



IShowSpeed streaming as a form of soft power: A study case of digital diplomacy potential to boost Indonesia global image

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid advancement of digitalization has transformed the landscape of international diplomacy from institution centered practices into more inclusive engagements involving nonstate actors, particularly global influencers. This study examines the visit of Darren Watkins Jr., widely known as IShowSpeed, to Indonesia in 2024 as a form of soft power and digital diplomacy with the potential to enhance Indonesia's global image. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative case study approach through literature review, media analysis, and online audience responses, the research demonstrates that IShowSpeed's spontaneous interactions with local culture including batik, cuisine, music, and traditional performances generated significant positive exposure for Indonesia worldwide. **Findings:** The impact of IshowSpeed Indonesian tour is reflected in increased online tourism searches, predominantly positive public sentiment, and a growing perception of Indonesia as a hospitable and open nation. Nevertheless, challenges remain, such as risks of cultural misinterpretation, negative virality, and public safety issues. **Conclusion:** The findings highlight the need for adaptive, collaborative, and data driven strategies in digital diplomacy to fully harness similar opportunities in the future. Consequently, IShowSpeed serves as a concrete example of how individuals can act as digital cultural diplomats supporting Indonesia's soft power strategy. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this study lies in its attempt to deconstruct the concept of digital diplomacy by positioning global live-stream content creators as central actors in contemporary soft power strategies.

KEYWORDS: digital diplomacy; global influencers; influencer marketing; IshowSpeed; soft power.

1. Introduction

When we think about diplomacy, it is commonly associated with formal interactions between state representatives, embassies, and international institutions. With an intricate system of conduct and rules of procedure. However, the advancement of digital technology has significantly changed this traditional understanding and the landscape of international communications.

The use of social media in diplomacy has already been a thoroughly researched phenomena since the early 2010s, when platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram

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began to play an active role in shaping political discourse and cross-cultural communication (Diplo, 2021; Gutelle, 2024). The digital interaction that occurred through these platforms is characterized by its tendency to be spontaneous, borderless, participatory, and highly interactive to its target audience. And because of its ability to be freely shared, social media has significantly reduced the capability to control international narratives (Fukuyama, 2018). Furthermore, it enables diverse actors to influence global public opinion through means of visibility, virality, and network effects.

Several notable events where social media takes a significant role in ushering political mobilization and international awareness is The Arab Spring in 2011, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Where protestors use social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube to communicate messages and provoke international reactions to topple oppressive regimes (Gire, 2014). Similarly, the darker implications of digital communication were evident in the use of Facebook to disseminate propaganda and incite hate crimes against Rohingya minorities in the Myanmar conflict (Maulana & Julyazti, 2025). The algorithmic amplification of misinformation and inflammatory narratives played a critical role in escalating offline violence, demonstrating that social media is not a neutral diplomatic instrument but a powerful force capable of shaping conflict dynamics and international perception.

Beyond state-centric conflicts, social media has also played a crucial role in global civil society movements and humanitarian responses. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, for instance, expanded from a domestic protest racial injustice in the United States in 2013 into a global transnational movement through digital platforms in 2020 because of George Floyd's death, influencing public discourse and diplomatic conversations on human rights worldwide (Firdaus et al., 2023). Similarly, social media platforms were instrumental in mobilizing international humanitarian assistance following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, as well as the 2010 Haiti earthquake, where social media is used as real time digital communication that spreads global awareness, fundraising, and emergency coordination (Muralidharan et al., 2011; Dugdale et al., 2012).

However, while these cases illustrate the growing significance of social media in diplomacy, they largely reflect a collective or issue driven digital mobilization rather than individual centered influence. The contemporary digital environment has since evolved with the emergence of global influencers whose transnational visibility allows them to shape international narratives independently of both state institutions and social movements. And unlike the formal setting of an official state spokesperson, influencers operate through personality-driven, experiential, and real time content, particularly via the internet and social media, which introduce a new modality of digital diplomacy characterized by authenticity, emotional resonance, and audience participation (Lee & Alhabash, 2025).

1.1 The notion of soft power to build trust

When talking about “power” in the field of International Relations, people generally think of “hard power” elements. In other words, those aspects that can be seen, measured, analyzed and categorized such as population size, military strength, industrial capability, economic growth and geographical location of a country (Rosadi & Ikom 2022). It can be said that hard power is the ability of a country to make other countries follow its will through threats and coercion.

However, there is also the concept of “Soft power” initiated by Nye (2008), this concept explains that a country also has the ability to influence other countries through voluntary attraction and encouragement rather than coercion. Soft power does not use military or economic power directly, but rather on the positive image of a country that makes it favored and other countries are voluntarily encouraged to imitate it. The use of soft power can be particularly attractive to countries which lack overwhelming military or economic dominance, or which seek to complement their hard power instruments with more sustainable and less confrontational forms of influence. Soft power is also seen as a

less confrontative option to soft power, because rather than compelling compliance through strategic superiority; Soft power operates by shaping preferences, perceptions, and values in other countries. Thereby fostering cooperation based on mutual trust and legitimacy (Nye, 2008).

Table. 1. The difference between hard power and soft power

Hard power	Soft power
Ability to change other’s position by force or inducement	Ability to shape preferences of others by attraction
Military and economic power	Cultural Power
Coercion, force	Co-option, influence
Absolute	Relative, context based
Tangible, easy to measure, predictable to certain degree	Intangible, hard to measure, unpredictable
Ownership Specified	Unspecified, multiple sources
Controlled by state or organizations	Mostly non-state, actors, uncontrollable
External, action, push	Internal, reaction/response, pull
Direct, short-term, immediate effect	Indirect, long-term, delayed effect
Manifested in foreign policies	Communicated via nation branding

The process of soft power is gradual and relational rather than immediate or coercive. It begins with cultural exposure and the projection of shared values, such as norms, lifestyles, traditions, or popular culture, that are perceived as relatable and appealing by foreign audiences (Raj, 2024). Through repeated exposure, these cultural elements shape positive perceptions of the country, framing it as friendly, modern, credible, or trustworthy. Over time, such favorable perceptions can develop into trust and emotional attachment, as foreign publics begin to associate the country with values they admire or identify with. This emotional dimension is crucial, as trust built through attraction tends to be more resilient than trust enforced through power asymmetries.

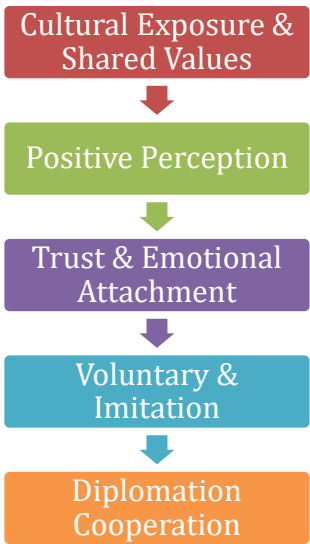


Fig. 1. The mechanism of soft power in building trust and cooperation

As a result, foreign societies may engage in voluntary imitation, by adopting similar cultures, norms or foreign policies and can be done by the people of a country without direct pressure from the country of origin or restrictions from other external factors. In this context, soft power will work through attraction to the culture, products and values of other countries and can create attachment and acceptance between societies. If this condition is achieved, it will strengthen the influence of the home country on the countries that receive the attraction. Ultimately, this chain of attraction, trust, and voluntary alignment creates a conducive environment for diplomatic cooperation, where

collaboration emerges not from obligation, but from mutual goodwill and perceived legitimacy. In this sense, soft power functions as an enabling force that lowers political resistance, enhances mutual understanding, and strengthens long term international partnerships (Melissen, 2015). This capacity to foster cooperation by creating understanding and trust from the people of other countries has made soft power especially relevant in an increasingly interconnected international system where public opinion, global visibility, and reputation play a decisive role in foreign policy outcomes.

1.2 Digital diplomacy's potential and the role of influencer

According to the Oxford English Dictionary as mentioned by Fukuda (2019), Diplomacy is a management of international relations through negotiation, where the relationship is synchronized and managed by the grand ambassador or diplomat. However, diplomacy can also be interpreted as the art of forwarding an idea or movement without receiving an excessive response. Through this definition, it can be understood that diplomacy can not only be carried out by state government bodies, but also by non-governmental actors such as international organizations, multinational companies, non-governmental organizations, and especially in this case individuals.

Much of the early implementation of digital diplomacy focused on text based or image-based interactions, where states and nonstate actors curated content to influence perceptions abroad (Barman, 2024). However, the digital ecosystem has since evolved into a more immersive, real time, and interactive space where actors can instantly interact with large numbers of people from all around the world, ushering in the era of live streaming (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Individuals are nonstate actors who play a role in influencing and shaping global dynamics even though they may not officially represent a state such as state leaders, corporate leaders, scientists, activists, terrorists and even civilians. Individuals in international relations do not have as much impact as a state's decisions, but they are still a part of the system, and their interactions can influence international society in contexts such as tourism, student exchange, cultural exchange, and trade.

In addition, individuals can also play a role in spreading ideologies, championing human rights, and potentially introducing cultures from one country to another (Garba, 2025). These interactions can contribute to the development of imitation or understanding from people of a different state. In this study, influencers are understood as individuals who possess a significant following on digital platforms and are capable of shaping opinions, behaviors, and perceptions through their online presence and content. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers build their credibility through perceived authenticity, relatability, and continuous interaction with their audiences (Goodwin et al., 2023). Their influence does not stem from formal authority or institutional power, but from social trust and emotional engagement established within digital communities.

Influencers are particularly relevant in the context of digital diplomacy because they operate at the intersection of culture, communication, and technology. Through platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, and TikTok, influencers are able to engage in real time interactions, allowing audiences from different countries to experience cultural exposure directly and spontaneously. This interactive nature enables influencers to function as informal cultural intermediaries, capable of transmitting values, norms, and everyday social realities of a country in ways that are often perceived as more genuine than official state messaging.

1.3 The significance of this study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of literature on soft power and digital diplomacy by examining the role of social media influencers as nonstate actors in shaping international perceptions and trust. While existing studies on soft power largely focus on state led cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy institutions, or

nation branding campaigns, fewer analyses have explored how informal entertainment driven digital content, particularly livestreaming, functions as a mechanism of soft power in real time. This study addresses this gap by sitting influencer led cultural exposure within the theoretical framework of soft power and trust building in international relations.

Empirically, this research offers a contextualized case study of IShowSpeed's visit to Indonesia, illustrating how influencer activities can generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities for a country's global image. By analyzing livestream interactions, audience responses, and on the ground social dynamics, this study provides insight into how trust, attraction, and perception are constructed and contested through digital platforms. The findings highlight that influencer diplomacy is not a neutral process, but one shaped by authenticity, audience interpretation, crowd behavior, and the absence or presence of institutional coordination.

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands Joseph Nye's soft power concept by demonstrating how digital media, parasocial interaction, and algorithm driven visibility intensify the speed and scale at which attraction and trust can be formed or disrupted. It shows that soft power in the digital age is increasingly decentralized, situational, and emotionally mediated, challenging traditional assumptions that soft power is primarily exercised through long term, state controlled cultural programs.

Practically, this study holds significance for policymakers, cultural institutions, and tourism authorities by offering evidence-based insights into how influencer engagement can be strategically managed to maximize diplomatic benefits while minimizing reputational risks. The analysis underscores the need for ethical guidelines, crowd management, and narrative coordination in influencer driven diplomacy, especially in countries with high digital engagement and strong public enthusiasm.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine IShowSpeed's 2024 visit to Indonesia as a form of digital cultural diplomacy and soft power practice. A case study design is chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of contemporary social phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case of IShowSpeed visit to Indonesia is considered critical and illustrative, as it represents a unique example of how a global digital influencer acting as a nonstate actor, can influence international perceptions through real time livestreaming.

2.1 Data collection stage

Primary data consists of livestream documentation and uploaded content from IShowSpeed's official YouTube and social media platforms, focusing on segments that depict cultural interactions, verbal expressions, and real time audience engagement in Jakarta, Bali, and Yogyakarta. Secondary data were obtained from user generated comments on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, as well as from official reports issued by Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, digital analytics platforms, and relevant online media coverage. These data sources were selected to capture both content production and audience reception, enabling a comprehensive examination of digital cultural diplomacy dynamics.

2.2 Data analysis stage

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach guided by soft power and digital diplomacy frameworks. Livestream content and audience responses were coded to identify recurring themes such as cultural attraction, authenticity, trustbuilding, and risks of misinterpretation. Audience comments were

further categorized descriptively into positive, neutral, and negative sentiments based on contextual meaning and keyword frequency to assess global perception trends. Triangulation across multiple data sources such as video content, audience interactions, official reports, and media narratives was applied to strengthen analytical validity and ensure a balanced interpretation of IShowSpeed's role as a nonstate digital actor in shaping Indonesia's international image.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 IShowSpeed in Indonesia

The phenomenon of streamer Darren Watkins Jr., better known as IShowSpeed, exemplifies how digital figures can play a strategic role in cultural diplomacy in the digital age. As a 19-year-old YouTuber from the United States, Speed is widely recognized for his expressive, spontaneous, and energetic personality, traits that resonate strongly with Gen Z audiences who value authentic and unscripted content. In September 2024, Speed embarked on a tour across several Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Throughout this journey, he explored local cultures through real time livestreams to millions of followers. From practicing Muay Thai in Thailand to enjoying Nasi Padang in Indonesia, his activities became a media content that not only entertained but also introduced Southeast Asian cultures to a global audience in an accessible and engaging manner.



Fig. 2. IShowSpeed posing with Indonesia residents: (a) posing with the Indonesian flag together with his fans; (b) taking photos with street performers and residents; (c) playing the Angklung with the local community; (d) receiving an action figure (IShowSpeed, 2024a, 2024b; Radar Aktual, 2024; Saputro, 2024)

During his visit in Indonesia, IShowSpeed planned to tour for 3 days and visited three major cities: Jakarta, Bali, and Yogyakarta; With a planned final tour to the Papua region cancelled because his plane had too few passengers and canceled by the airline. IShowSpeed began his Indonesia tour on 18 September 2024, arriving in Jakarta and immediately engaging in a live streamed exploration of Indonesia capital city's cultural and historical landmarks. His activities included visiting the Kota Tua (Old City) area,

wearing traditional batik attire (Figure 2a), interacting with street performers and vendors (Figure 2b & Figure 2c), sampling Indonesian cuisine like Nasi Padang, and participating in Indonesia cultural performances such as dangdut music. His stream is also used by several local fans to greet and present him with gifts (Figure 2d), as well as portraying Indonesia's urban culture as vibrant, friendly, and highly interactive.

A particularly notable event during this stage of the tour occurred when IShowSpeed was presented with the Indonesian national flag by local fans and posed with it amid a large gathering of supporters. This moment, which was livestreamed to millions of viewers worldwide, was accompanied by IShowSpeed's enthusiastic verbal expressions such as "W in the chat" and "I f***ing love Indonesia, bro." Although delivered in an informal and entertainment-oriented manner characteristic of his streaming persona, this interaction carried symbolic significance in the context of digital cultural diplomacy. The visual of a global influencer voluntarily embracing a national symbol, combined with an explicit expression of admiration can function as an unintentional yet powerful soft power moment. From an international relations perspective, such imagery contributes to the construction of a positive national narrative by associating Indonesia with enthusiasm, hospitality, and emotional resonance.

Following his time in Jakarta, Speed continued his journey to Bali Island, on 19 September 2025. Where his livestreams focused on Indonesia's cultural heritage richness and natural landscape beauty. IShowSpeed visited Kuta Beach and Ubud market, entered the Bali Zoo, participated in traditional Balinese Kecak dance performances (Figure 3a), explored Balinese Hinduism temple complexes, and interacted with local artists and residents. It can be said that the Bali tour shows a different side of Indonesia, if the Jakarta stream is highlighting Indonesia's urban vibrancy and everyday social interactions, the Bali livestreams would project an image of Indonesia as a spiritually rich, culturally distinctive, and aesthetically captivating destination (Figure 3b). The visual focus on traditional performances, ritual spaces, and natural scenery reinforced Bali's long-established identity as a global cultural and tourism hub, while Speed's spontaneous reactions and direct engagement with local communities preserved the sense of authenticity that characterized his content.

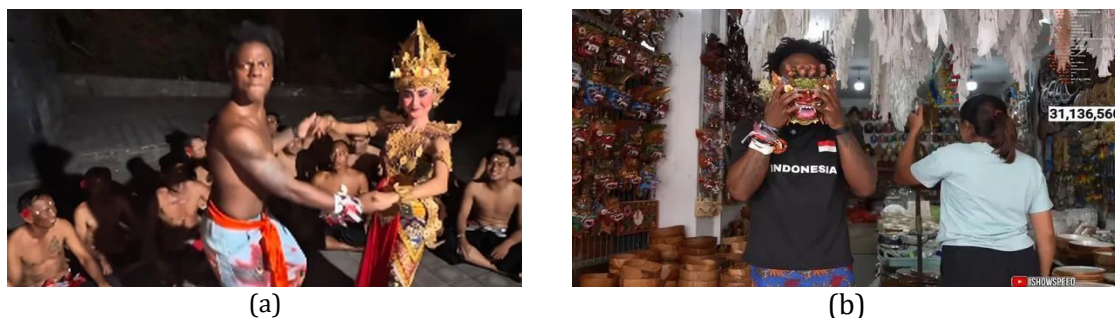


Fig. 3. Traditional Balinese: (a) performing the Balinese Kecak dance; (b) trying on a traditional Balinese mask
(Detik Sumbagsel, 2024; Sundari, 2024)

Unfortunately, the Bali segment of the tour also revealed less favorable dynamics that illustrate the vulnerabilities of influencer-driven cultural diplomacy. During his visit to local markets, IShowSpeed encountered what is commonly referred to as "tourist pricing," where foreign visitors are charged significantly higher prices than local customers. In one livestreamed instance, he spent approximately Rp. 300,000 on an imitation Cristiano Ronaldo football jersey, Rp. 100,000 on a Balinese *Leak* ashtray, Rp. 100,000 on an "I Love Bali" hand fan, and Rp. 300,000 on a Balinese phallus-shaped bottle opener, resulting in a total expenditure of Rp. 800,000 for souvenir items that viewers widely considered overpriced (IShowSpeed, 2024b).

Throughout the livestream, audience members repeatedly warned IShowSpeed via the live chat that he was being overcharged and potentially scammed. However, Speed

appeared largely indifferent to these warnings, choosing instead to treat the incident humorously and as part of the entertainment value of the stream. The public visibility of such transaction's risks reinforcing negative perceptions of Indonesia as a destination where tourists are vulnerable to exploitation, particularly when the incident unfolds in real time before a global audience (IShowSpeed, 2024b).

The destination of IShowSpeed's Indonesia tour was Yogyakarta, on 20 September 2024. A city widely recognized as the center of Javanese culture and intellectual heritage. In contrast to the urban modernity showcased in Jakarta and the spiritual-touristic imagery presented in Bali, Yogyakarta can be seen as a representation of Indonesia's historical continuity and cultural preservation. This is highlighted in IShowSpeed visit, IShowSpeed participated in batik making workshops, learned how to play traditional Javanese gamelan instruments, riding delman carriage, learning Javanese language and phrases such as "monggo", and livestreamed from heritage sites such as the Malioboro complex (IShowSpeed, 2024c).

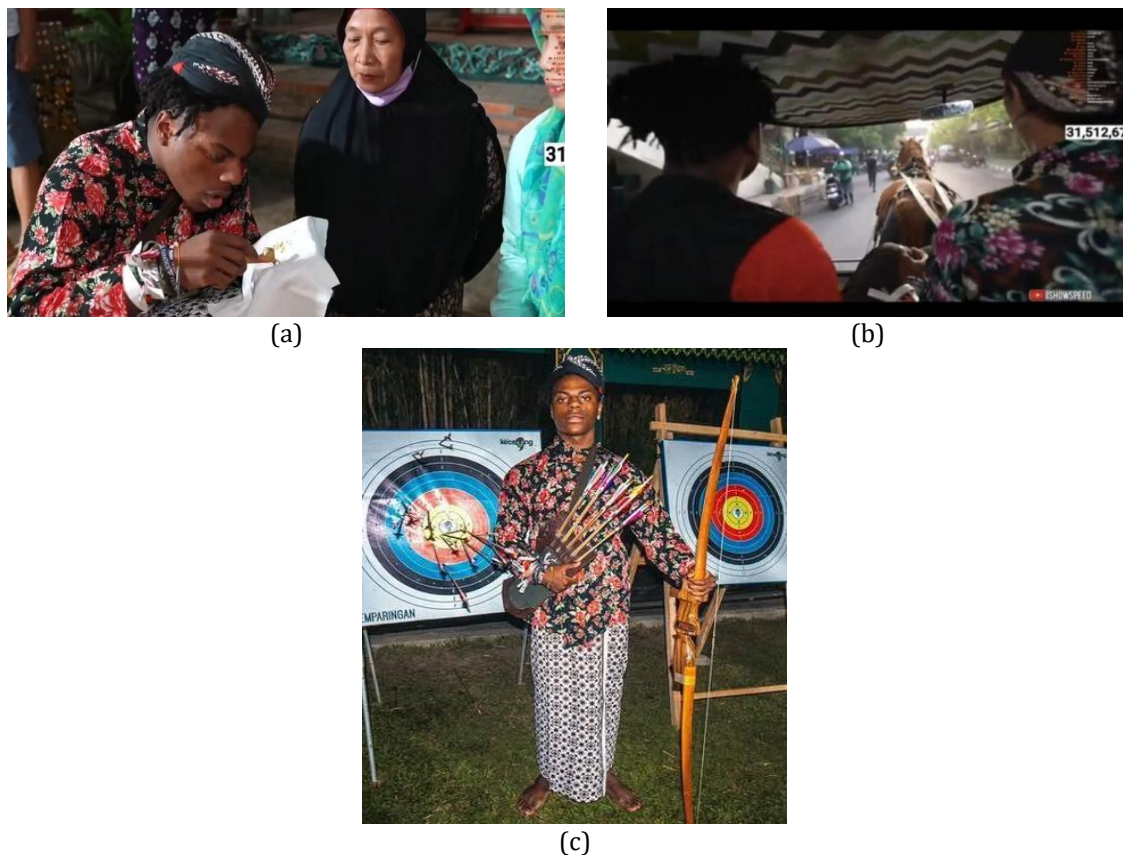


Fig. 4. Learning activity IShowSpeed in Indonesia: (a) learning to make batik; (b) riding in a Javanese delman train; (c) earning archery using traditional Javanese clothing (Bahri, 2025; IShowSpeed, 2024a)

However, the IShowSpeed Indonesia tour has also revealed several significant risks inherent in an influencer driven digital diplomacy. During multiple segments in the stream, there are several instances that received negative responses from the audience. Stemming both from IShowSpeed's type of highly expressive and entertainment-oriented persona and from the behavior of local crowds, which functioned as largely uncontrollable external factors (IShowSpeed, 2024c).

Because of this, the convergence of livestreaming, celebrity visibility, and real time location disclosure created conditions conducive to Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), motivating large numbers of fans to gather spontaneously in public spaces to interact with IShowSpeed. These crowd dynamics resulted in practical disruptions, including road blockages, congestion in pedestrian areas, and interference with IShowSpeed's group

mobility. The sudden accumulation of fans attempting to appear on stream or interact directly with the influencer transformed ordinary public spaces into unmanaged event zones. Such situations not only posed safety concerns but also risked portraying Indonesia as lacking crowd control and public order management in the eyes of international viewers.

More critically, one crucial aspect to consider in digital cultural diplomacy is the potential ambiguity in the verbal expressions used by influencers. During his visit to Indonesia, IShowSpeed is persuaded by viewers and uttered several offensive phrases that quickly went viral among local audiences, such as “Minggir lu miskin” (“Move aside, you’re poor”) and “Santai, santai” (“Relax, relax”). Although these expressions are not intended to offend the locals and were delivered in a humorous and spontaneous manner characteristic of Speed’s streaming style, phrases like “Minggir lu miskin” carry a literal connotation that is derogatory and potentially offensive especially when interpreted outside the context of digital culture or streamer communication norms.

Although these events are the result of few individuals and not representative of Indonesian society, their amplification through livestreaming has effectively exposed global audiences to negative social behavior. The viral nature of such moments risks reinforcing harmful stereotypes, undermining the positive cultural narratives being promoted through the stream. These types of behavior are particularly prone to occur in influencer led diplomacy due to the absence of formal protocols, crowd regulation mechanisms, and cultural mediation that typically accompany official diplomatic or tourism events. Unlike state sponsored cultural diplomacy, influencer interactions unfold in unpredictable public settings where audience participation, peer pressure, and online provocation converge. Viewers’ attempts to prompt sensational reactions, combined with the influencer’s performative persona, can unintentionally generate moments that conflict with local norms and values.

Moreover, the live and unedited nature of streaming eliminates opportunities for contextual clarification or narrative correction. Once circulated, controversial phrases or chaotic scenes are often detached from their original situational context and reinterpreted by global audiences unfamiliar with local language nuances or streaming culture. This creates a risk of misrepresentation, where humor or imitation may be perceived as disrespect, and spontaneous crowd enthusiasm may be interpreted as disorderliness. Despite these limitations, these interactions remain significant precisely because of their spontaneity. They reflect an informal and decentralized form of cultural diplomacy in which meaning is coproduced by the influencer, local participants, and global audiences. As described by Narvaez Rojas et al. (2021), such livestream environments function as “microscale global public spheres” where cross cultural encounters occur in real time, without institutional mediation. However, this same openness that enables authenticity also exposes digital diplomacy to volatility, reinforcing the notion that influencer based soft power is highly impactful yet structurally fragile.

3.2 Impact and response from world audiences in the stream

This phenomenon is increasingly relevant in the context of diplomacy 5.0, where global influencers like IShowSpeed act as catalysts for cultural promotion that is spontaneous, interactive, and transnational. According to data from Indonesia’s Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, interest among foreign tourists in destinations visited by Speed rose by 70%, with online search traffic increasing by 55% within two weeks of the content’s release (Kemenparekraf, 2025). Speed’s reaction to Indonesian culture was overwhelmingly positive; he referred to Indonesia as a “special country” and expressed a desire to stay longer due to the warm reception from locals.

On the other hand, Indonesian audiences responded with remarkable enthusiasm. Sentiment analysis of thousands of YouTube and TikTok comments revealed that 80% were positive, 15% neutral, and only 5% negative. Dominant keywords in positive comments included “funny,” “friendly,” “exciting,” and “bro,” indicating emotional

engagement and strong cultural acceptance. Research from Horton & Wohl (1956) further shows that netizen responses to Speed's visit were not only expressions of admiration but also served as a medium for articulating national identity and perspectives on local sociocultural issues. Comments such as "Speed should be a tourism ambassador" or "Indonesia is proud of this moment" reflect how the public interprets the presence of global figures as positive representations of their culture.

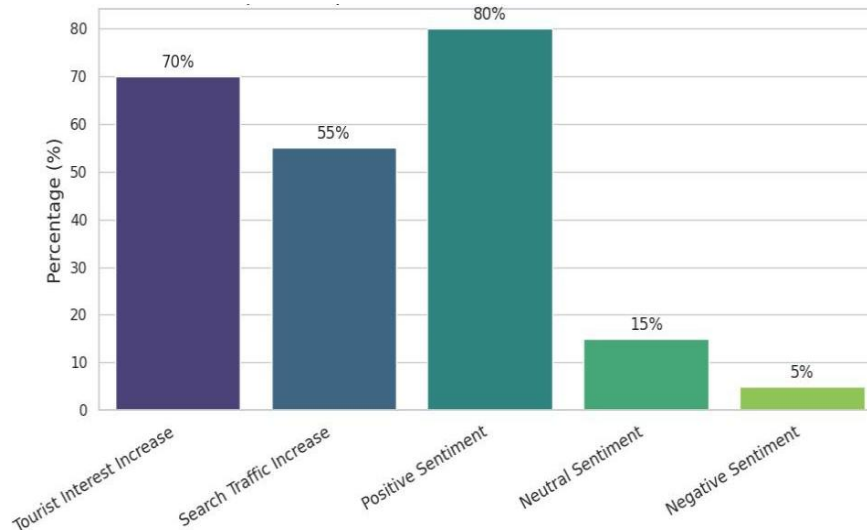


Fig. 5. The impact of Speed's content on tourism and sentiment

Academic literature supports this view, Bjola & Manor (2022) asserts that "digital diplomacy allows nonstate actors to shape international narratives," which aligns with how Speed's content influenced global perceptions of Indonesia. Similar patterns are evident in the case of BTS, whose digital campaigns significantly enhanced South Korea's image through cultural exports and tourism promotion (Jin, 2021). In Indonesia's context, local media outlets such as Radar Jogja and Kumparan highlighted Speed's visit as an informal yet impactful moment of cultural diplomacy. This shift illustrates the evolution of contemporary diplomacy toward "network diplomacy," where non-state actors play a central role in shaping international relationships and perceptions (Hocking, 2007).

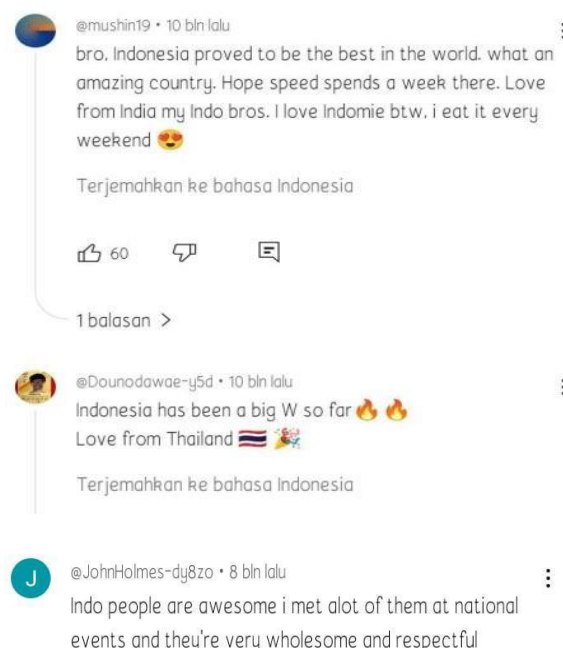


Fig. 6. Internet Users' positive comments

3.3 Challenges encountered

Despite its positive impact, digital diplomacy through public figures such as IShowSpeed presents several structural and situational challenges that require deeper consideration. While the findings demonstrate that Speed's engagement with residents and participation in cultural activities such as traditional music and performances has successfully generated global curiosity and positive attention, these interactions also exposed vulnerabilities inherent in influencer-driven diplomacy. The first major risk is the chance of cultural misinterpretations, content created by IShowSpeed's is characterized by its spontaneity, exaggeration, and entertainment driven reaction, which, while engaging for live audiences, may distort the meaning of cultural practices.

For instance, the moment he is told by a chat member to say "Minggir Lu Miskin!" to the local crowd watching him has demonstrate how language and behavior can be interpreted differently across cultural contexts. IShowSpeed does not possess the sufficient Indonesian language proficiency or cultural contextual understanding to fully grasp the semantic and social implications of such phrases within Indonesian society. As a result, expressions that are perceived as humorous or harmless within the context of online streaming culture may carry derogatory or offensive connotations when interpreted through local cultural norms. Especially when young viewers may view it as a slang word and prone to use it in social media (Wirasasti et al., 2025). This disconnect illustrates how influencer-driven communication can unintentionally reproduce meanings that conflict with the values of the host society.

Moreover, the participatory nature of livestreaming further amplifies this risk. Audience members actively shape the content by suggesting phrases, actions, or challenges, often prioritizing entertainment value over cultural sensitivity. In this case, the phrase was not organically generated by the influencer but rather prompted by viewers seeking a reaction. However, once articulated by the influencer, the responsibility and visibility of the message shift to the host environment, thereby associating the incident with Indonesia in the perception of global audiences.

The second major risk is that influencer-driven diplomacy introduces reputational dependency risks. As a non-state actor, IShowSpeed operates independently of governmental authority, yet his actions and experiences are often associated with Indonesia in the perception of international audiences. This creates an asymmetrical dynamic in which the host country benefits from exposure but has limited control over how it is represented. Any controversial behavior, whether during the visit or beyond, can generate reputational spillover that affects national image.

An example of this phenomenon is the image of Kazakhstan portrayed in the 2006 mockumentary movie "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan". Although the film is a work of satire and does not accurately represent the country, its portrayal significantly shaped international perceptions of Kazakhstan for years. The film falsely depicted elements of Kazakh culture, such as presenting exaggerated and fictional "national traditions," including the consumption of unusual food combinations and unsanitary practices, which were never reflective of actual societal norms (Satayeva, 2024). Additionally, scenes filmed in a Romanian village were misrepresented as Kazakhstan, portraying residents as impoverished, uneducated, and socially regressive. These depictions contributed to a distorted and stigmatized image of the country in the global imagination (Pratt, 2015; Tzanelli, 2023).

Furthermore, the movie's parody of the Kazakh national anthem, featuring lyrics that referenced unrelated and inappropriate themes such as exaggerated economic claims (Kazakhstan possessing a high-quality potassium export), and morally offensive statements (claiming the country to have the second-cleanest prostitute in the region) has extended beyond the film itself. In one notable international incident, the parody version of the anthem was mistakenly played during a medal ceremony for Kazakh athlete Mariya Dmitriyenko at the Emir of Kuwait International Shooting Grand Prix (BBC News, 2012; Neild, 2012). This incident illustrates how entertainment-driven misrepresentations can

transcend their original context and produce tangible diplomatic embarrassment, reinforcing inaccurate perceptions at the international level.

Several more risks are the uncontrolled fan gatherings which pose a public safety risk. The livestream format, which limits narrative control, also increases the risk of unintended virality. Moreover, reliance on public figures introduces reputational risks should the creator become involved in future controversies. The IShowSpeed phenomenon not only highlights the potential of cultural promotion through digital media but also underscores the importance of safeguarding in digital diplomacy. When public figures engage in cross border livestreams, there is a risk of cultural misrepresentation, negative virality, and security disruptions that can undermine public trust and international relations (InsertLive, 2024)

3.4 How IShowSpeed creates opportunities to build trust

Trust is a critical element in digital diplomacy. When global audiences witness Speed's authentic and friendly interactions with Indonesian communities, they form positive perceptions that strengthen trust in Indonesia as an open and welcoming nation (Nye, 2008). Crossborder collaboration is also evident in how Speed's content sparked intercultural interactions. Comments from viewers in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand expressed curiosity and appreciation for Indonesian culture, creating informal dialogue spaces that enhance regional connectivity.

The trustbuilding process generated through IShowSpeed's livestreams is further reinforced by the perceived authenticity of his content. This is because unlike state-sponsored promotional campaigns that are often viewed as scripted or agenda driven, Speed's unscripted reactions and direct engagement with local people reduce skepticism among global audiences. This authenticity functions as a credibility mechanism, allowing viewers to interpret Indonesian culture through lived experience rather than official representation. As Nye (2008) emphasizes, soft power is most effective when attraction emerges naturally, rather than through overt persuasion.

Moreover, the format of livestreaming IShowSpeed allowed forms of parasocial interaction to happen between the stream audience, IShowSpeed as the content creator, and Indonesian people and culture as the environment. This emotional proximity enhances trust by humanizing Indonesia beyond abstract national branding. Viewers are not only exposed to cultural symbols such as batik, traditional dance, or local cuisine, but also to everyday social interactions marked by friendliness, humor, and hospitality. These microlevel encounters contribute to macrolevel perception shifts, reinforcing Indonesia's image as a culturally vibrant and socially open nation.

However, this trust is fragile and must be continuously reinforced through responsible interaction and contextual sensitivity. The same authenticity that strengthens trust can also rapidly undermine it when livestreamed behavior deviates from cultural norms or when situations escalate beyond control. Unlike formal diplomatic engagements, influencer driven interactions lack institutional safeguards, meaning that misunderstandings, inappropriate remarks, or chaotic crowd dynamics can instantly circulate to global audiences without mediation.

Furthermore, the reliance on parasocial trust places significant weight on the influencer's personal conduct. Since global audiences often associate the influencer's experience directly with the host country, any negative incident such as disorderly crowds, public disturbances, or derogatory language risks being interpreted as reflective of broader social conditions rather than isolated events. In this sense, trust generated through livestreaming is highly situational and vulnerable to sudden reversal. Therefore, there should be coordinated strategic coordination and ethical awareness between the government tourism sectors, local actors and content creators in order to maximize benefits and minimize risks in the event of similar tours happening. Because without adequate crowd management, cultural guidance, authorities briefing, mutual responsibility between local actors and streamer/content creators and follow up strategy

by the government. The soft power produced through the trust building interactions in the tour may only be temporary and even transform into reputational risks. This shows the characteristics of influencer diplomacy, powerful in generating attraction, but unstable in sustaining long term trust and cooperation.

3.5 Things IshowSpeed has learned

The phenomenon of Darren Watkins Jr. (IShowSpeed) visiting Indonesia in 2024 shows that cultural diplomacy is no longer limited to state actors or formal institutions. Through digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, individuals can play a strategic role in shaping global perceptions of a country. Speed's spontaneous and authentic interactions with Indonesian society, from sampling local cuisine to wearing batik and participating in cultural performances have created widespread and positive cultural exposure. Data shows a significant increase in foreign tourist interest, online searches, and social media engagement, all of which contribute to strengthening Indonesia's image in the eyes of the world.

One crucial aspect to consider in digital cultural diplomacy is the potential ambiguity in the verbal expressions used by influencers. During his visit to Indonesia, IShowSpeed uttered several phrases that quickly went viral among local audiences, such as “Minggir lu miskin” (“Move aside, you’re poor”) and “Santai santai” (“Relax, relax”). Although these expressions were delivered in a humorous and spontaneous manner characteristic of Speed’s streaming style, phrases like “Minggir lu miskin” carry a literal connotation that is derogatory and potentially offensive especially when interpreted outside the context of digital culture or streamer communication norms. This phenomenon presents a risk of misinterpretation, where some local and global audiences perceive the phrases as playful or familiar, while others view them as inappropriate and verbally aggressive. In the context of cultural diplomacy, such expressions may obscure the intended positive messaging and even trigger backlash against the national image being promoted. As Narvaez Rojas (2021) explains, microscale digital public spheres shaped by celebrities can strengthen crosscultural connections, but they are also vulnerable to semantic distortion and uneven interpretation.

Therefore, it is essential for stakeholders in digital diplomacy to understand the dynamics of informal communication and anticipate potential misreadings that may influence public perception. Mitigation strategies such as media literacy initiatives, narrative clarification, and collaboration with local creators can help ensure that cultural diplomacy remains constructive and inclusive. Digital diplomacy in the contemporary era requires an adaptive, participatory, and network-based approach. In this context, public figures like IShowSpeed act as “digital cultural diplomats” who can reach global audiences in real time and build emotional connections across borders. However, this great potential is also accompanied by challenges such as the risk of cultural misrepresentation, negative virality, and security breaches.

4. Conclusion

This paper asserts that digital cultural diplomacy is an increasingly relevant soft power instrument in the era of globalization and digital connectivity. IShowSpeed's visit to Indonesia serves as a case study demonstrating how informal interactions through social media can yield tangible diplomatic impacts. Governments and stakeholders must respond to this phenomenon with policies that support the engagement of digital creators, protect cultural narratives, and measure impacts based on data. Thus, Indonesia can leverage this digital momentum to strengthen its national image, expand its cultural influence, and build more inclusive and sustainable international relations.

In addition, the findings also highlight that such diplomatic potential is not automatic and must be actively managed. The absence of structured governmental engagement during IShowSpeed’s visit illustrates a missed strategic opportunity. Without

coordination, influencer activities risk generating fragmented narratives, reputational vulnerabilities, and unmanaged public responses, such as crowd-related disruptions or the amplification of negative incidents. These risks underscore the need for adaptive policy frameworks that recognize influencers as legitimate, albeit informal, diplomatic actors within the digital ecosystem.

It should be noted that the government's response to IShowSpeed's visit has been minimal and unstructured. There was no visible coordinated effort between tourism authorities, cultural institutions, local governments, or security agencies to manage the crowds, guide the narrative, or strategically amplify the positive exposure generated by the livestreams. As a result, the digital momentum created by IShowSpeed's massive global audience largely unfolded without institutional direction, leaving both opportunities underutilized and risks insufficiently mitigated. This moment should have been utilized as a strategic opportunity to introduce Indonesia more broadly to the world, not only as a tourist destination, but also as a culturally diverse, socially adaptive, and digitally aware nation.

In order to maximize the opportunities brought by similar visits, the government of Indonesia should develop a structured and collaborative digital diplomacy strategy. The government could consider implementing a "CreatorinResidence" program that provides IRLfriendly broadcast routes with local fixer support, drafting a Cultural Ethics MoU as a representation guideline, conducting real time monitoring during livestreams, and establishing an impact measurement framework based on digital metrics such as peak viewers, replay counts, engagement rates, and post broadcast keyword searches. With a data driven and adaptive approach, Indonesia can leverage this momentum to strengthen its cultural image on the global stage and position digital diplomacy as a core component of its national soft power strategy.

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