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Beyond Soft Power: A Critical Review of Inequality, Authenticity, and Sustainability in Food Diplomacy

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A B S T R A C T

Food diplomacy has increasingly attracted scholarly attention as a potent form of soft power that shapes national images and influences foreign publics. However, while much of the existing literature celebrates food diplomacy as an effective and benign instrument of cultural exchange, fewer studies critically interrogate its limitations, power dynamics, and long-term implications. This critical literature review evaluates key academic contributions by examining dominant theoretical perspectives, assessing empirical case studies, and identifying significant conceptual gaps. Moving beyond the standard narrative of "winning hearts and minds", this paper argues that food diplomacy functions as a site of political contestation where authenticity is constructed and regulated for state interests. The review identifies critical tensions, including the commodification of culinary heritage, the marginalization of local producers in favor of elite actors, and the conflict between export-oriented diplomacy and domestic food security. Furthermore, it highlights the lack of robust empirical evidence linking gastrodiploamcy to measurable diplomatic outcomes and questions the superficial use of sustainability narratives. The paper concludes by proposing a future research agenda that integrates political economy, ethics, and rigorous impact evaluation to provide a more holistic understanding of food's role in international relations.

Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Food diplomacy, also known as culinary diplomacy or gastrodiploamcy, is the use of food and cuisine as tools to foster cross-cultural understanding, improve international relations, and project national identity and soft power. This concept has historical roots and has evolved significantly in modern times. It

has increasingly attracted scholarly and policy attention as a form of soft power in international relations. Existing studies emphasize how food, cuisine, and agricultural products are strategically employed to shape national image, influence foreign publics, and support diplomatic objectives [1, 2]. As food is deeply embedded in culture and everyday social practices, it provides a powerful and accessible medium for fostering cross-cultural understanding and people-to-people connections.

In recent years, governments have increasingly institutionalized food diplomacy through national branding



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campaigns, culinary promotion programs, and participation in global food security initiatives. These efforts suggest that food diplomacy is no longer a peripheral cultural activity but an integral component of contemporary diplomatic strategies. Moreover, global challenges such as climate change, food insecurity, and sustainability have further elevated the role of food in international discourse.

Despite its growing prominence, food diplomacy is often framed in normative and celebratory terms. Much of the existing literature highlights its potential benefits while paying limited attention to its structural constraints, power relations, and long-term socio-economic and environmental implications. This imbalance indicates the need for a more critical and comprehensive examination of food diplomacy as a complex diplomatic practice.

1.2. *Research Problem*

Although food diplomacy is widely regarded as an effective and benign tool of soft power, relatively few studies critically interrogate its limitations and contested dimensions. Existing research tends to focus on success stories and state-led initiatives, often overlooking issues such as cultural commodification, inequality between state and non-state actors, and the marginalization of local producers.

Furthermore, the intersection between food diplomacy, food security, and sustainability remains underexplored. Export-oriented food promotion strategies may generate economic benefits and international visibility, yet they may also create tensions with domestic food availability, affordability, and environmental sustainability. The lack of empirical evaluation and critical engagement with these issues constitutes a significant gap in the literature.

1.3. *Research Objective*

Based on the identified research problem, this study aims to:

1. Examine dominant theoretical perspectives used to conceptualize food diplomacy in international relations.
2. Critically evaluate existing empirical studies and case analyses of food diplomacy practices;
3. Identify conceptual and methodological gaps in the current literature;
4. Analyze how food diplomacy intersects with issues of sustainability, inequality, and food security;
5. Contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of food diplomacy as a contested diplomatic practice.

1.4. *Research Contribution*

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it advances a critical perspective on food diplomacy by moving beyond descriptive and celebratory narratives toward a more analytical and evaluative approach. Second, it integrates insights from international relations, food studies, political economy, and sustainability studies, thereby offering an interdisciplinary framework for understanding food diplomacy. Third, by highlighting neglected issues such as power dynamics, inequality, and sustainability trade-offs, this study provides a more inclusive and ethically informed perspective on food diplomacy. Finally, the findings of this research are expected to

inform future empirical studies and policy discussions by offering conceptual clarity and identifying directions for more rigorous and socially grounded food diplomacy research.

2. **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION**

Food diplomacy is a multifaceted and evolving field that utilizes the universal appeal of food to bridge cultural divides, enhance diplomatic relations, and project national identity. As food is a fundamental and culturally embedded aspect of human life, it provides a unique and accessible medium through which nations can communicate values, foster mutual understanding, and build trust in international relations. With the growing recognition of food as a form of soft power, food diplomacy has become increasingly prominent as both a cultural and strategic diplomatic practice.

At its core, food diplomacy encompasses a range of approaches that employ food in diplomatic contexts, each with distinct objectives and target audiences. These approaches include culinary diplomacy, gastrodiploacy, and food diplomacy in its broader sense.

Culinary diplomacy refers to the use of food and dining experiences within formal diplomatic settings, such as state banquets and official receptions, to strengthen relationships with visiting dignitaries and promote cultural exchange. The primary aim of culinary diplomacy is to create a positive national image by showcasing a country's culinary traditions, hospitality, and cultural refinement [1, 2].

Gastrodiploacy, in contrast, is more outward-facing and public-oriented. It focuses on raising international awareness of a country's culinary heritage and constructing an "edible nation brand" through restaurants, food festivals, media campaigns, and popular culture. As a form of cultural diplomacy, gastrodiploacy seeks to engage foreign publics directly rather than diplomatic elites, thereby broadening the reach and impact of culinary influence [1, 2].

Food diplomacy, as a broader concept, encompasses the strategic use of food across various diplomatic contexts. This includes ceremonial meals, agricultural and trade diplomacy, international food aid, and participation in global food security initiatives. In this sense, food diplomacy extends beyond cultural representation to include political, economic, and humanitarian dimensions of international engagement [3].

2.1. *Historical and Contemporary Practices of Food Diplomacy*

The practice of using food as a diplomatic tool has deep historical roots. Culinary diplomacy can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where feasts and banquets were integral to political negotiations and alliance-building. However, it was notably institutionalized in the early nineteenth century through French diplomatic traditions, in which cuisine became an essential element of statecraft and cultural prestige.

In contemporary contexts, food diplomacy has expanded significantly. National food promotion campaigns launched by several Southeast Asian countries exemplify modern gastrodiploacy strategies aimed at enhancing cultural visibility and tourism appeal. Similarly, initiatives such as promoting healthy eating at official events in the United States illustrate how

food diplomacy can convey normative values, such as public health and sustainability.

Diplomatic meals continue to play a symbolic and strategic role in international relations. In Portugal, for example, official diplomatic dining has been used to promote transnational political relations while simultaneously projecting national identity. These meals function not merely as social occasions but as platforms for cultural expression and political messaging.

Moreover, the rise of digital communication has introduced new dimensions to food diplomacy. Social media platforms enable states, international organizations, and individuals to participate in global food-related discourse. Campaigns and hashtags such as **#WorldFoodSafetyDay** illustrate how food-related narratives can be mobilized within public diplomacy to foster international awareness, cooperation, and dialogue on shared global challenges.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual foundation of food diplomacy is closely linked to **soft power** and **nation branding**. According to Nye's soft power theory, states can influence others by attraction rather than coercion. Food, as a cultural artefact deeply tied to identity and emotion, is an effective soft power resource. Through culinary representation and branding, nations can shape favorable perceptions and strengthen their global standing [3].

In addition, food functions as a form of **non-verbal communication**. Culinary practices convey messages of hospitality, friendship, and cultural openness without relying on language. Through taste, presentation, and dining rituals, food communicates national narratives and values in subtle yet powerful ways, reinforcing its diplomatic potential.

2.3. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite its growing relevance, food diplomacy faces several conceptual and practical challenges. One major issue is conceptual ambiguity, particularly the overlapping and sometimes inconsistent use of the terms culinary diplomacy, gastrodiploacy, and food diplomacy. This lack of clarity complicates both academic analysis and policy formulation, highlighting the need for clearer conceptual distinctions and standardized frameworks.

Nevertheless, the potential global impact of food diplomacy remains significant. As international relations increasingly emphasize cultural engagement, sustainability, and people-to-people connections, food diplomacy offers promising opportunities to advance global cooperation and mutual understanding. Future research and policy development should therefore focus on refining conceptual frameworks, evaluating real-world impacts, and integrating ethical and sustainability considerations to ensure that food diplomacy contributes meaningfully to a more interconnected and harmonious world.

3. EVOLUTION OF PRACTICES AND EMPIRICAL CASE STUDIES

3.1. Historical Perspectives on Food Diplomacy

The use of food as a diplomatic instrument is deeply rooted in history and predates contemporary international relations. One of the earliest formalized traditions of culinary diplomacy can be traced to nineteenth-century France, particularly through the

influence of **Antonin Carême**, a pioneer of haute cuisine. Carême played a crucial role in institutionalising diplomatic dining, in which carefully designed banquets were used to project political authority, cultural superiority, and national refinement [4]. French diplomatic meals during this period functioned as symbolic performances, reinforcing France's cultural leadership in Europe.

Beyond European contexts, food also played a complex and often ambivalent role in colonial settings. During the Spanish conquest of the Americas and British colonial rule in South Asia, food served simultaneously as a mechanism of domination and a medium of cultural exchange. Colonial authorities imposed European dietary norms as markers of power and "civilization," while selectively appropriating local ingredients and culinary techniques [5]. These interactions produced hybrid food cultures, demonstrating how food diplomacy has historically been embedded within unequal political and economic structures rather than functioning solely as a benign cultural exchange.

3.2. Modern Practices and Successful Case Studies

In contemporary international relations, food diplomacy has evolved into a more systematic and publicly oriented strategy closely linked to tourism, cultural branding, and economic development. Several countries are frequently cited in the literature as exemplary cases of modern food diplomacy.

Thailand and South Korea are among the most prominent examples. Thailand's government-led promotion of Thai cuisine abroad, often referred to as the *Global Thai Program*, significantly increased the global presence of Thai restaurants while strengthening tourism and agricultural exports [1, 6]. Similarly, South Korea's *Hansik Globalization* initiative positioned Korean cuisine as healthy, modern, and culturally distinctive, reinforcing the global spread of Korean popular culture (*Hallyu*) and contributing to national branding efforts [7].

Singapore offers a distinctive model of food diplomacy grounded in cultural heritage preservation. The successful inscription of Singapore's **hawker culture** on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity reflects a strategic effort to elevate everyday food practices into symbols of national identity. By framing hawker culture as shared heritage, Singapore has enhanced its international image while simultaneously reinforcing narratives of multiculturalism and social cohesion at home [8].

Portugal represents another model of food diplomacy centered on elite cultural practices. Through state banquets and what has been described as "**wine diplomacy**," Portugal has used food and wine as instruments to project national identity, hospitality, and historical continuity. Diplomatic meals and wine promotion function as platforms for strengthening political relations and economic ties, particularly within European and Lusophone diplomatic networks [9].

3.3. Critical Reflections on Empirical Practices

While these cases are often presented as success stories, a critical examination reveals important underlying tensions. Many food diplomacy initiatives prioritize global visibility, tourism, and export growth, which may disproportionately benefit large industries and urban elites while marginalizing small-scale producers and local communities [3]. Furthermore, the emphasis on nation branding can lead to the simplification and

standardisation of culinary traditions, raising concerns about cultural commodification and the loss of authenticity [10].

These empirical examples demonstrate that food diplomacy is neither neutral nor universally beneficial. Instead, it operates within broader political, economic, and cultural frameworks that shape which identities are represented and whose interests are advanced. Understanding the evolution of food diplomacy, therefore, requires moving beyond celebratory narratives to assess its social, economic, and ethical implications critically.

3.4. *Food Diplomacy in Indonesia: Cultural Heritage, Commodities, and Global Positioning*

Indonesia presents a distinctive case of food diplomacy that combines culinary heritage, agricultural commodities, and cultural narratives rooted in diversity. Unlike highly centralized gastrodiploacy programs such as those of Thailand or South Korea, Indonesia's food diplomacy has developed in a more fragmented yet culturally rich manner, drawing heavily on traditional cuisine, spices, and agricultural products as symbols of national identity.

One of the most prominent examples of Indonesia's culinary diplomacy is **rendang**, a traditional Minangkabau dish that has gained international recognition after being repeatedly ranked among the world's best foods by global media. Rendang has been strategically promoted through cultural events, embassy functions, and diaspora networks, positioning it as a symbol of Indonesian culinary richness and cultural depth [11]. This form of promotion reflects an implicit gastrodiploacy strategy, where global visibility is achieved through cultural circulation rather than a single state-led campaign.

In addition to prepared cuisine, Indonesia's food diplomacy is closely linked to **agricultural commodities**, particularly coffee, spices, cocoa, and palm-based products. Indonesian coffee varieties such as Gayo, Toraja, and Kintamani have become important elements of trade diplomacy and national branding in international markets. These commodities are frequently framed within narratives of origin, tradition, and sustainability, aligning food diplomacy with rural development and export competitiveness [12].

Historically, Indonesia's spices played a central role in global trade and colonial encounters, shaping early international relations long before the modern concept of diplomacy emerged. Contemporary food diplomacy initiatives often draw upon this historical legacy by rebranding Indonesia as a "spice archipelago," thereby linking food heritage with tourism, cultural diplomacy, and national storytelling [3].

However, critical scholarship highlights several challenges within Indonesia's food diplomacy practices. The promotion of iconic dishes and export commodities may obscure internal inequalities, particularly the marginalization of smallholder farmers and traditional producers. Moreover, tensions between export-oriented strategies and domestic food security persist, especially amid price volatility and environmental sustainability concerns [13].

From a critical perspective, Indonesia's case illustrates both the potential and limitations of food diplomacy in the Global South. While culinary heritage and agricultural diversity offer strong soft power resources, the absence of an integrated national gastrodiploacy framework may limit coherence and impact. At the same time, Indonesia's experience underscores the

importance of incorporating sustainability, producer welfare, and food sovereignty into food diplomacy strategies, rather than focusing solely on international recognition and market expansion.

4. INEQUALITY, COMMODIFICATION, AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

While the dominant literature often frames food diplomacy as a benign "soft power" tool for bridging cultural divides, this approach oversimplifies complex power relations. A deeper analysis reveals that food diplomacy is not merely a neutral cultural exchange, but a strategic practice driven by the state and embedded within power dynamics. This chapter interrogates the darker side of food diplomacy by examining the tensions between commodification and authenticity, the inequality of actor representation, and the contradictions within the global political economy of food.

4.1. *The Paradox of Commodification and "Gastronationalism"*

The core critique of food diplomacy lies in how national identity is constructed and sold. The concept of "gastronationalism," introduced by [10], challenges the neutral portrayal of food diplomacy by highlighting how states actively construct "authenticity" and regulate food identities for political and economic purposes.

In the effort to promote national cuisine on the global stage (gastrodiploacy), complex culinary traditions are often standardized into forms that are "market-friendly." This creates a paradox: while gastrodiploacy aims to preserve and promote national identity, the process risks diluting regional diversity and original authenticity. Critics warn of cultural homogenization, in which food traditions are transformed into uniform global commodities that ultimately erode cultural meaning to satisfy international consumer tastes.

4.2. *Structural Inequality: Who Benefits?*

Popular soft power narratives frequently overlook unequal access to representation in food diplomacy. The literature indicates a marginalization of grassroots actors. While urban elites, celebrity chefs, and state-backed corporations derive disproportionate benefits from global food promotion, small-scale producers and local communities are often sidelined.

This disparity is particularly evident in the lack of perspectives from the Global South—specifically, smallholder farmers and indigenous communities—in the food diplomacy literature. Food diplomacy often operates as a top-down strategy serving elite and corporate interests, rather than empowering the food-producing communities themselves.

4.3. *The Political Economy of Food: Between Exports and Food Security*

One of the most significant gaps in existing literature is the lack of integration between food diplomacy, food security frameworks, and political economy. Agricultural diplomacy often emphasizes food exports, international standards, and market access as instruments of international influence.

However, this strategy creates a tension rarely discussed: the conflict between export-oriented diplomacy and domestic food availability. In the context of developing nations (the Global South), prioritizing export commodities for the sake of diplomatic image or foreign exchange can exacerbate local food insecurity. Consequently, food diplomacy cannot be decoupled from global value chains, which often leave developing countries in a position of trade dependency.

4.4. *The Ethics of Aid and the Rhetoric of Sustainability*

The final critical dimension concerns the use of food aid and sustainability narratives. Although food aid is often portrayed as a moral and diplomatic good, critical scholars caution that it can reinforce dependency and asymmetrical power relations if not designed with strict ethical principles.

Furthermore, while recent scholarship has begun to link food diplomacy with sustainability narratives, this often remains at the level of branding rhetoric. There are concerns that sustainability claims in food diplomacy may amount to "greenwashing," lacking critical evaluation of actual environmental impacts, labor conditions, or social justice within the supply chain.

5. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE AGENDA

5.1. *Introduction: The Need for Rigor and Depth*

Despite the growing body of literature on food diplomacy, this review identifies several significant gaps that limit both theoretical advancement and practical policy relevance. While existing scholarship effectively catalogues the rise of culinary nation-branding, it often lacks analytical robustness. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more rigorous, inclusive, and evidence-based understanding of how food functions in international relations.

5.2. *The Empirical Deficit: Measuring Diplomatic Impact*

One of the most prominent gaps in the literature is the limited empirical assessment of food diplomacy's actual diplomatic impact. Most studies assume that culinary promotion and gastrodiploacy initiatives positively influence national image, public perception, or bilateral relations. However, these claims are rarely supported by systematic empirical evidence.

Future research must move beyond symbolic interpretations. There is a critical need for longitudinal studies that measure changes in perceptions over time and for public opinion surveys that link food exposure to specific attitudinal shifts. Furthermore, policy analysis is required to examine whether food diplomacy translates into tangible diplomatic or economic outcomes, rather than remaining largely a cultural branding exercise.

5.3. *Overcoming the "Success Bias" in Case Studies*

Existing research relies heavily on descriptive, celebratory case studies, particularly on well-known examples such as Thailand, South Korea, and Japan. While these cases offer valuable insights, the predominance of "successful" narratives reveals a publication bias that limits theoretical generalization. Few studies analyze failed or contested food diplomacy initiatives, thereby limiting understanding of potential pitfalls. To address this, future

scholarship should adopt comparative cross-national designs and integrate mixed-methods approaches. By moving beyond single-case narratives, researchers can identify broader patterns, causal mechanisms, and the contextual factors that determine why some initiatives succeed while others fail.

5.4. *Decolonizing the Narrative: Global South and Producer Perspectives*

The literature remains disproportionately centered on state-led initiatives and Global North or upper-middle-income countries. Voices from the Global South—particularly small-scale farmers, indigenous communities, and local food producers—are largely absent from the discourse.

A crucial agenda for future research is to incorporate bottom-up perspectives from producer communities. Scholars must examine how food diplomacy affects local livelihoods and cultural autonomy, and explore the power asymmetries between state institutions and grassroots actors. Such work is vital to reveal whether food diplomacy empowers local communities or primarily serves elite and corporate interests.

5.5. *Integrating Political Economy and Security Frameworks.*

While food diplomacy is often framed as a cultural or branding strategy, its intersections with food security, trade dependency, and global political economy are underexplored. Few studies critically assess the tension between export-oriented food diplomacy and domestic food availability or affordability. Future research should integrate food security frameworks into analyses of food diplomacy. This involves examining how global value chains shape diplomatic food strategies and assessing the trade-offs between national branding and domestic food sovereignty. Incorporating political economy perspectives would provide a more realistic understanding of how power, markets, and resources influence food diplomacy outcomes.

5.6. *Moving Beyond "Greenwashing": Ethical and Sustainability Assessments*

Although sustainability narratives are increasingly associated with food diplomacy, much of the literature treats sustainability as a rhetorical or promotional tool rather than a measurable outcome. Ethical concerns related to environmental impact, labor conditions, and cultural appropriation receive limited critical attention. To distinguish substantive food diplomacy from symbolic "greenwashing," future studies must evaluate the environmental footprints of food diplomacy initiatives and examine ethical sourcing and labor practices.

5.7. *A Call for Interdisciplinary Integration*

Food diplomacy research remains fragmented across disciplines such as international relations, cultural studies, and tourism studies, often lacking theoretical integration. Future scholarship should adopt interdisciplinary frameworks combining diplomacy, political economy, and sustainability science. By developing standardized indicators and employing participatory research methods, scholars can move the field beyond normative enthusiasm toward a critical, evidence-based, and socially grounded understanding of food diplomacy

5.8. Directions for Future Research

Based on the identified gaps, future research should prioritize: empirical evaluation of soft power outcomes; comparative and multi-level analyses; inclusion of marginalized and producer voices; integration of food security and political economy; and ethical and sustainability impact assessment. By addressing these areas, scholars can move the field beyond normative enthusiasm toward a critical, evidence-based, and socially grounded understanding of food diplomacy.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that, despite the growing popularity of food diplomacy as both a policy instrument and an academic field, significant theoretical, empirical, and methodological gaps remain. While existing studies have contributed valuable insights into the cultural and symbolic

dimensions of food diplomacy, they often rely on descriptive case studies and normative assumptions, limiting analytical depth and policy relevance. As a result, the literature lacks a coherent roadmap for advancing food diplomacy research in a more systematic and critical direction.

To address these limitations, it is necessary to translate the identified gaps into a structured research agenda that can guide future scholarly inquiry. The research agenda presented in Table 1 synthesizes key deficiencies in the current literature and proposes concrete directions for empirical investigation, theoretical development, and methodological innovation. By organizing these gaps into clear research priorities, the agenda aims to support more rigorous, inclusive, and policy-relevant studies of food diplomacy, particularly regarding power dynamics, sustainability, and food security.

Table 1. Research agenda for future studies on food diplomacy.

Identified Research Gap	Key Issues in Existing Literature	Proposed Research Focus	Suggested Research Questions	Recommended Methods / Approaches
1. Lack of empirical evaluation of diplomatic impact	Food diplomacy is often assumed to enhance soft power, but evidence is mainly anecdotal or symbolic	Measure tangible diplomatic, perceptual, or economic impacts of food diplomacy	- Does food diplomacy measurably improve national image? - How does exposure to national cuisine affect foreign public perceptions? - Why do some food diplomacy initiatives succeed while others fail?	Longitudinal surveys, perception studies, policy outcome analysis, experimental designs
2. Overreliance on descriptive case studies	Dominance of single-country success stories (e.g., Thailand, Korea, Japan)	Develop comparative and theory-driven analyses	- What contextual factors shape effectiveness? - Who benefits most from food diplomacy initiatives?	Comparative cross-national studies, mixed-methods research, multi-case analysis
3. Limited Global South and producer perspectives	Focus on state narratives; marginalization of small producers and local communities	Examine food diplomacy from bottom-up and community-based perspectives	- How do producers experience and perceive food diplomacy?	Ethnography, participatory research, interviews with farmers, SMEs, indigenous communities
4. Insufficient integration of food security and political economy	Weak linkage between food diplomacy, export strategies, and domestic food systems	Analyze trade-offs between diplomacy, food security, and food sovereignty	- Does export-oriented food diplomacy affect domestic food availability? - How do global value chains shape food diplomacy?	Political economy analysis, food system analysis, policy and trade data analysis
5. Weak engagement with ethical and sustainability trade-offs	Sustainability often framed as branding rather than measurable practice	Evaluate ethical, environmental, and social impacts of food diplomacy	- Are sustainability claims reflected in production practices? - What are the environmental and labor impacts of food diplomacy?	Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), sustainability indicators, ethical supply-chain analysis
6. Fragmented theoretical and methodological approaches	Limited integration across disciplines; lack of standardized indicators	Build interdisciplinary and integrated analytical frameworks	- How can soft power, political economy, and sustainability be integrated?	Interdisciplinary framework development, index construction, systems analysis
7. Limited policy relevance and evaluation tools	Weak translation of research findings into policy design	Develop policy-relevant evaluation models for food diplomacy	- How can governments assess food diplomacy performance?	Policy evaluation frameworks, logic models, stakeholder analysis

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that food diplomacy is a multifaceted and contested practice that extends beyond cultural promotion to encompass political, economic, and ethical dimensions. While frequently framed as a benign form of soft power, food diplomacy operates within power structures that shape cultural representation, economic distribution, and access to global visibility. As such, it cannot be understood as politically neutral or universally beneficial. A critical examination reveals that many food diplomacy initiatives privilege nation branding and market expansion while marginalizing local producers, reinforcing inequalities, and overlooking tensions with food security and environmental sustainability. These findings challenge celebratory narratives dominant in the literature and underscore the need to reconceptualize food diplomacy as a site of negotiation and contestation rather than merely cultural exchange.

6.2. Policy Implications

For policymakers, the findings suggest that food diplomacy strategies should move beyond symbolic promotion toward more inclusive and ethically grounded approaches. Effective food diplomacy requires integrating small-scale producers, local communities, and sustainability principles into national and international initiatives. Aligning food diplomacy with domestic food security objectives and environmental commitments is essential to avoid unintended social and ecological consequences. At the international level, food diplomacy also holds potential as a platform for cooperation on shared global challenges, provided that long-term social and environmental outcomes are prioritized over short-term visibility.

6.3. Implications for Future Research

For scholars, this study highlights the need for greater empirical rigor and theoretical integration in food diplomacy research. Future studies should employ comparative and mixed-method approaches to assess the actual impacts of food diplomacy on public perception, diplomatic relations, and economic outcomes. Incorporating Global South perspectives and bottom-up analyses is particularly crucial for understanding how food diplomacy affects producers and communities often excluded from dominant narratives. Moreover, integrating political economy, food security, and sustainability frameworks can deepen analytical insight into the trade-offs inherent in food diplomacy practices. Positioning ethical considerations—such as labor conditions, cultural representation, and environmental responsibility—at the center of analysis will enable future research to contribute more meaningfully to both academic debates and policy development.

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