodiplomacy depended not only on the availability of cultural materials but also on students' practical capacity to manage interactions in a crowded exhibition.

Limited equipment and restricted booth space also affected food presentation and visitor flow. One student organizer explained:

> *"The booth space was not very large, and the cooking and serving equipment had to be used alternately. Sometimes visitors gathered in front of the booth while we were still preparing, serving, and explaining the food. It required clear role division among group members" (Student Informant 7, interview, 2025).*

The quotation above strengthens that the implementation of gastrodiplomacy in a campus expo faced practical constraints at the operational level. These obstacles were addressed through teamwork, role distribution, and direct communication among group members. The activity's success was supported by team readiness, careful planning, visitor enthusiasm, and a conducive campus environment. These factors enabled the expo to run effectively, although the educational dimension still needs stronger time management, better booth arrangement, and more supportive explanatory materials in future activities.

Evaluation

The evaluation method used in this activity involved comparing the outcomes achieved with the initial plan prepared before the expo. This comparison was important for assessing whether the implementation of the gastrodiplomacy practice aligned with the objectives, division of work, technical preparation, and educational targets established earlier. The four teams also conducted a cross-check of several aspects that had not been fully achieved through internal discussions among members. This process was intended to ensure alignment between the activity's results and the initial planning framework.

The evaluation was also conducted from a managerial perspective by assessing the consistency among the planned budget, actual expenditure, and sales revenue generated

Table 2. Comparative of capital, income, and profit/loss per group

Group	Culinary Product	Country Represented	Capital Expenditure	Price x Quantity Sold	Sales Revenue	Profit/Loss
1	*Bolani*	Afghanistan	IDR 350,000	IDR 15,000 x 30 portions	IDR 450,000	**Profit** (IDR 100,000)
2	*Wonton*	China	IDR 250,000	IDR 10,000 x 50 portions	IDR 500,000	**Profit** (IDR 250,000)
3	*Mandu*	South Korea	IDR 500,000	IDR 10,000 x 40 portions	IDR 400,000	*Loss* (IDR 400,000)
4	*Nem Rán*	Vietnam	IDR 350,000	IDR 10,000 x 30 portions	IDR 300,000	*Loss* (IDR 50,000)

during the expo. These financial records were important to measure the efficiency of budget management and the feasibility of the food stall operation. In addition, the teams interviewed several visitors to assess their satisfaction, the quality of the dishes, and their perception of the event's overall organization. After the event ended, the four teams held an internal discussion to assess team coordination, including the efficiency of the production process, the effectiveness of task distribution, and the promotional strategy implemented by the brand ambassadors. The teams also evaluated the number of buyers and sales volume to measure the effectiveness of the promotional strategy. This discussion enabled each team to identify strengths, weaknesses, and technical aspects that need improvement in future activities.

Regarding the table above, this research does not present data by study program because such data were not collected during the expo. UTY Growpath Expo #3 was an open-campus event, and buyer respondents provided only initials in brief, transaction-based responses. The instrument did not ask visitors to state departments, keeping data collection simple and non-intrusive. The only confirmed study program background was among the sellers, students of International Relations. To maintain accuracy, the visualization was adjusted to show buyer proportions by country stall, reflecting visitor interest in the culinary representations of Afghanistan, China, South Korea, and Vietnam in the field. The evaluation findings indicate that the activity was implemented and consistent with the initial plan. The success of the expo should be understood primarily as operational, educational, and cultural success, rather than as uniform financial success for all groups. The expo's gastrodiplomacy practice was a success. All the food prepared by the four groups sold out. However, based on Table 2 above, two groups recorded a profit, while the other experienced a loss. Profit and loss are determined based on the difference between sales revenue and capital expenditure. The losses resulted from high capital expenditure, limited portions, or selling prices that did not cover production costs. These findings are important for entrepreneurship learning because students learned to evaluate pricing, cost control, profit margins, and financial planning by directly practicing gastrodiplomacy through food, culture, and visitor interaction. As a result, the food stalls attracted visitors who passed by the tenant area as well as those who purchased food products. The activity also provided visitors with new

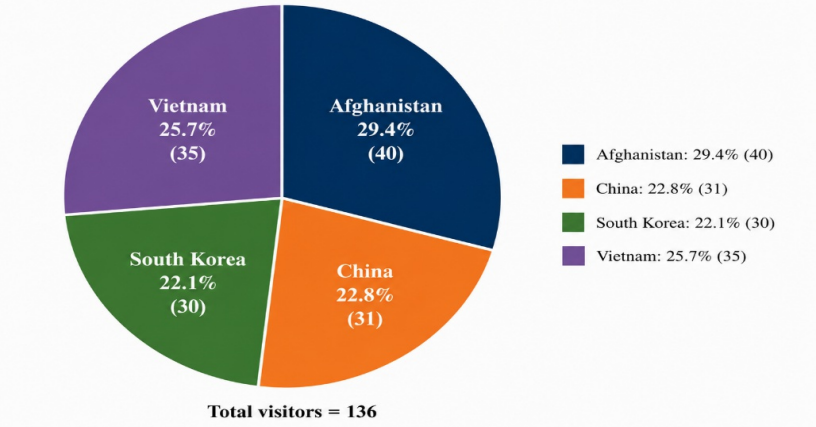
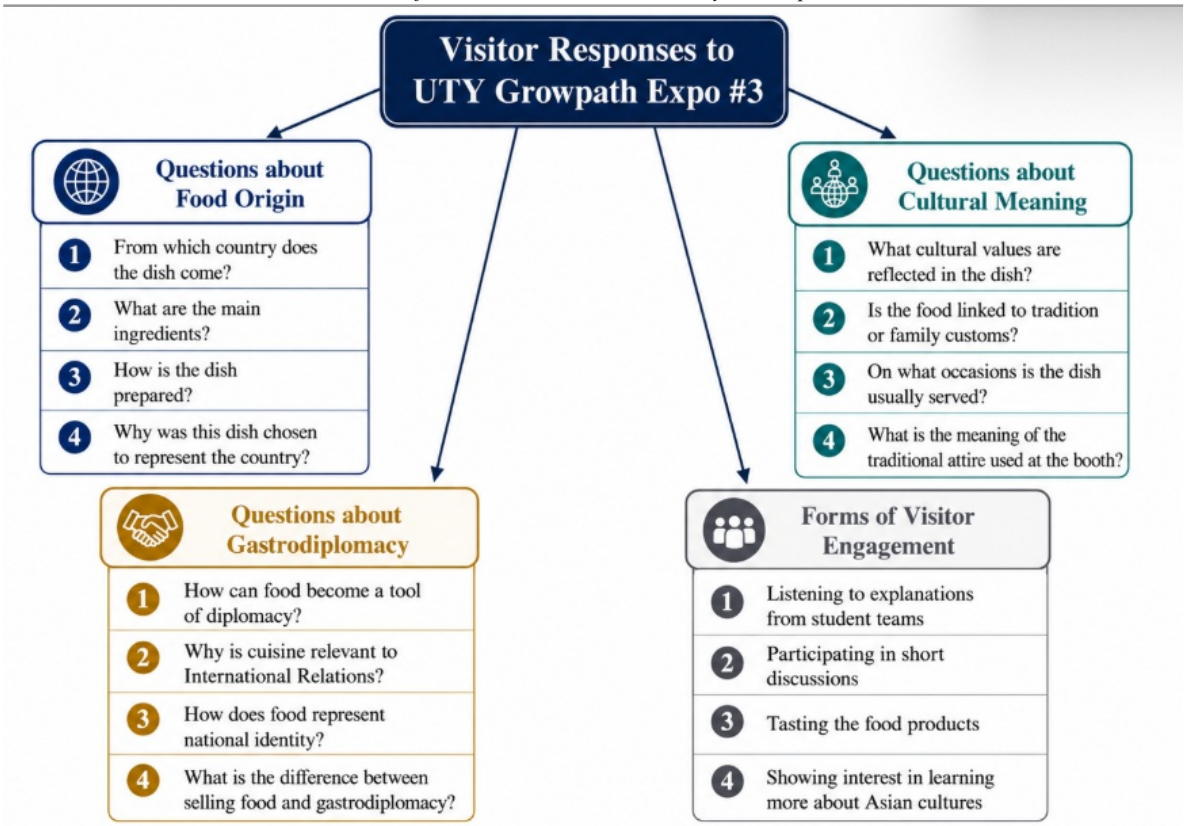


Figure 4. Distribution of buyers per culinary stand



Source: Processed from qualitative visitor responses during UTY Growpath Expo #3.

Figure 5. Concept map of visitor responses

insights into Asian culinary traditions that are not widely known in Indonesian society, particularly among university students. The use of traditional clothing from each represented country also became an important supporting element. It helped attract visitors' attention and encouraged them to learn more about Afghanistan, China, South Korea, and Vietnam. This expo activity not only introduced food as a cultural product but also presented visual cultural symbols that enriched the gastrodiplomacy experience.

The audience at UTY Growpath Expo #3 averaged 34 buyers per food stall, as shown in Table 1 above. Audience came from various academic communities within Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta, including students from International Relations, Management, Psychology, Communication Studies, Informatics, and Electrical Engineering. Several lecturers and members of the campus community also purchased the food products. Most visitors were participants in the campus expo and showed interest in activities related to culture, culinary practices, and international studies.

The audience response was not only positive overall but also evident in identifiable patterns of curiosity and engagement. Visitor questions and short discussions during the expo can be grouped into three main aspects, as seen in Figure 8 above. First, many visitors asked about the food's origin, including the country of origin, the ingredients used, and how each dish was prepared. Second, visitors showed interest in the cultural significance of the dishes, including the social values, traditions, and symbolism represented by *Bolani*, *Wonton*, Mandu, and Nem Rán. Third, several visitors asked about the relationship between food and gastrodiplomacy, particularly how cuisine could function as a medium of cultural diplomacy and why food was relevant to the study of international relations. These patterns indicate that visitor enthusiasm was expressed not merely through consumption, but through active curiosity, dialogue, and interpretive engagement. The explanations delivered by the four teams encouraged visitors to connect food with broader issues of identity, culture, and international relations. Their participation in short discussions and willingness to taste and learn more about Asian culinary traditions demonstrate that the expo served as an experiential learning space in which culinary presentations stimulated intercultural understanding and public engagement.

Implementation of the Expo as Recognizing and Introducing Asian Gastrodiplomacy

Culinary culture in UTY Growpath Expo #3 represents a small but meaningful practice of gastrodiplomacy, in which food serves as a medium for conveying identity, values, and cultural imagination to a public audience (Iswardhana et al., 202). The presentation of fried wonton with chili oil from China, alongside culinary products from Afghanistan, South Korea, and Vietnam, demonstrates that cuisine can be understood as cultural narratives in direct social experience. In International relations, this practice is significant because public diplomacy not only operates through official state discourse, embassies, or cultural institutes. It also works through everyday encounters in which foreign cultures are sampled, discussed, interpreted, and emotionally remembered. This finding is in line with Suntikul's argument that gastrodiplomacy should be understood as part of a broader public diplomacy spectrum, especially when food creates a contact zone between cultural representation and audience experience (Suntikul, 2019). The difference is that UTY Growpath Expo #3 did not operate as a tourism destination or a state campaign, but rather as a university-based exhibition in which students became the main actors in cultural communication.

From the perspective of gastrodiplomacy, food functions as a soft power instrument because it creates attraction without coercion. The cuisine is not merely offered as a product for consumption, but as a symbolic entry point into cultural identity. Its ingredients, taste profile, serving method, and accompanying explanation enabled visitors to associate Chinese cuisine with richness, familiarity, creativity, and cultural depth. This process shows that gastrodiplomacy works through sensory persuasion. Visitors may not receive a formal political message, yet they experience a cultural representation that shapes perception. Food becomes persuasive precisely because it is informal, accessible, and emotionally engaging. Recent studies also show that culinary diplomacy increasingly involves communities, tourism actors, cultural institutions, restaurants, diasporas, and educational actors. This confirms the finding of Cabral, Querido, and Castro that gastronomy becomes diplomatically meaningful when taste is connected with narration, cultural framing, and audience participation. The success of the expo is evident in its ability to create sensory and interactive encounters. Its limitation lies in the uneven depth of cultural explanation across booths, which shows that culinary attraction must be supported by stronger interpretive materials and clearer cultural narratives (Cabral et al., 2024). Compared with Lee & Kim's study of Singapore's hawker culture, which shows that food-based nation branding becomes stronger when culinary heritage is institutionalized, narrated, and linked to wider national recognition (Lee & Kim, 2021). Li shows that contemporary gastrodiplomacy research has moved toward broader questions of public diplomacy, cultural mediation, identity construction, and non-state participation (Li, 2025). Meanwhile, the UTY case extends this discussion by placing students at the center of the practice, not only as learners but as organizers, narrators, and evaluators of cultural communication. UTY Growpath Expo #3 is on a much smaller scale, but it follows a similar logic by using food as a marker of cultural recognition. The main difference is that the expo was driven by student initiative and educational interaction, rather than by a national UNESCO-oriented campaign. The expo supports recent literature criticizing the tendency to treat gastrodiplomacy solely as food promotion. The UTY case also contributes to this debate by showing that students can serve as cultural mediators who connect food, learning, and public engagement at the local academic level.

The activity also illustrates the relations between gastrodiplomacy and nation branding. Nation branding concerns the construction of a favorable national branding in the minds of external audiences. Cuisine becomes a brand marker because it condenses complex cultural meanings into a recognizable and memorable experience. Asian culinary identity, for instance, was represented not through state propaganda, but through a dish that allowed visitors to encounter any country as a civilization associated with tradition, taste innovation, and social interaction. The same logic was applied to the other Asian cuisines presented at the expo. Afghanistan, China, South Korea, and Vietnam were not introduced as abstract geopolitical entities, but as cultural communities with distinctive food heritage and social values.

The expo demonstrated that nation branding through food depends not only on taste but also on narrative management. A dish becomes diplomatically meaningful when it is accompanied by explanation, symbolism, and interaction. Without cultural narration, food risks being reduced to a commercial product. With narration, it becomes a cultural text that communicates history, identity, and people-to-people connection. The students' role in the expo, that explaining the origin, meaning, and

diplomatic relevance of each dish, was crucial because they transformed culinary consumption into intercultural learning. This reflects a constructivist understanding of international relations, where meaning is socially produced through interaction.

The expo also reveals the growing role of non-state actors in public diplomacy. Students, campus communities, and educational institutions can contribute to cultural representation even without formal diplomatic authority. Their practices may operate on a limited scale, yet they participate in the broader circulation of national branding. UTY Growpath Expo #3 became a micro-site of gastrodiplomacy and nation branding. Its success, reflected in positive visitor responses and sold-out products, indicates that culinary diplomacy can generate curiosity, appreciation, and cultural proximity. The main challenge lies in deepening the educational dimension, so that culinary attraction is not separated from critical understanding of culture, identity, and international relations. This point is essential for ensuring that the activity remains academically grounded rather than promotional and commercially oriented.

■ CONCLUSION

UTY Growpath Expo #3 can be understood as a micro-level practice of gastrodiplomacy, soft power, and nation branding in higher education. Through food presentation, cultural explanation, visual symbols, and direct interaction with visitors, the expo demonstrated that culinary culture can connect academic learning with public diplomacy practice. The introduction of Asian culinary products did not merely serve commercial purposes but operated as a cultural medium for communicating identity, values, symbolic meanings, and intercultural understanding.

The contribution of this study lies in expanding the analysis of gastrodiplomacy beyond state-led programs and formal diplomatic institutions. By positioning students, lecturers, and the university community as cultural communicators, the research shows that higher education institutions can help shape cultural perceptions and circulate national branding. This finding enriches existing studies of gastrodiplomacy by highlighting experiential learning, student agency, and educational exhibitions as relevant spaces for cultural diplomacy. Future campus-based gastrodiplomacy activities should strengthen cultural storytelling, visitor engagement, and systematic evaluation. Culinary presentation needs to be supported by deeper academic explanation, allowing food to function not only as a consumable product but also as a reflective instrument of cultural diplomacy. It has also been proven that university-based exhibitions can serve as practical laboratories where students learn to translate cultural knowledge into public communication, entrepreneurial practice, and intercultural engagement.

For higher education institutions that intend to replicate this model, campus-based gastrodiplomacy should be designed through several technical steps. First, institutions need to integrate the expo with relevant courses, especially entrepreneurship, international relations, cultural studies, or communication, to ensure that the activity has clear academic outcomes. Second, each culinary booth should be accompanied by a brief cultural narrative that explains the origin, meaning, values, and social context of the food presented. Third, student presenters should receive basic training in cultural storytelling, visitor communication, and ethical representation of foreign cultures. Fourth, the use of visual identity, traditional attributes, sustainable packaging, and interactive displays should be planned consistently to strengthen the visitor experience. Fifth, the activity should include simple evaluation instruments, such as visitor response forms, observation notes, and participant reflection sheets, to measure cultural understanding, visitor engagement, and learning outcomes. These steps are important to ensure that similar exhibitions do not remain merely promotional events but develop into structured academic programs that combine cultural diplomacy, experiential learning, entrepreneurship, and public engagement.

The future campus-based gastrodiplomacy activities should strengthen cultural storytelling, visitor engagement, and systematic evaluation. Culinary presentation needs to be supported by deeper academic explanation, allowing food to function not only as a consumable product but also as a reflective instrument of cultural diplomacy.

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