

Sushi Diplomacy as an Instrument of Gastrodiploamacy: Implications for Japan's Public Diplomacy and National Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic use of sushi as a central instrument in Japan's gastrodiploamacy, aiming to enhance public diplomacy, soft power, and national identity on the global stage. Utilizing a qualitative case study design combined with media discourse analysis, the research maps the engagement of state and non-state actors—including government agencies, renowned chefs, international restaurants, and digital media platforms—in shaping cultural narratives through culinary diplomacy. Data are drawn from policy documents, academic literature, global media sources, and digital trend analysis via Brand24. The findings reveal that sushi serves not only as a gastronomic product but also as a cultural symbol representing Japanese values, including aesthetics, omotenashi (hospitality), health consciousness, and craftsmanship. Cross-sector collaborations have fostered a dynamic diplomatic ecosystem that advances Japan's cultural positioning while stimulating trade and tourism. Challenges persist in managing authenticity and commercialization, particularly in markets where sushi has undergone significant local adaptation. Compared to gastrodiploamacy campaigns such as Thai Select and Kimchi Diplomacy, Japan's approach is marked by strategic flexibility and a commitment to preserving culinary heritage. This study enriches scholarly discourse by providing a comprehensive conceptual mapping of sushi diplomacy as a geopolitical tool and cultural branding strategy, offering practical insights for policymakers and cultural practitioners seeking to leverage cuisine in international engagement.

Keywords: sushi diplomacy, gastrodiploamacy, soft power, public diplomacy, cultural identity

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi peran strategis sushi sebagai instrumen utama dalam gastrodiploamacy Jepang, yang berfungsi memperkuat diplomasi publik, identitas budaya, dan kekuatan lunak di panggung internasional. Melalui pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif yang dikombinasikan dengan analisis wacana media, penelitian ini menelaah keterlibatan aktor negara dan non-negara, termasuk institusi pemerintah, koki ternama, restoran global, dan media populer, dalam mendesain narasi budaya melalui kuliner. Data diperoleh dari dokumen kebijakan publik, publikasi akademik, representasi media global, serta analisis tren digital menggunakan Brand24. Temuan mengungkap bahwa sushi bukan hanya produk makanan tetapi simbol budaya yang merepresentasikan nilai-nilai Jepang seperti estetika, keramahan (omotenashi), kesehatan, dan kehati-hatian dalam produksi. Kolaborasi antara pemerintah dan sektor swasta menghasilkan ekosistem diplomasi yang memperkuat citra nasional dan meningkatkan keterlibatan lintas negara, baik dalam bentuk

promosi ekspor pangan maupun peningkatan pariwisata budaya. Tantangan yang muncul mencakup komersialisasi berlebihan dan degradasi otentisitas, terutama di pasar seperti Amerika Serikat yang memodifikasi sushi dalam bentuk yang jauh dari tradisi asalnya. Perbandingan dengan strategi gastrodiploamacy negara lain, seperti Thai Select dan Kimchi Diplomacy, menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan Jepang cenderung fleksibel namun tetap berorientasi pada pelestarian warisan budaya. Studi ini berkontribusi pada wacana akademik tentang diplomasi budaya dengan menawarkan pemetaan konseptual dan analisis praktik kuliner sebagai alat geopolitik dan simbol identitas bangsa.

Kata kunci: *sushi diplomacy, gastrodiploamacy, soft power, diplomasi publik, identitas budaya*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of international relations, soft power has emerged as a crucial instrument for states to project influence beyond military and economic means. Nye (2004) defined soft power as the ability to shape preferences through appeal and attraction, which is manifested in cultural diplomacy, with gastrodiploamacy becoming a key element in a nation's public diplomacy strategy. Japan has strategically positioned its culinary heritage, particularly Sushi, as an instrument of soft power, leveraging food as a medium to shape international perceptions, strengthen bilateral ties, and reinforce national identity on a global scale (Bestor, 2014).

Sushi diplomacy represents an extension of Japan's gastrodiploamacy, a state-driven effort to promote its national cuisine, known as washoku, to enhance Japan's international image and foster cultural affinity. This approach is particularly significant following UNESCO's designation of washoku as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, which further institutionalized Japanese cuisine as a vital component of the nation's cultural diplomacy (Farina, 2018). By 2022, over 150,000 Japanese restaurants were operating overseas, a substantial increase from only 24,000 in 2006 (Japan Times, 2023). Sushi

restaurants account for a significant proportion, especially in major cities across the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The Japanese Government actively supports this proliferation through cultural certifications, such as 'Authentic Japanese Restaurant' labels, which standardize quality and reinforce sushi's symbolic role in diplomatic and economic outreach (Farina, 2018; MAFF, 2020).

Japan's gastrodiploamacy efforts are not merely about promoting national cuisine but are deeply intertwined with economic and geopolitical objectives. The Japanese Government has actively promoted Sushi as a globalized yet authentically Japanese product to boost agricultural exports, maintain food security, and strengthen Japan's culinary economy (Farina, 2018). By increasing the global consumption of Sushi, Japan not only enhances its cultural presence but also reinforces its economic positioning in the international food market. The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) have played a pivotal role in advancing this agenda through subsidies, culinary exchange programs, and promotional campaigns targeting foreign markets (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2021).

Gastrodiplomacy is increasingly recognized as a vital component of cultural diplomacy, enabling nations to connect with global audiences through cuisine (Rockower, 2012). Although gastrodiplomacy is recognized as part of Japan's soft power, specific academic studies on sushi diplomacy remain limited. Notable exceptions include Bestor (2014), who analyzed the role of sushi in cultural globalization, and Otmazgin & Ben-Ari (2017), who explored the political economy behind the promotion of Japanese cuisine abroad. These studies emphasize the need for more focused analysis on sushi's function as a cultural and diplomatic symbol. While existing studies examine the role of washoku in nation branding and cultural identity formation, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to analyzing sushi diplomacy as a targeted strategy within Japan's gastrodiplomacy framework (Bestor, 2014; Farina, 2018).

Additionally, much of the literature on gastrodiplomacy focuses on its economic and cultural impact, with insufficient attention given to its geopolitical implications. The potential advantages of gastrodiplomacy strategies are not limited to their ability to introduce a nation's image and culture internationally, but also extend to their potential to boost the country's economic revenue. The situation aligns with the growing interest of the international community in the culinary products and cultural heritage of the respective nation (Farina, 2018). Thailand, as a pioneer of gastrodiplomacy in 2002, serves as a successful example of promoting its cuisine on a global scale. The "Land of Smiles" managed to quadruple the number of Thai restaurants in the United States between 1990 and 2002, thanks to

the Global Thai campaign launched in 2002. Following the implementation of gastrodiplomacy that year, Thailand ranked 15th globally among food-exporting countries, with export values reaching US\$9.9 billion. A year later, this figure continued to rise, reaching US\$11.4 billion (Michelle & Baskoro, 2022). By 2009, the number of Thai restaurants worldwide had reached approximately 13,000 (Forman, 2024). Given Japan's growing influence through culinary diplomacy, it is necessary to conduct a deeper exploration of how sushi diplomacy contributes to Japan's public diplomacy, geopolitical standing, and national identity construction.

This study aims to address these gaps by conducting an in-depth analysis of sushi diplomacy as an instrument of Japan's gastrodiplomacy and soft power. By examining how Japan strategically utilizes sushi in diplomatic engagements, cultural exchanges, and global media representation, this research contributes to a broader understanding of culinary diplomacy as a geopolitical tool (Anholt, 2007). Furthermore, by examining the international reception of sushi diplomacy, this study investigates how Japan's culinary identity is constructed, contested, and adapted in various cultural contexts. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from international relations, cultural diplomacy, and media discourse analysis. Those combinations happened to provide a comprehensive understanding of sushi diplomacy. By analyzing policy documents, media portrayals, and diplomatic case studies, this study advances theoretical discussions on gastrodiplomacy and its implications for soft power and national branding.

Additionally, this research expands the existing literature by investigating the impact of sushi diplomacy on Japan's global influence, situating it within broader geopolitical considerations (Farina, 2018).

Understanding sushi diplomacy is particularly relevant in today's complex geopolitical landscape, where nations are increasingly utilizing cultural assets to strengthen diplomatic ties and foster mutual understanding. Japan's strategic promotion of sushi has yielded measurable outcomes. For instance, data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) show that Japanese food exports grew by 38% between 2013 and 2020, partially driven by the global appeal of sushi (MAFF, 2021). Additionally, sushi-themed cultural events supported by JETRO and MOFA have consistently attracted diplomatic attention, with over 70 events held in 30 countries between 2015 and 2020 (JETRO Annual Report, 2020). This empirical success provides a replicable model for other nations interested in culinary diplomacy. As culinary diplomacy continues to evolve, it is crucial to critically evaluate the effectiveness, challenges, and long-term implications of such initiatives on global public diplomacy. By situating sushi diplomacy within the broader discourse of gastrodiploamacy, nation branding, and international cultural exchange, this study seeks to contribute to both academic and policy discussions on the role of food in shaping global diplomatic relations. The findings of this research will not only enhance scholarly understanding of Japan's culinary soft power strategy but also offer practical insights for policymakers and cultural

diplomats seeking to harness the power of food in international engagement.

METHODOLOGY

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing media discourse analysis, to examine how sushi diplomacy serves as an instrument of Japan's gastrodiploamacy and soft power strategy. The research focuses on how media narratives construct sushi diplomacy, shaping global perceptions of Japan's national identity and international influence. The study integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify dominant themes, representations, and ideological framings in global media coverage, policy documents, and digital content.

The data collection process includes content from global news media, government reports, social media trends, and scholarly publications. Social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and YouTube serve as key indicators of public perception and digital engagement with sushi diplomacy (Khamis & Munt, 2018). The study also utilizes Brand24, a digital trend analysis tool, to track online discussions related to "sushi" and "Japanese cuisine" over the past three months (7 January-7 March 2025). By analyzing sentiment patterns, engagement levels, and geographic distribution of mentions, this study evaluates how Sushi is perceived as a cultural and diplomatic asset. By integrating qualitative discourse analysis with digital trend tracking, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of sushi diplomacy as a dynamic gastrodiploamatic tool, contributing to theoretical and policy discussions on soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Conceptual Framework

This research draws on two core theories within the field of international relations: Soft Power Theory, as proposed by Joseph Nye, and Nation Branding Theory, as developed by Simon Anholt. Soft Power Theory, conceptualized by Joseph S. Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence other nations through attraction rather than coercion or economic inducements. Soft power is rooted in culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative. In this context, sushi serves as a soft power instrument, enabling Japan to project its cultural influence globally. Through the spread of Sushi, Japan presents its culinary heritage as an attractive cultural asset, fostering positive perceptions and shaping global preferences in favour of Japan without relying on hard power. Sushi diplomacy exemplifies Nye's argument that culture and values embedded in national symbols, such as food, can be used effectively to build international trust, strengthen bilateral relations, and influence foreign publics.

This study also applies the Nation Branding Theory (Anholt, 2007), which suggests that countries, much like corporations, engage in branding practices to manage and enhance their international image. Nation branding includes strategies that highlight a country's unique cultural, historical, and economic attributes to appeal to global audiences. Japan's promotion of washoku (traditional Japanese cuisine) fits within this framework. Sushi has become a symbol of modern and traditional Japan, representing not only the country's aesthetic and culinary values but also reflecting qualities such as precision, hospitality (omotenashi), and health

consciousness. Sushi diplomacy operates as a branding tool that reinforces Japan's identity as a country rooted in tradition yet adaptable to modern global trends. The strategic international promotion of Sushi helps Japan shape global perceptions, positioning itself as a sophisticated, culturally rich, and trustworthy nation.

By integrating both soft power and nation branding, this research explains how sushi diplomacy extends beyond promoting food, serving as a diplomatic instrument to cultivate long-term influence and cultural affinity. The use of Sushi as part of Japan's gastrodiploamacy strategy demonstrates the synergistic relationship between cultural diplomacy and foreign policy, as it not only strengthens Japan's cultural narrative globally but also contributes to Japan's broader geopolitical and economic interests. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining how Japan utilizes its culinary heritage to enhance its public diplomacy efforts and international standing within the context of international relations literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Japan's Gastrodiploamacy Strategy: Sushi as a Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Tool

Gastrodiploamacy is an approach that utilizes food as a medium to disseminate cultural values and strengthen national identity in the global arena. Japan, with its rich culinary traditions, has elevated Sushi from merely a local dish to a worldwide symbol that reflects wisdom, aesthetics, and the philosophy of omotenashi (Japanese hospitality). Through this strategy, sushi is recognized not merely as a culinary

delicacy but as a vehicle for conveying cultural messages and profound national values.

As one of the most globally recognized Japanese foods, Sushi has become a symbol of Japanese culture worldwide. The Japanese Government has taken various initiatives to promote Sushi and other traditional Japanese cuisines, known as Washoku, through UNESCO and international events. In 2013, Washoku was recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. This recognition not only increased Sushi's global popularity but also reinforced Japan's image as a country with a rich and diverse culinary culture.

Sushi's elevation from a culinary product to a diplomatic symbol reflects Japan's strategic use of soft power. Nye's theory (2004) posits that cultural appeal can shape international preferences without coercion. In this context, sushi serves as a medium through which Japan projects values such as *omotenashi*, precision, and health consciousness—qualities that resonate globally and foster cultural affinity.

Japan's Policies in Supporting Sushi's Global Expansion

Japan's strategic promotion of sushi on the global stage exemplifies a sophisticated form of soft power that merges culinary diplomacy with national branding. Sushi is not merely a traditional dish; it is a cultural ambassador, embodying Japan's values of precision, harmony, and innovation. The Japanese Government, through institutions such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), has actively supported this global expansion by organizing international food exhibitions, cultural festivals, and chef training programs that

elevate sushi's visibility and authenticity abroad.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) has institutionalized several initiatives to ensure the quality and cultural integrity of Japanese cuisine overseas. These include: the Ministerial Awards for Promoting Japanese Food Abroad, the Certification for Stores Supporting Japanese Food and Ingredients, and the Cooking Skill Certification for Japanese Cuisine in Foreign Countries. These programs not only standardize culinary practices but also cultivate a global network of ambassadors for washoku, reinforcing Japan's gastronomic identity.

Government initiatives such as JETRO's culinary exchange programs and MAFF's certification schemes show a coordinated branding effort. These policies align with Anholt's concept of competitive identity, where consistent cultural messaging enhances national reputation (Anholt, 2007). Sushi's role in high-level diplomacy, such as the "Sushi Summit," illustrates Nye's soft power in action, where cultural engagement fosters trust and bilateral cooperation.

According to Moscato (2018), sushi serves as a symbolic medium in Japan's gastrodiploacy, particularly in high-profile diplomatic encounters, such as the "Sushi Summit" between U.S. President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. These culinary moments serve as strategic tools for fostering cultural congruency and enhancing bilateral relations. One notable example is the Japan Halal Food Project (JHFP), which aims to promote halal-certified Japanese cuisine in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This initiative combines product adaptation, strategic

culinary events, and social media campaigns to increase awareness and acceptance of Japanese food among Muslim consumers. As Farina (2018) notes, such efforts not only expand Japan's food export markets but also enhance its cultural resonance in diverse regions.

Another flagship initiative is the Washoku World Challenge, an international cooking competition for non-Japanese chefs. This event serves as both a pedagogical platform and a diplomatic gesture, allowing chefs worldwide to engage with Japanese culinary philosophy. Imura (2020) highlights how such events facilitate the "recontextualization" of sushi, enabling it to adapt to local tastes while preserving its traditional essence. The globalization of sushi, as Bestor (2000) argues, reflects a complex interplay between cultural authenticity and market adaptation. Sushi has evolved into a transnational symbol, simultaneously serving as a commodity, a cultural artifact, and a diplomatic tool. Japan's policies thus represent a nuanced model of gastrodiploamacy, where food becomes a medium for dialogue, identity, and influence.

The Role of Sushi in Strengthening Japan's National Identity

Sushi plays a crucial role in strengthening Japan's national identity. As one of the most globally recognized traditional foods, sushi has become a widely acknowledged symbol of Japanese culture. Sushi reflects Japanese cultural values such as craftsmanship, dedication, and attention to detail. Moreover, sushi also showcases Japan's cultural diversity and richness, further reinforcing the country's national identity. Through the

promotion of sushi, Japan has successfully demonstrated to the world that it is a nation with a deep and diverse culinary heritage. The success of sushi as a gastronomical diplomacy instrument is evident from its increasing popularity worldwide. Sushi has become a symbol that communicates the uniqueness of Japanese culture while promoting universal values, such as harmony, discipline, and innovation. By entering the global market, sushi invites the international community to understand Japanese life philosophy, ultimately building a positive image and fostering cross-cultural cooperation.

Sushi's global recognition reinforces Japan's identity as a nation of craftsmanship and aesthetic discipline. According to Nye (2004), soft power is most effective when rooted in authentic cultural expressions. Sushi's presentation and philosophy embody this authenticity, making it a persuasive tool in shaping perceptions of Japan as both traditional and modern. Matsumoto (2018) highlights that the effectiveness of this strategy is not solely focused on the culinary aspect but also on the ability of food to facilitate cultural dialogue and enhance soft power. The presence of sushi as a cultural attraction has become a crucial asset for Japan in building an inclusive and dynamic national identity in the era of globalization. Beyond the artistic aspect, sushi's contribution to boosting tourism and the local economy further complements the gastro-diploamacy strategy. Yamada (2021) notes that every successful sushi promotion ultimately strengthens global recognition of Japan's cultural excellence, which also positively impacts the country's national image and pride.

The Role of Key Actors in Sushi Diplomacy

Sushi, as one of Japan's most emblematic culinary exports, has transcended its traditional roots to become a global cultural phenomenon. This widespread popularity is not merely the result of organic culinary diffusion, but is instead the product of deliberate and coordinated efforts by key actors engaged in what scholars term "sushi diplomacy." These actors, ranging from state institutions to private chefs and media producers, collaborate to embed sushi within the cultural and gastronomic landscapes of diverse international markets. The Japanese Government plays a pivotal role in this process by initiating and supporting cultural culinary promotion campaigns abroad. Through agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the Government provides training and certification programs for international sushi chefs and restaurants, ensuring that the authenticity and quality of sushi are maintained across borders. Culinary festivals organized globally by these institutions serve not only as promotional platforms but also as instruments of soft power that reinforce Japan's cultural identity abroad. Complementing these state-led efforts are international sushi restaurants, which function as cultural intermediaries.

These establishments, such as the globally recognized Nobu chain founded by chef Nobu Matsuhisa, do more than serve food; they host sushi-making workshops and Japanese food festivals, thereby fostering intercultural dialogue and appreciation (Smith, 2019).

Renowned chefs such as Jiro Ono, Nobu Matsuhisa, and Masaharu Morimoto have emerged as culinary diplomats, utilizing their public personas, television appearances, and publications to introduce the artistry and philosophy of sushi to global audiences (UNESCO, 2013). The documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, which chronicles the life and craft of Jiro Ono, exemplifies how individual chefs can become symbols of national culinary excellence. Media, too, plays a critical role in shaping global perceptions of sushi. Films, anime, and social media platforms have amplified the reach of sushi culture, with titles like *Shokugeki no Soma* and the digital presence of chefs like Morimoto on Instagram serving as powerful tools of cultural transmission (Farina, 2021).

The collaboration between state actors and culinary figures like Jiro Ono and Nobu Matsuhisa reflects Anholt's emphasis on multi-sectoral branding. These chefs act as cultural ambassadors, translating Japan's culinary values into global narratives. Their visibility in media and international events amplifies Japan's brand equity through cultural storytelling (Anholt, 2010).

As Assmann (2017) argues, Japan's culinary diplomacy is not merely about promoting national cuisine but about constructing a global narrative of cultural sophistication and heritage. Through the strategic deployment of *washoku*, Japan cultivates a form of soft power that enhances its international image while reinforcing domestic cultural identity. A similar perspective is presented by Timonina (2021), who emphasizes that Japan's gastrodiploamacy operates as a multifunctional tool, simultaneously promoting food exports, revitalizing rural economies, and enhancing tourism

through public-private partnerships. Bestor (2018) further contextualizes this within the politics of cultural heritage, noting that Japan's pursuit of UNESCO recognition for washoku was not only aimed at international prestige but also at encouraging domestic consumption of traditional foods.

Moreover, Anargirou (2025) highlights how Japan's culinary diplomacy is strategically designed within the broader "Cool Japan" initiative, as a soft power mechanism that fosters political alliances and economic prosperity through cultural attraction. Together, these actors and strategies form a dynamic network that sustains and expands the global presence of sushi, transforming it into both a culinary delight and a diplomatic instrument.

Collaboration Between Government and Private Sectors

Collaboration between the government and private sectors is essential to the success of sushi diplomacy. The Japanese Government collaborates with sushi restaurants and media outlets to promote Japanese culinary culture more effectively. For instance, the government provides funding and logistical support for sushi promotional events abroad. At the same time, restaurants and renowned chefs offer authentic dining experiences that attract visitors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018).

The media also plays a vital role in spreading the message of sushi diplomacy. By highlighting inspiring stories about sushi chefs and restaurants, media platforms help build a positive image of Japanese culinary culture. Additionally, social media facilitates direct interaction between chefs,

restaurants, and consumers, further increasing awareness and appreciation of sushi (Farina, 2021). The collaboration between the government and private sectors in sushi diplomacy has significant long-term impacts. First, this partnership strengthens Japan's global influence through cultural diplomacy. By introducing sushi to international audiences, Japan fosters a positive national image as a country with a rich and diverse culinary heritage (UNESCO, 2013). Second, this collaboration contributes to economic growth both within Japan and beyond. International sushi restaurants create business opportunities and employment, while the rising demand for Japanese food ingredients boosts exports of agricultural and seafood products (Smith, 2019). Finally, sushi diplomacy plays a role in strengthening international relations. Through cultural and culinary events, people from different nations gain a deeper understanding of Japanese culture, fostering mutual appreciation and cross-cultural understanding. Those conditions can contribute to building more harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships on a global scale (Farina, 2021).

Global Perception of Sushi and Japanese Culture

In Western countries, sushi is often regarded as exotic and considered healthy. Sushi restaurants have proliferated in major cities in the United States and Europe, indicating their growing popularity. In Asia, sushi is also well received, though with some local adaptations to suit local tastes (Anderson, 2020). This fact reflects the successful reception of the Japanese

Government's campaigns about gastrodipomacy.

In Western countries, such as the United States, sushi has evolved into various forms tailored to local preferences. For example, the California Roll, which uses imitation crab meat and avocado, is a popular adaptation of sushi. In Europe, sushi is often regarded as a luxury food, typically served in high-end restaurants. This trend illustrates how sushi has permeated various social strata beyond Japan (Smith, 2019). Multiple factors, including Japanese films, anime, and tourism promotions, have contributed to the widespread adoption of sushi in Western and Asian countries. Japanese movies and anime often feature scenes of eating sushi, indirectly promoting the cuisine to international audiences (Smith, 2019).

Additionally, tourism promotion campaigns by the Japanese Government have played a significant role in introducing sushi to foreign tourists (Jones & Brown, 2021). In some Asian countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, sushi has been adapted and modified to suit local cultures and tastes. For instance, in South Korea, there is a sushi variant called "kimbap," which utilizes local ingredients such as vegetables, meat, and rice, all wrapped in seaweed. This adaptation demonstrates how sushi can be integrated into local culinary cultures while retaining its Japanese essence (Yamamoto, 2020).

The adaptation of sushi in foreign markets, such as the California Roll, demonstrates Japan's cultural flexibility without compromising its core culinary identity. This phenomenon aligns with Nye's (2004) theory, which posits that cultural appeal becomes increasingly powerful when diverse audiences

embrace a symbol through attraction rather than coercion. While issues of authenticity remain a challenge, local adaptations have extended the global reach of Japan's soft power by making sushi more accessible and relatable across cultures (Bestor, 2000).

Sushi as a Symbol of Modern Japan

Sushi has become a symbol of modern Japan, connecting food with Japanese culture and values such as hospitality, quality, and health. Each piece of sushi is carefully arranged, reflecting the attention to detail and aesthetics that are integral to Japanese culture. Sushi also represents health values, with fresh and low-calorie ingredients used in its preparation (Tanaka, 2018). Sushi not only reflects the quality of the ingredients used, but also embodies the philosophy of "omotenashi," which means providing the best service and hospitality to guests. This condition is reflected in the way sushi is presented and enjoyed, with a focus on visual presentation and the overall dining experience. Moreover, sushi also embodies the principle of "washoku," which emphasizes nutritional balance, taste, and aesthetics in every dish (Lee, 2018).

Sushi has played a significant role in increasing the global recognition of Japanese culture. Through gastrodipomacy, Japan has successfully promoted sushi as part of its national identity. Sushi restaurants in various countries not only serve food but also introduce Japanese dining etiquette and traditions to customers (Lee, 2018). It helps to strengthen Japan's cultural diplomacy and enhance the recognition and appreciation of Japanese culture worldwide (Kim, 2020). Cultural diplomacy through sushi also

encompasses Japan's participation in international culinary events, including food festivals and culinary competitions. In this context, sushi serves as a cultural ambassador, introducing Japanese values and traditions to a global audience. Additionally, the increasing number of sushi restaurants worldwide also contributes to the recognition of Japanese culture and strengthens international relations (Jones & Brown, 2021).

The analysis of sushi diplomacy as an instrument of Japan's gastrodiplomacy is supported by empirical data from the Brand24 digital trend analysis. The research investigates media discourse and online conversations regarding sushi and Japanese cuisine from 5 February to 7 March 2025. The data reveals a significant increase in global engagement with sushi-related content, indicating its growing relevance as a diplomatic and cultural soft power tool.



Picture 1. Digital Trend Analysis of “Sushi” Mentions: Social Media and Online Engagement (Feb 5 – Mar 7, 2025)



Picture 2. Digital Trend Analysis of “Japanese Cuisine” Mentions: Social Media and Online Engagement (Feb 5 – Mar 7, 2025)

The Brand24 report on sushi recorded 34,290 mentions, marking a 1,566% increase from the previous period. The total social media reach was 433 million, representing a 1,516% increase, while the non-social media reach stood at 81 million, with a 1,303% increase. Sentiment analysis shows 12,311 positive mentions and 1,277 negative mentions, indicating an overwhelmingly favorable perception of sushi diplomacy. The top trending hashtags included #sushi, #sushilover, #foodie, and #japanesefood, highlighting how sushi is increasingly integrated into

digital food culture and online discussions about gastronomy.

The analysis of Japanese cuisine as a broader concept further contextualizes the diplomatic role of sushi. The Brand24 report on Japanese cuisine recorded 3,161 mentions, showing a 2,158% increase, with a combined media reach of 13.2 million. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, have played a crucial role in amplifying Japan's culinary identity, with viral food content and influencer-driven discussions shaping global perceptions of Japanese cuisine. From a geopolitical perspective, sushi diplomacy is observed in

diplomatic events, promotional campaigns, and government-backed food exhibitions. The data highlights how government institutions such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) continue to promote *washoku* as a national brand, reinforcing Japan’s cultural and economic influence. The association of sushi with premium quality, health benefits, and authentic culinary experiences further strengthens Japan’s nation branding strategy.

The presence of negative mentions (approximately 9% of total sushi-related discussions) suggests contentious debates on cultural appropriation,

authenticity, and commercialization. Some users expressed concerns over non-Japanese adaptations of sushi, particularly in Western fast-food markets, which challenge the traditional identity of Japanese cuisine. These debates underscore the tensions between globalization and culinary nationalism, which impact Japan’s ability to maintain sushi’s authenticity within its gastrodipomatic framework. A comparative analysis of digital engagement and media exposure (see Table 1) illustrates how sushi garners significantly higher global traction than general discussions on Japanese cuisine. The table below summarizes key findings:

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Sushi and Japanese Cuisine Mentions (5 Feb –7 Mar 2025)

Metric	Sushi	Japanese Cuisine	Percentage Increase
Mentions	34,290	3,161	+1566% / +2158%
Social Media Reach	433M	4.2M	+1516% / +5050%
Non-Social Media Reach	81M	9M	+1303% / +4900%
Positive Mentions	12,311	0	+1509%
Negative Mentions	1,277	0	+1580%
Trending Hashtags	#sushi, #foodie, #sushilover	#japanesecuisine, #foodtok	N/A

Source: Data compiled from Brand24 monitoring report on sushi and Japanese cuisine, 5 February – 7 March 2025

The findings indicate that sushi diplomacy remains one of Japan’s most successful gastrodipomatic strategies, achieving both high engagement in digital

spaces and widespread acceptance in global markets. The ability of sushi to transcend cultural boundaries while retaining its association with Japan’s

culinary heritage demonstrates its effectiveness as a tool of soft power. By leveraging sushi diplomacy, Japan continues to strengthen its global culinary identity, promote food exports, and enhance bilateral relations through cultural diplomacy (Wilson, 2011). However, ongoing discussions about authenticity and globalization present challenges that necessitate careful cultural branding strategies to maintain Japan's culinary sovereignty in the international gastronomy landscape.

Comparison of Sushi Diplomacy, Thai Select, and Kimchi Diplomacy

Several Asian countries, apart from Japan, have successfully implemented gastrodiploacy strategies, including Thailand and South Korea. Thailand's gastrodiploacy strategy has helped improve the country's tourism image, shifting its previous association with the adult entertainment industry to become an internationally recognized culinary destination. As part of its strategy, Thailand introduced a specialized standardization program called *Thai Select*, which certifies Thai restaurants operating globally. The goal of the *Thai Select* program is to ensure that the quality of Thai cuisine exported or produced in foreign restaurants adheres to established standards. Culinary producers who meet the Thai Ministry of Commerce's standards receive a *Thai Select* certificate, which serves as a guide for tourists in finding the best Thai cuisine. This certification also acts as a motivator for Thai culinary producers to continuously enhance the quality and authenticity of their products (Utomo & Sari, 2022).

On the other hand, South Korea has adopted a unique approach to

gastrodiploacy. Instead of directly and specifically promoting national cuisine as seen in the Washoku and Thai Select strategies, South Korea has leveraged the Korean Wave (Hallyu) to introduce its national culture, encompassing not only cuisine but also music, drama series, lifestyle, and other cultural aspects (Asy'ari et al., 2024).). In addition to Hallyu, the South Korean Government also launched the "Korean Cuisine to the World" program, known as the "Hansik" program. The program is tailored to promote the taste of Korean cuisine in the international community, which is also considered part of the country's culinary globalization (Yuniningsih et al., 2025). A key element of this strategy is the prominent and vibrant display of South Korean cuisine in Korean dramas and entertainment. As a result, global audiences have not only developed an interest in Korean dramas such as *Squid Game* and *Parasite* but have also become increasingly intrigued by Korean cuisine. Recognizing this growing interest, the South Korean Government later introduced a specific strategy known as "Kimchi Diplomacy" to promote further Kimchi, one of the country's most beloved dishes (Nihayati et al., 2022).

Compared to Thai Select and Kimchi Diplomacy, Japan's Washoku strategy does not significantly differ in principle. All three strategies focus on promoting their respective national cultures through soft power, each employing its unique approach. The Japanese Government's Washoku initiative aims to enhance global recognition of traditional Japanese cuisine, including sushi. Japan's soft power approach through Washoku seeks to improve the international appeal of its culture (Farina, 2018). This approach shares a similar objective with Kimchi

Diplomacy and Thai Select: to increase global interest in each country's cuisine and culture.

The Differences

Despite their shared objectives, the implementation of each country's culinary diplomacy varies significantly. Thai Select, for instance, emphasizes quality improvement and authenticity preservation through a government-led certification program. The Thai Government categorizes culinary establishments into three tiers based on their quality and service: Thai Select Casual, Thai Select Classic, and Thai Select Signature. Additionally, Thailand publishes the *Thai Select Cookbook*, featuring a collection of traditional Thai recipes (Thai Select, 2020). In contrast, Japan's Washoku strategy is not limited to its Washoku-Try Japan's Good Food campaign, which is conducted 20 times annually (Lusiana et al., 2022). Japan also collaborates with various entities to promote its national cuisine, including the establishment of an award system. The Award for Overseas Promotion of Japanese Food, presented by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, recognizes individuals who contribute to the global promotion of Japanese cuisine (Farina, 2018). Although the South Korean Government did not initially design the Korean Wave as a culinary promotion effort, its success in introducing national culture ultimately led to the formation of Kimchi Diplomacy, which focuses more specifically on food. Meanwhile, Japan's Washoku strategy remains centered on promoting its traditional dishes, particularly sushi.

Challenges

The globalization of sushi is not without its challenges, particularly in

terms of authenticity. One example is the marketing of sushi in the United States. Brown (2012) found that sushi was initially perceived as an elite culinary art form, considered an exotic curiosity among American consumers. At that time, sushi was primarily associated with high-status individuals, such as Hollywood actors and actresses. In the 1970s, Japanese cuisine in the U.S. was generally seen as a symbol of sophistication and privilege. By the 1980s, sushi had gained broader recognition, appearing in U.S. television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Breakfast Club*, and even being featured in *The Yuppie Handbook* (Brown, 2012). The "invasion" of sushi in the U.S. became increasingly massive following the expansions of multiple Japanese restaurants in the country. The expansions were also accompanied by the arrival of various Japanese chefs and businesspeople in the country, which further amplified the accessibility and popularization of Japanese food, including sushi. The "California roll" sushi was introduced as a local U.S. adaptation of traditional Japanese sushi, which significantly amplified its popularity. Progressively, sushi in the U.S. has become a symbol of trendiness, health awareness, and sophistication (Takenaka, 2019).

Initially, sushi in the U.S. was exclusive to high-end restaurants. However, this trend gradually shifted in the early 2000s as sushi gained more widespread acceptance. The growing popularity of sushi led to the emergence of non-luxury sushi eateries. The restaurant owner gradually replaced the traditional presentation of sushi on authentic wooden trays in restaurants and with plastic packaging in

supermarkets. By 2004, 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. began selling pre-packaged sushi, and in 2007, Walmart followed suit (Brown, 2012). According to Payne's (2018) book review of Robert Ji-Song Ku's *Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA*, the production of the U.S. "California roll" in a particular restaurant in Los Angeles involves the usage of imitation crab meat and avocado. The finding aligns with Sakamoto and Allen's (2011) research regarding the use of artificial crab stick meat and mayonnaise in supermarket sushi in the U.S.

The arrival of sushi robots and conveyor-belt sushi from Japan made once-expensive sushi more affordable and accessible. Today, the sushi industry in the U.S. ranges from US\$5 refrigerator *uramaki*, a type of rolled sushi with nori inside the rice, to US\$200 fatty tuna sushi served at an upscale restaurant (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011). Diwyarthi (2024) conducted a qualitative study based on interviews with sushi chefs, emphasizing the importance of uniqueness and aesthetics in sushi presentation. In Japan, sushi is more than just food; it represents art, tradition, and a profound sense of hospitality. Japanese sushi chefs undergo years of rigorous training to master essential skills, including precise knife techniques and the art of rice preparation. They plated and designed the sushi to be visually appealing, with artistic garnishes that enhance the overall presentation (Diwyarthi, 2024).

One of the major challenges in globalizing sushi is maintaining authenticity. Altintzoglou et al. (2016) argue that traditional culinary products exposed to modernization and

convenience elements can be considered innovative. However, excessive innovation can diminish the perceived original value of the product. One example of this degradation is the increasing prevalence of pre-packaged sushi (Altintzoglou et al., 2016). This condition aligns with the rise of convenience sushi in the U.S., where sushi is commonly packaged in disposable plastic containers, accompanied by sachets of soy sauce and disposable bamboo chopsticks (Brown, 2012). This phenomenon poses a challenge to preserving the authenticity of sushi outside Japan. Beyond packaging, sushi presentation is another crucial factor. In Japan, sushi embodies art, tradition, and a deep sense of hospitality. Sushi chefs require extensive training to perfect techniques such as precise knife handling and meticulous rice preparation. Each sushi dish is carefully arranged to create a visually appealing and aesthetically pleasing presentation (Diwyarthi, 2024). Maintaining the authenticity of sushi is considered a challenge in the current highly globalized world. While Yang (2013) stated that sushi is considered a flexible cuisine, the modernization of technology tends to influence the traditional aspect of preparing the cuisine. The preparation procedures of sushi in traditional sushi bars often involve veteran chefs with years of training. Toshiba Matsuoka, a former Japanese minister of agriculture, stated that people need to understand that authentic Japanese food is considered a work of art, beautifully presented, made with genuine ingredients, and prepared by a trained chef. In the current modern era, the arrival of sushi robots, for example, tends to diminish the importance of the sushi chef's years of

training and professional experience in presenting highly presentable sushi. While the technology provides an easier and cheaper alternative, producing twice to three times the speed of a veteran sushi chef, the existence of such modernization tends to limit the involvement of the chefs themselves to just layering the robot-made sliced fish and adjusting the shape of the robot-made sushi rice. This phenomenon led to a decline in the number of professional sushi chefs. A sushi expert, Makoto Fukue, head of the Tokyo Sushi Academy, stated that certain types of sushi might have been prepared incorrectly by unqualified sushi chefs, which in turn influences the overall image of sushi itself, a major concern. The driving force of economic gain is compromised by mass-producing sushi using sushi robots, which sacrifices the image of sushi (Yang, 2013).

Almansouri et al., (2022) mentioned several authenticity risk factors in preparing heritage foods, namely: 1) The cook that lacks adequate skills, knowledge, and experience; 2) Ingredients scarcity; 3) Disobedience to the recipe; 4) Modernization of cooking method and equipment; 5) Unfamiliarity with table manners and presentation; 6) Adaptation for customer preferences; 7) Ingredients costs; and 8) Foreign chefs (Almansouri et al., 2022). The abovementioned phenomenon of sushi robot existence in U.S sushi industry align with several of Almansouri et al's authenticity risk factors, namely the experienced cook factor, as the machines tend not to possess the veteran chefs' years of experience and knowledge of sushi, one of Japan's heritage cuisines, and instead prioritize speed and mass production of the food. Another authenticity risk factor associated with

the phenomenon of sushi robot existence is the modernization of the cooking method and equipment. Almansouri et al. (2022) stated that the modernization risk factor is associated with traditional and old customs in preparing cuisine. They specifically stated that "...so using modern machines and new techniques will affect the authenticity of the dish" and "Not using the right equipment would cause losing the identity of the heritage dish" (Almansouri et al., 2022).

In addition to modernization and the diminishing role of professional sushi chefs, the authenticity of Japanese sushi served in overseas restaurant is further challenged by several other phenomena, for example the usage of artificial crab meat in the sushi, which relates to the disobedience to the recipe risk factor, and the birth of local sushi adaptation such as the "California Rolls" sushi in the U.S, which translates into another risk factor namely the adaptation for customer preferences. The former is associated with the notion that a heritage cuisine should strictly adhere to established recipes to maintain authenticity. Otherwise, there is a possibility that the dish created by not following the traditional recipe might influence the legacy of the dish's heritage, as well as the identity of the cuisine itself. The latter is associated with the agreement that the customer's preference affects the authenticity of the dish.

Changing, removing, and/or adding ingredients to the dish, in this case, sushi, also influences its authenticity, making the heritage dish unrecognizable (Almansouri et al., 2022). Thus, it can be inferred that the increase in sushi's popularity overseas, such as in the U.S., provides a multitude of challenges in maintaining the authenticity of Japanese

sushi, which involves multiple risk factors to be considered.

To address authenticity concerns, Japan once proposed a sushi certification system under the Washoku program. In 2006, Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries initially planned to introduce a certification for sushi abroad as part of the Washoku-Try Japan's Good Food campaign. The initiative was initially aimed at promoting Japan's culinary heritage and monitoring the authenticity of sushi served in foreign restaurants. However, this proposal faced intense criticism, with Japan being labeled the "sushi police" for its aggressive promotion of its culture. As a result, the certification plan was revised into a mere recommendation.

Additionally, the responsibility for managing this recommendation was transferred to a non-governmental organization, the Organization to Promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad (JRO), rather than to official government ministries (Farina, 2018). While the Japanese overboard sushi monitoring authority falls to JRO, the NGO is considered less "aggressive" than the country's initial plan to monitor the authenticity of sushi served globally. Research in 2011 found that the chairman's reaction was lenient to the birth of the U.S.'s California Roll sushi. While the study found that a staff member of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the California Roll is an imitation of authentic Japanese sushi, the chairman of JRO tended to give a more lenient response. Instead of enforcing or issuing an authenticity-check recommendation regarding the sushi adaptation, the chairman stated that there is a growing need to consider the California Roll as part of Japanese

food culture. Also, he emphasized the importance of acknowledging its existence (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011).

Ultimately, the global sushi industry remains largely unregulated, as there is no official certification system ensuring authenticity in overseas sushi restaurants. Overall, it can be inferred that Japan's oversight of sushi abroad remains relatively weak, because not only Japan lacks an official government body to strictly monitor, regulate, and/or enforce the authenticity of sushi served in overseas restaurant, but also the current authority, the JRO, in this case of California Roll, tend to lack the power in establishing the standard for Japanese Sushi authenticity in overseas restaurants. This fact poses a significant challenge for maintaining the authenticity of sushi worldwide, especially as its evolution in countries like the U.S. has transformed it from a luxury dish into a convenient, mass-produced food item.

CONCLUSION

This article examines how sushi serves as a cultural diplomacy tool within Japan's gastrodiploamacy strategy. By leveraging sushi's global popularity, Japan has successfully strengthened its national image, enhanced diplomatic relations, and driven economic growth through food exports. UNESCO reinforced this strategy by designating washoku as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013, affirming the importance of Japanese cuisine as a key element of the country's cultural identity.

The Japanese Government, through organizations such as the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), actively promotes

sushi in international markets. These efforts include certification programs for Japanese restaurants abroad, training programs for international chefs, and culinary festivals that showcase sushi as a cultural icon. These initiatives not only foster a deeper understanding of Japanese culture worldwide but also support Japan's culinary industry and boost exports of Japanese food products. Sushi is not only a symbol of Japanese cuisine but also represents cultural values such as *omotenashi* (hospitality), attention to quality, and aesthetic presentation. Its success as a cultural diplomacy tool is evident in its widespread acceptance across various countries, both in its traditional form and through adaptations tailored to local tastes. However, the globalization of sushi also presents challenges, particularly regarding authenticity and commercialization, as variations of sushi deviate significantly from its traditional roots.

Compared to other gastrodiploamcy strategies, such as Thailand's Thai Select program and South

Korea's Kimchi Diplomacy, Japan's approach is more flexible while maintaining an emphasis on authenticity and quality. Although Japan once attempted to regulate the authenticity of sushi abroad through a certification system, this effort faced criticism and was ultimately reduced to a recommendation rather than an enforced standard. Social media data suggest that sushi remains a popular global culinary phenomenon. Online discussions about sushi have surged, demonstrating how sushi not only promotes Japanese culture but also contributes to Japan's economy and diplomatic relations.

Overall, sushi has proven to be an effective soft power tool for Japan, influencing not just cultural and economic aspects but also fostering stronger international relations. Moving forward, Japan's key challenge will be to strike a balance between preserving the authenticity of sushi while adapting to global culinary trends. With the right approach, sushi will continue to serve as a powerful symbol of Japanese culture on the international stage.

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