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K-Pop and Contemporary Cultural Diplomacy: The Influence of K-Pop Idol Neo Culture Technology (NCT) on Indonesia's Cultural Diplomacy in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Globalization has influenced the polarization of international relations activities, especially towards implementing cultural diplomacy. Referring to transnationalism theory, non-state actors have dominated international relations activities by using popular culture and social media as a means of international communication. The implication of the role of non-state actors from among K-Pop idol groups is no exception to spreading a country's local culture as a form of cultural diplomacy. Therefore, this article sees the implications of NCT's transnational activities as a K-Pop idol group influencing the strategy and implementation of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the digital era. By using qualitative research methods with library research techniques and observing activities using social media, this article analyzes the role of NCT in spreading Indonesian culture globally through three approaches to cultural diplomacy, according to Cynthia Schneider, namely values, audience, and environmental approaches. Through these three approaches, this article underlines that the role of NCT in spreading Indonesian cultural values has an impact on the formation of the basis of trust and the image of Indonesia internationally. Then the use of social media carried out by NCT has succeeded in expanding the target of Indonesian cultural diplomacy, which can be seen through the achievement of a considerable number of audiences and enhanced regional reach. In addition, the role of NCT in spreading Indonesian culture also influences the strategy and policy of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy. It is shown through the recognition and use of NCT in one of the Ministry of Creative Economy and Tourism projects. Thus, these article findings show the role of NCT in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy as a form of popular culture utilization, the K-Pop, and extend the effectiveness of using social media as a means of cross-country communication in the digital age.

Key Words

Cultural diplomacy, non-state actors, transnationalism, social media.

1. Introduction

The rising trend of spreading foreign culture around the world through the use of social media has become a phenomenon. One is the rise of the Korean Wave, which leads to Korean Pop or K-Pop culture. Nowadays, K-Pop has developed into one of the successful strategies used by South Korea as a cultural country to dominate the current international cultural exchange after the United States of America and Japan. The use of technology in spreading K-pop culture is a manifestation of the cultural dissemination policy established by the South Korean Ministry of Culture in 1994. Several policies implemented by South Korea to improve its influence include the massive modernization of cultural heritage through K-Pop and its film sector (Aryanti, 2017).

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Hence, the success and popularity of Korean culture are becoming the primary cultural diplomacy strategy in South Korea as an impactful tool for its cooperative relations with nations and private companies worldwide.

However, the phenomenon of the entrance of foreign cultures into a country does not only have an impact on the culture's country of origin but can also be an opportunity for other countries. Generally, the rise of K-pop popularity in Indonesia has impacted the nationalism of Indonesian citizens, including their interest in buying South Korean products. The reformation of K-pop culture worldwide has continued to be influenced by globalization, which expanded the characteristics of K-pop itself. The significant growth of the use of social media by people worldwide also indirectly compared South Korean culture with other nations as a product of the international cultural exchange process. In 2016, the expansion characteristic of K-Pop significantly developed when SM Entertainment, one of the idol agencies in South Korea, officially released the 'New Culture Technology' project. This project is regarded as a new milestone in K-Pop history. It was created as a tool for international cultural exchange by incorporating technological sophistication into its production and marketing processes. It produced a new K-pop idol group called Neo Culture Technology, or NCT, which opens opportunities for young talents worldwide to join and represent their own cultures. Hereafter, this project is a new opportunity for Indonesia to implement a cultural diplomacy strategy in the digital era by leveraging public influence in international cultural exchange.

Neo Culture Technology (NCT) promotes a rotational and unlimited system that brings new uniqueness to the music industry, especially K-Pop. The rotation system requires personnel to participate in special projects matched by their talents and character. Meanwhile, the unlimited system means that the NCT's personnel will continue to grow over time. This system allows all youth worldwide to become part of NCT and represent their respective countries. Therefore, NCT is the only multinational K-Pop idol with the most foreign nationals in South Korea and has 23 members. NCT has also developed projects in various entertainment fields, such as dramas, vlogs, cultural content, games, and education. They utilize various platforms and social media such as Twitter, YouTube, Lysn, VLive, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, which succeed in making this group one of the most influential musicians in the world, followed by various achievements and popularity throughout their career. It was proven when Twitter released data regarding the Top 10 most mentioned K-Pop artists throughout 2020, where NCT managed to rank second internationally. Accordingly, the first rank is occupied by BTS, which debuted in 2013 and competed with NCT, which debuted in 2016 (Twitter, 2021). This ranking shows NCT's rapid growth rate and that it can compete with K-pop idols and other international artists only after four years.

The dominance of the Indonesian people's interest in K-pop culture has influenced the spread of Indonesian culture internationally. This process occurs when the Indonesian public's interest in K-pop is increasing and is used by South Korea as a strategic country target for its cultural diplomacy strategy. As a result, the process of cultural diplomacy carried out by both parties became a medium for cultural exchange in two directions. This article aims to underline the pattern of interactions between non-state actors that can influence a country's foreign policy, particularly regarding cultural diplomacy strategies. This pattern will be explained through cross-border interactions between Indonesian people and NCT as international actors through cultural exchange. Following Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy in the digital era oriented towards the use of social media in promoting Indonesian culture worldwide and NCT as an international actor, this article recognizes that NCT's transnational activities have implications for the implementation of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the digital era. Therefore, to extend the analysis of this issue, this article raises questions of "what are the roles of the K-Pop Neo Culture

Technology (NCT) idol and what are the impacts of such roles on the implementation of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the digital age?" In addressing these questions, this article is sectioned into four sections. First, it will review the analytical framework used, comprising the concept of cultural diplomacy, non-state actor, international communication, and transnationalism, to provide a solid analysis of the issues being discussed. Second, it briefly explains the method employed to research this issue. Third, based on the abovementioned analytical framework, this article will identify the role of NCT and its impact on implementing Indonesian cultural diplomacy by utilizing social media and renewable technology in the digital era as it is today. Lastly, this article concludes the analysis and reinforces its elaboration.

2. Analytical Framework

This article's analysis and argumentation have focused on the implications of NCT's activities as a transnational non-state actor and their impact on Indonesia's cultural diplomacy implementation and strategy in the digital era. These are recognized as a manifestation of the interaction between non-state actors within the process of cultural exchange, which can influence and be used by state actors as an implementation and manifestation of cultural diplomacy in the digital era. Through this cultural exchange process, NCT, as a cultural content group, has helped promote Indonesia's culture through its social media content from 2017–2022. In providing a robust analysis, this article thus employs the concept of cultural diplomacy and non-state actors, and the theory of international communication and transnationalism. The descriptions and relevancies of these concepts and theories toward the issue raised in this article are as follows.

2.1. Cultural diplomacy

The concept of cultural diplomacy explains the efforts of a country to achieve its national interests in the cultural sector. It provides basis of interpretation of the achievements of Indonesia's national interests through the interaction with non-state actors, including civil society and NCT. This article limits its research on cultural diplomacy between nations that include international cultural exchanges. According to Cynthia Schneider, there are three approaches to program implementation and cultural diplomacy strategies, namely "values" that are appropriate and acceptable to "audiences" and the "environment" or conditions of the area receiving the cultural values. These three approaches are absolute in seeing the effectiveness of the cultural diplomacy strategy in shaping the country's characteristics and forming a foundation of trust with the international community (Schneider, 2003). The value approach in cultural diplomacy is part of achieving national interests. It is produced and exchanged in various ways, including; group identity and characteristics that show differences and diversity, personal and social interactions, use of mass media and international communication, rituals and practices in everyday life, narratives and fantasies, and rules and norms that apply (Bakry, 2017). The audience approach in cultural diplomacy is related to public diplomacy, which is oriented toward citizens rather than the government or other countries' formal sectors. The cultural dissemination target in cultural diplomacy ultimately focuses on diverse global audiences through intercultural and reciprocal dialogue. It is in line with the influence of globalization in the theory of transnationalism, according to which international relations activities involve all stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector (Ang et al., 2015). Hence, the dissemination of culture through social media depends on the characteristics and number of viewers achieved, thus affecting the chances of fulfilling the goals of a country's cultural diplomacy.

While the environmental approach is an effort to realize world peace through cultural exchange, globalization marks the emergence of an era of reform marked by technological

advances and their use in managing the international environment. Cultural diplomacy is related to international environmental management and social actors influencing global political dimensions. The existence of international environmental management efforts can reduce opportunities for misunderstandings to occur between countries, which can encourage cooperative relations and create world peace (Hyungseok, 2013). The literature review above has shown several interpretations of implementing cultural diplomacy strategies. However, there has yet to be initiatives to combine cultural diplomacy with popular culture through social media and non-state actors, especially concerning the force of globalization, which has affected the implementation of a country's cultural diplomacy (Ang et al., 2015). Therefore, this article's research focuses on explaining the implications of the role of non-state actors, the K-Pop and the use of social media towards Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy in the digital era.

2.2. Non-State Actors, International Communication, and Transnationalism

The concept of non-state actors and the theory of international communication and transnationalism are also integral parts of the cultural diplomacy concept to establish a solid analysis in this article. In this regard, the concept of non-state actors is used to explain the role and influence of non-state actors on international relations activities, particularly in the digital era, through various methods and characteristics. Through this article, the author will suggest the implications of non-state actors' role in implementing a country's cultural diplomacy through social media. This article aims to describe its effectiveness as carried out by non-state actors who dominate international activities in the era of globalization. The concept will be used to analyze the roles, potentials, and capabilities of non-state actors in carrying out cultural exchange processes that impact the implementation of cultural diplomacy. The development of the relationship between Indonesians and K-Pop idols NCT is then recognized as a pattern of interaction between non-state actors that can be used to achieve Indonesia's interests of internationalizing local culture. Meanwhile, international communication theory represents interpersonal relations among people of different races and cultures. It analyses the international interaction patterns and their impact on international actors. This article thus will analyze and present the effectiveness of cultural exchange as a form of cultural diplomacy in various communication platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and others. Furthermore, the theory of transnationalism is used as the foundation for analyzing globalization's influence on international relations activities and demonstrating the existence of non-state actors used by a country to achieve its national interests, particularly in cultural diplomacy activities.

This article will comprehensively use the abovementioned concepts and theories to operationalize two main research variables (independent and dependent variables). The independent variable in this article is Idol K-pop and Neo Culture Technology (NCT) as agents of transnationalism and international communication. Meanwhile, the dependent variable is the implementation of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the digital era. According to Cynthia Schneider, these two variables will be analyzed at the international level using three approaches to implementing cultural diplomacy: values, audiences, and the environment. The approaches will be projected in the data analysis process to explain the implications of transnational activities carried out by NCT for the strategy and implementation of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the digital era. In detail, they will work as follows. First, values are used to analyze the implications of Indonesian cultural values promoted by NCT, both materially and non-materially, through social media to explain the contained values in the process of spreading Indonesian culture as applied by NCT. Second, the audience is used to demonstrate the number of viewers for NCT content and a comparison of previous strategies for expanding Indonesian culture prior to the involvement of NCT. This indicator can also show audiences' behaviour in accepting Indonesian

culture through NCT content, influencing the opportunities for Indonesian cooperation with certain countries or regions. Third, the environmental approach is used to analyze countries or areas reached by NCT, aiming to show the influence of NCT on the spread of Indonesian culture around the world, including the response of the government and the private sector to the utilization of the role of NCT in the implementation of cultural diplomacy. Based on the description of the conceptual framework and the operationalization of the variables discussed, this article concludes the analytical model as depicted below.

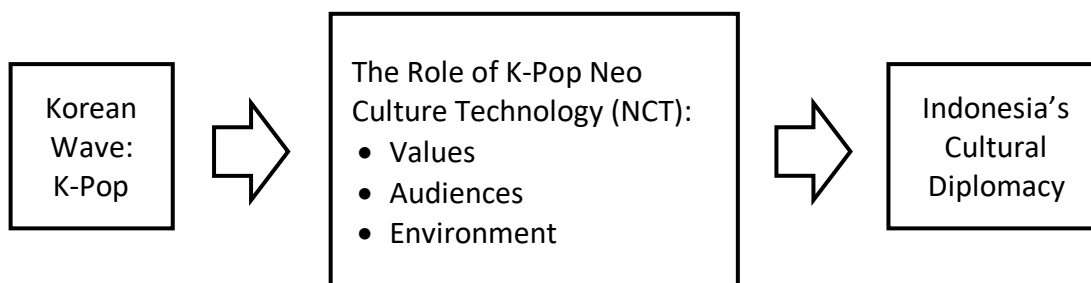


Figure 1. Analytical Framework

Source: Own elaboration

3. Research Method

The type of research used in this article is a qualitative approach that aims to understand a symptom or phenomenon related to behaviour and actions that will be described descriptively. This article will explain the role of the K-Pop idol NCT in implementing Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy in the digital era. The data collection technique used by the authors are library research and observation using digital platforms and social media such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and others. The data analysis technique is a qualitative analysis technique, which aims to analyze the problem under study by describing the existing facts and then linking these facts with other facts to produce a valid argument.

4. Results and Discussions

This article employs the perspective of transnationalism and its relation to cultural diplomacy, which upholds public dominance as an international actor. In contrast to the practice of diplomacy, which is usually centred on the state, the author highlighted a research subject focused on the implications of non-state actors in implementing cultural diplomacy. Referring to the writings of Vera Exnerova (2017), entitled "Introducing Transnationalism Studies to the Field of Public Diplomacy," the patterns of interaction and relationships formed between non-state actors (Indonesian people and NCT, can be utilized by Indonesia as a strategy for cultural diplomacy in the digital age. It helps to promote international cultural exchange. To show the implications of NCT's transnational activities in the implementation of Indonesian cultural diplomacy, the author used three cultural diplomacy approaches proposed by Cynthia Schneider (2003), namely values, audiences, and environment. Each approach is used in presenting values and products, the process of distributing values, and the goals and achievements of spreading Indonesian culture through the role of NCT, which measures the extent to which NCT activities have implications for the realization of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the digital era.

First, values are used in analyzing the implications of Indonesian cultural values promoted by NCT, both materially and non-materially, using social media to mention the contained values in the process of spreading Indonesian culture packaged by NCT. The audience indicator is used

to show a comparison of the strategy of expanding Indonesian culture used by the Indonesian government with the strategy of expanding culture through NCT contents in the digital era, which influenced opportunities to form the basis of trust and the image of the country (national branding). At the same time, the environmental indicators are used in analyzing the reach of the expansion of Indonesian culture through NCT's role and in measuring the influence of NCT on Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the world, including the response of the government and the private sector in utilizing the NCT in their cultural diplomacy implementation. The main objective of the state in promoting its culture is expressed in the process of adjusting to and understanding the cultural values disseminated. The values contained in the material and non-material culture do influence people's perspectives and understanding of prevailing norms. They lead to the easier formation of further relationships. The role of NCT in spreading Indonesian culture can be analyzed through the cultural values promoted in some of its cultural content. This is illustrated through a spectrum of influences that are channelled through language, education, and the depiction of tangible and intangible skills.

In spreading Indonesian culture, NCT is dominated by observing and exploring local material cultures, both traditional and modern. Through this exploration process, NCT often introduces Indonesian material culture through regular content on all NCT YouTube channels. In 2019, NCT Dream maximized the advantage of their visit to Indonesia by visiting the Indonesian Textile Museum, located in Jakarta's capital city. This visit was included in NCT Daily content (2019), which contained NCT Dream activities while studying the history and process of making Indonesian batik. The use of Indonesian traditional clothing and attributes in promoting Indonesian culture is often found both during official activities such as music events and in everyday life. One of the most attractive ways of NCT in using Indonesian attributes is when Taeyong, one of the NCT 127 members, wore Indonesian handicraft "Blangkon" at the Live World Premiere of Lemonade during the first release of NCT 127's third album 'Sticker' which was broadcast worldwide (NCT 127, 2021, 3: 10).

Besides showing the richness of Indonesian culture through typical Indonesian handicrafts, such as traditional attributes and clothing, NCT also introduces typical Indonesian food and drinks. In one of the NCT Daily's (2020) contents entitled "Indonesia School," NCT members had the opportunity to explore more about popular Indonesian foods such as *Nasi Goreng* and *Mi Goreng*. In addition, local food and beverage products such as a *Tango* wafers from PT. Ultra Prima Abadi, *Malkist* biscuits from PT. Garudafood Putra Putri Jaya Tbk and ABC Cup Noodles produced by PT. ABC President Indonesia was also added. The introduction of various original Indonesian food and beverage products can also be found in various NCT vlogs through backstage activities display (NCT Daily, 2020, 3:41). For example, NCT 127 tried Indonesian fruits such as *salak* (snake fruit), mangosteen, and *rambutan*, which are iconic to the tropical countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia (SM Entertainment Indonesia, 2019). Through these contents, Indonesian food and beverage production companies have begun considering NCT's popularity and used it as an international market strategy. For instance, PT. ABC President Indonesia has collaborated with NCT 127 since 2019 in the marketing of Nü Green Tea products (NU TEA, 2020, 0:32). NCT Dream also became a brand ambassador for *Lemonilo* products in collaboration with PT. Lemonilo Indonesia Healthy and successfully attracted foreign investment. On his official instagram account, Sandiaga Uno, Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, stated that the marketing strategy involving NCT succeeded in demonstrating the expansion of Indonesia's creative economy sector. Following the announcement of the NCT collaboration with Lemonilo, funds totalling 36 million USD were injected from India and Belgium.

NCT's influence in the entertainment industry as a K-Pop idol is closely related to music and dance. It turned into one of the main features used in NCT's content for promoting Indonesian culture, such as songs, musical instruments, and original Indonesian dances, both traditional and modern, which are popular in NCT's social media content. For example, NCT 127 learned Aceh Darussalam's traditional Saman Dance during their visit to Indonesia in 2019 (채널 NCT DAILY, 2019, 4:57). Besides that, NCT Dream also learned one of West Java's original musical instruments, the Angklung, during a quiz session posted on SM Entertainment Indonesia's Instagram page (2019). In addition, NCT demonstrated their music skills by performing live a modern Indonesian song entitled "Cinta Luar Biasa (Extraordinary Love)" by Andmesh Kamaleng using Indonesian language (채널 NCT MUSIC, 2019, 0:01). The widespread use of social media like TikTok is also used as a strategy for spreading Indonesian culture by NCT. In 2022, NCT Dream made an appealing performance to Indonesian society after releasing a post on the @NCT_Official account containing a challenge to dance to the song "Mendung Tanpo Udan" by Denny Caknan.

Cultural empowerment through content uploaded via social media is currently considered effective in describing cultural diversity and reflecting the Indonesian people, who are still heavily influenced by cultural values. It also includes empowering non-material cultural values by applying local language and norms, influencing the world's perspective on Indonesia. The Indonesian language is the most common approach NCT uses when interacting with fans through social media. The NCT educational program categorization even created a special segment to learn Indonesian in the NCT Daily YouTube account (2020), which follows the concept of a formal school like Indonesia. WayV and NCT Dream also had the opportunity to hone their Indonesian language skills through the YouTube content of "halo82" (2020 & 2022). In addition, the use of Indonesian culture is also found in NCT's official posts on various social media accounts, such as in promoting their new song. In the voting conducted by Kapanlagi.com (2021) for the category "Korean Male Idol who is the Best at Indonesian," NCT Haechan managed to win the title with a total percentage vote of 46.71%.

Respectable actions for Indonesian culture are also shown by NCT through the realization of local community norms and habits when carrying out humanitarian activities in Indonesia. The *Salim* culture, the Indonesian politeness norms adopted by the local community in accordance with humanitarian principles and religious values. The two NCT members, Jeno and Jaemin, demonstrated not only Indonesian social conditions but also people's habits that represent cultural norms and values through activities initiated by Good Neighborhood (_official, 2019, 49:26 & 51:00). The effectiveness of NCT's use of social media in the process of cultural exchange is manifested through the number of viewers and the reach of cultural expansion analyzed using an international communication measurement model developed by Brian Haven and Forrester (Jiang et al., 2016). The engagement measurement model showed that social media traffic and projected audience presence at NCT international communication forums are more significant than the Indonesian government's official forums, so NCT's global cultural exchange process is considered more effective. The number of viewers proves this among NCT's social media followers on YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. According to the data collected, the difference in the number of social media followers between NCT and the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu RI) and the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf RI) based on the three different platforms shows a significant gap (see figure 2). Meanwhile, the flow of cultural dissemination through social media highly depends on the number of followers and the extent of the information itself.

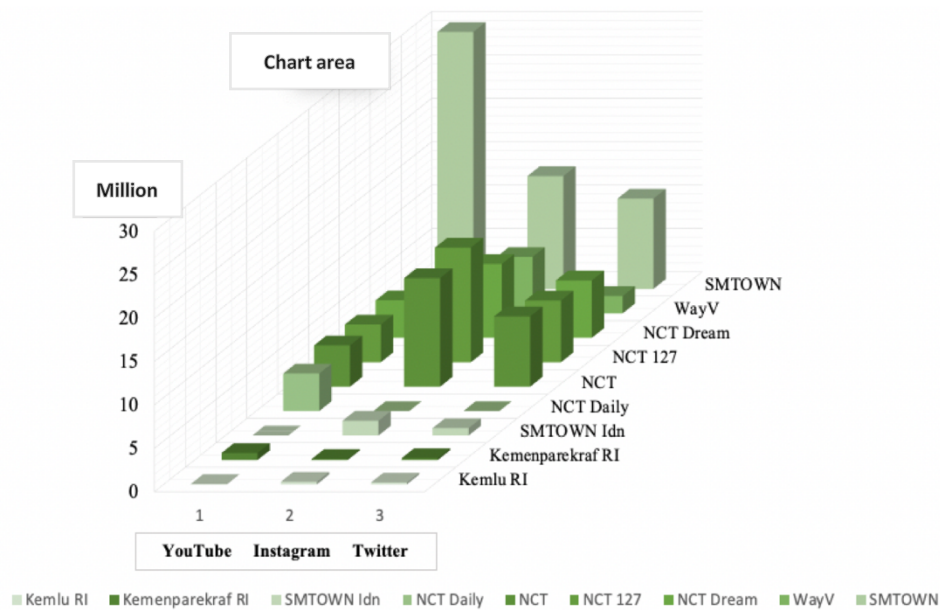


Figure 2. Comparison of the number of social media followers of NCT, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu RI), and the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf RI) as of 10 January 2022.

Source: Processed by the authors from several sources

Through an influence measurement model, this article found that NCT's YouTube content reached all continents, with more than 100 countries worldwide (YouTube Insight, 2021). The role of NCT has influenced Indonesia's cultural diplomacy strategy, as shown by a music show entitled "MTV World Stage Indonesia," which was held by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and MTV Asia as a strategy to promote Indonesia's tourist destinations internationally. By showing various Indonesian cultural values and resources, this show was broadcasted in 160 countries worldwide through the MTV Asia YouTube account (Larasati, 2020). The Indonesian government's use of NCT in the cultural diplomacy strategy has demonstrated the transnationalism theory adopted by this article to show changes in patterns of international relations in the digital age. Furthermore, the interaction measurement model shows that NCT's social media followers tend to disseminate and repost information sourced from NCT posts. For example, one of the @NCTsmtown Twitter accounts posted the music video for "Beautiful" in 2021, successfully shared 152 thousand times when the data was taken. It indicated an excellent opportunity to be amplified in spreading Indonesian culture through NCT's social media. Meanwhile, based on the intimacy measurement model, this article suggests that the interaction and closeness produced by NCT through social media, such as VLive and Bubble, affect people's interest and open the process of accepting cultural values.

The significant role of NCT in spreading Indonesian cultural values has indirectly shaped the world's perspective on Indonesia's image. Based on the hypothesis of interaction and relationship patterns between state actors that can be amplified as their transnationalism schemes, Indonesia as a state actor, in this case, used the implications produced by NCT's interaction with its fans to further the interests of Indonesian cultural diplomacy. Through the Ministry of Creative Economy and Tourism, the Indonesian government has officially recognized the NCT's role in promoting Indonesia's tourist destinations internationally during the pandemic. It proves that the

implementation of cultural diplomacy in the digital era forms new patterns of activity that affect state strategies to integrate non-state actors to achieve its political and non-political interests.

5. Conclusion

The results of cultural diplomacy are not limited to the outcome of political achievements such as the creation of bilateral or multilateral agreements. Technological advances accompanied by social media as a means of cross-border communication have significantly impacted the achievements of cultural exchange activities that need to be measured. The cultural diplomacy strategy is no exception, which has undergone significant changes in terms of actors (senders and recipients), the process of cultural distribution, the instruments used, and the interests behind implementing these activities. In this regard, all actors in international relations can conduct international communication that intensifies cross-border interaction and further amplify cultural exchange.

The content containing Indonesian cultural values has dominated NCT's social media, as have cultural exchange activities supported by Indonesian people in forming personal ties with NCT. Leaving aside NCT's primary interest in spreading Indonesian culture through social media, this article considers that the expansion of Indonesian culture is more effectively carried out by combining popular culture, K-Pop, with local culture. The Indonesian people are no exception to the cultural trend of K-Pop, which is one of the most demanded cultures by the global community. Thus, this article concludes that the implications of NCT for implementing Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the digital era are vivid. These can be reckoned from NCT's significant role in spreading Indonesian cultural values, its social media usage effectiveness as a form of international communication, and its influence on Indonesian cultural diplomacy strategies and policies in the digital age.

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