

Research Article

Japan's Multicultural Diplomacy through JENESYS 2024: Cultural Exchange and Soft Power toward Indonesian Youth

Muhammad Imran Nur^{1*}, Sakinah Fitrah Rahmah², Muhammad Arjalulwahid Aliyah³, Muhammad Dhiemas Anggareksa⁴, Lady Nubailah Wahdah⁵

¹Department of Criminal Justice System, Faculty of Law, University of Indonesia, Indonesia, e-mail: imran17171nur@gmail.com

²Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Science, University of Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia, e-mail: imran17171nur@gmail.com

³Department of Management, Faculty of Economic and Business, University of Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Indonesia, e-mail: imran17171nur@gmail.com

⁴Department of Pharmacy, Faculty of Pharmacy, Pancasila University, e-mail: imran17171nur@gmail.com

⁵Department of Nutrition, Polytechnic of the Ministry of Health of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, e-mail: imran17171nur@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: imran17171nur@gmail.com

Abstract. This research analyzes multicultural practices within Japan's social context, both domestically and in international relations. The study focuses on how Japanese society facilitates the development of multicultural identities, particularly through interactions between Japanese citizens, immigrant populations, and ethnic minority communities. In the context of globalization, Japan has increasingly positioned multicultural engagement as an important strategy for strengthening social cohesion and international cooperation. Through the JENESYS 2024 program, a cultural exchange initiative involving youth from East Asia, Japan seeks to channel the values of multiculturalism into tangible benefits, including the enhancement of strategic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the reinforcement of cultural diplomacy to maintain its role as a regional power in Asia. Based on the author's observations, JENESYS 2024 includes at least three main components: the introduction of collective memory, immersive cultural experiences, and direct multicultural interactions among participants. These activities provide participants with opportunities to understand cultural diversity while building mutual understanding between nations. This paper further highlights how Japan develops cultural communication with Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, and demonstrates how Japan's soft diplomacy through JENESYS contributes to strengthening its international image. Ultimately, the program reinforces Japan's position as a cultural and civilizational reference point among Indonesian youth while promoting long-term intercultural collaboration.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Japan-Indonesia Relations; JENESYS 2024; Multicultural Society; Soft Diplomacy.

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1. Introduction

In the dynamics of international relations, the state remains a primary actor operating with diverse visions and missions to realize its national interests (Triwibowo & Apprehension, 2025). Driven by rapid technological advancements and global connectivity, nations have developed novel mechanisms to interact with one another. These approaches leverage national attractiveness, legitimacy, and the capacity to cultivate social networks, such as cross-border cooperation and diplomatic initiatives, rather than relying solely on conventional military force (Benjamin Daßler, 2018). This paradigm shift underscores the growing recognition that enduring international relations are built not only through political, economic, or coercive instruments, but also through unique, organic, and long-term institutional attractions (Rohmadiati et al., 2025).

This phenomenon is best conceptualized through the lens of soft power, a framework pioneered by Joseph Nye. Nye posits that a nation's influence originates not just from its capacity to coerce others through material strength, but from its ability to attract external actors and cultivate positive perceptions (Singh & Nye, 2026). Within this analytical framework, Japan stands out as a state that actively integrates soft power strategies into its broader foreign policy activities (Jeong & Grix, 2023). Following World War II, Japan faced the profound challenge of reconstructing its international identity; consequently, through targeted soft power strategies (Xia, 2024), Japan adopted cultural diplomacy to rehabilitate its global image as a "highly reliable society" and encourage the international community to voluntarily embrace Japanese cultural values (Rohmadiati et al., 2025).

A prominent contemporary manifestation of Japan's soft power strategy is its bilateral partnership with Indonesia. Bilateral relations between Japan and Indonesia have a long historical foundation, dating back to the signing of the Peace Treaty on January 20, 1958 (Fauzi, 2025). Over time, this relationship has progressively strengthened, expanding deeply into social, cultural, and inter-community dimensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). A concrete example of this partnership is the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) program, which has operated continuously since 2007, positioning Southeast Asian youth "particularly from Indonesia" as its primary demographic target (Japan Foundation, n.d.).

JENESYS 2024 exemplifies how Japan strategically elaborates on public and cultural diplomacy through a multicultural approach as a core element of its soft power architecture. This approach intentionally bridges the diverse cultures, identities, and cross-community interactions of the participants to foster deep mutual understanding (Kaldor, 2017). This strategic intent is embedded across the itinerary of JENESYS 2024, which includes educational site visits to historical landmarks, immersive homestays with Japanese host families, and structured cross-institutional dialogues. Through this study, the author analyzes how JENESYS 2024 functions as a strategic soft power tool in shaping positive perceptions and images among Indonesian youth, utilizing a multicultural diplomacy approach derived from participant observation and comprehensive documentation analysis.

2. Literature Review

Japan's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy as a Theoretical Perspective

According to Joseph Nye's seminal work, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," soft power is defined as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or financial payments (Singh & Nye, 2026). In other words, it enables external actors to voluntarily align with a state's interests without explicit demands or pressure (Mangowal, 2010). In contemporary international relations, soft power is widely exercised through public diplomacy, which encompasses the processes by which a state communicates with and engages foreign publics outside traditional, elite-level diplomatic channels (Currie, 2020).

Today, modern public diplomacy has shifted away from a rigid, one-way communication model toward a highly dialogical approach. In this framework, states do not merely project messages to an international public; instead, they cultivate relationships and mutual understanding through sustained social interaction (Storie, 2018). This approach redefines the international public not as passive targets of diplomatic messaging, but as active co-creators who directly influence the success of bilateral relationships. This approach redefines the international public not as passive recipients of diplomatic messaging, but as active co-creators who directly influence the success of bilateral relationships. As a result, public diplomacy serves as a vital mechanism through which states convert cultural resources into international appeal.

Cultural Diplomacy and International Exchange as Soft Power Practices

Furthermore, the execution of effective public diplomacy relies heavily on cultural diplomacy as a supporting instrument. Cultural diplomacy refers to the strategic deployment of a nation's cultural practices, values, and expressions to foster international cooperation (Schneider, 2005). In practice, the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS 2024) program serves as a premier instrument of both public and cultural diplomacy for Japan, offering foreign participants direct, first-hand exposure to the history, traditions, and contemporary social life of the Japanese people (Mangowal, 2010).

Contextually, Japan has been uniquely consistent in leveraging soft power through its distinct cultural capital, ranging from animation and culinary arts to fine arts and its renowned societal work ethic, which is projected globally through diverse exchange programs and multi-stakeholder collaborations (Watanabe & McConnel, 2015).

Previous studies have indicated that Japan's soft power strategy operates through various cultural and social channels. Japan's international engagement extends beyond merely promoting culture; it also involves building long-term relationships with foreign societies. These efforts demonstrate that cultural diplomacy serves as a means of shaping national image and enhancing international legitimacy.

However, most discussions about Japan's soft power have concentrated on cultural products or national-level diplomatic strategies. There has been less emphasis on the experiential aspect of cultural diplomacy, particularly in terms of how foreign youth participants interpret and internalize Japanese values through direct interactions.

Multicultural Diplomacy and Cross-Cultural Interaction

Beyond superficial cultural introductions, JENESYS 2024 can be understood through the lens of cross-identity interaction, which prioritizes meaningful dialogue among individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. By implementing a multicultural approach, the program views cultural diversity not as a barrier to communication but as an enabling space to generate a common understanding through direct experiential learning (Vertovec, 2019).

Through the JENESYS 2024 program, the differences between the socio-cultural backgrounds of Japan and Indonesia are particularly significant. Japan is often viewed as having a cohesive cultural identity that emphasizes social harmony, public order, and a strong respect for tradition. In contrast, Indonesia is a distinctly pluralistic society, characterized by a wide array of religions, ethnicities, and local cultures. These contrasts highlight the importance of multicultural interaction in shaping participants' understanding of foreign societies. Instead of merely transferring cultural messages, multicultural diplomacy fosters the emergence of perceptions through direct experiences and interpersonal relationships.

Soft power, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy have been extensively discussed in previous literature as tools for enhancing a nation's international influence. However, there has been limited analysis regarding how cultural exchange programs operate at the interpersonal level, particularly in shaping young people's perceptions of Japan.

This study employs Nye's soft power theory as a foundation for assessing Japan's strategic initiatives to advance its national interests. It investigates public diplomacy as the main avenue for international engagement, cultural diplomacy as the operational tool for achieving institutional goals, and cross-cultural diplomacy as the means by which interactions among JENESYS 2024 participants effectively foster positive perceptions and enhance Japan's national image among Indonesian youth.

3. Materials and Method

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing participant observation (*observasi partisipan*) and documentation analysis as the primary methods for data collection (Chand, 2025). Participant observation was conducted by embedding the researcher directly as an active participant within the JENESYS 2024 program, thereby enabling first-hand, empirical observation of the various activities, social interactions, and experiences that unfolded throughout the itinerary.

Through this direct immersive involvement, the researcher gathered a comprehensive understanding of the operationalization of Japan's multicultural diplomacy, the dynamics of cultural exchange, and the strategic mechanisms used to project soft power onto young Indonesian delegates. Throughout the program, the researcher systematically observed key operational dimensions, including the nature of interpersonal interactions between Indonesian youth and Japanese citizens/institutions, the dissemination of Japanese core societal values, the pedagogical framework of historical and educational field trips, and the immediate experiential responses of the participants. This observational data was preserved through detailed field notes and reflective journals, which were subsequently analyzed in alignment with the core research objectives.

To ensure data validity and academic rigor, the study also incorporates rigorous documentation analysis (Sankofa, 2023). This method involves an exhaustive review of official documents tied to the JENESYS 2024 program, including institutional itineraries, formal reports, promotional and media publications, the organizer's official web portals, field photographs, and other archival materials. Analyzing these materials serves to contextualize the strategic narratives, policy goals, and diplomatic methodologies designed by the Japanese government.

The simultaneous deployment of participant observation and documentation analysis facilitates rigorous data triangulation, allowing the researcher to evaluate the subjective, lived experiences of participants against the structural, objective data found in official texts (Campbell, 2018). As a result, this methodological framework yields a highly credible, multifaceted analysis of how the JENESYS 2024 program operates as a vehicle for Japanese multicultural diplomacy and an effective tool for soft power amplification among Indonesia's younger generation.

4. Results and Discussion

The empirical results demonstrate that the JENESYS program acts as a highly effective instrument of Japanese multicultural diplomacy, successfully optimizing cross-cultural exchanges while building enduring soft power assets among Indonesian youth. Based on the systematic analysis of participant testimonies and reflections, four dominant themes were identified regarding how the program constructs participant perceptions and influences Japan's contemporary image.

Historical Narrative and Collective Memory

The first theme indicates that JENESYS 2024 provides a critical educational space for participants to develop a sophisticated understanding of Japanese history through structured field visits to historic landmarks, memorial museums, and cultural institutions. This immersive exposure allows delegates to observe firsthand how Japan articulates its national identity through historical narratives of resilience, post-war reconstruction, and meticulous heritage preservation. The insights gained go beyond simple information gathering; they forge a powerful collective memory of Japan as a nation uniquely capable of recovering from systemic crises.

Consequently, history emerges as a key determinant forming how youth view modern Japan. Commenting on this dynamic during an interview, Inda Hudira, a researcher and fellow alumnus of JENESYS 2024, noted: "With many museums and museum governance that is very neat and good, participants are amazed; in just one prefecture in Nagasaki with a close distance can visit 6 museums and excellent cultural institutions with only a short time all day" (Documentation of images of visits to several museums attached).

Cultural Immersion Experience

The second finding focuses on the deep cultural immersion experienced by participants over the course of the program. Through direct, hands-on involvement in local traditions, sustained contact with residents, collaborative visits to educational institutions, and natural observations of daily Japanese life, delegates attain an authentic understanding of the host culture. This experiential baseline allows them to recognize and internalize core values embedded within Japanese society, such as social discipline, collective cooperation, profound respect, and shared social responsibility.

This immersive formatting goes beyond expanding academic knowledge; it builds genuine empathy and emotional affinity toward Japanese culture. Reflecting on this process, fellow researcher Muhammad Irwan stated: "JENESYS 2024 participants were entrusted by the Japanese government and lived with a host family for 3 days in Isahaya; departing from that experience as participants are well aware of the cultural gap and structured daily life, clean, neat, and dignified from a Japanese family" (Documentation of pictures of life with adoptive families attached).

Multicultural Interaction and Perception Formation

The third identified theme highlights that open, multicultural interaction is a vital catalyst in transforming participants' perceptions of Japan. Throughout the program, participants engage in frequent, unmediated dialogue with local host communities, institutional organizers, and fellow delegates representing vastly diverse backgrounds. These encounters establish a reliable space for communicative dialogue and the cross-pollination of perspectives, which naturally drives intercultural literacy.

Through this relational process, participants do not merely absorb information about Japan; they actively reflect upon and contextualize their own native cultural identities. This reflexive process directly contributes to creating open, inclusive, and positive outlooks toward global diversity. Highlighting this trend, fellow researcher and 2024 alumnus Puti

Hasanatusyadiah shared: "Through measurable programs prepared by the Japanese government, both the material presented by Waseda University lecturers, direct interaction with government officials in Nagasaki Prefecture, as well as meetings with local communities from various agencies and types of community groups participating in JENESYS, getting many new views and understandings that make an impression positive to the direct interactions that occur" (Documentation of direct interaction with the cross-professional community is attached).

Construction of a Positive Image of Japan Among Indonesian Youth

The fourth theme demonstrates that the intersection of historical education, cultural immersion, and multicultural dialogue culminates in the strategic construction of a highly positive image of Japan among Indonesian youth. Japan is universally perceived by delegates as a technologically pioneering nation with a highly ordered social system, an exceptionally rich cultural tapestry, and a unique capacity to maintain a harmonious balance between rapid modernity and ancestral tradition. Importantly, this positive brand is not merely a replication of pre-existing media tropes; it is empirically validated and reinforced through direct personal experience during the itinerary.

Thus, JENESYS succeeds as a highly potent tool for expanding Japan's national appeal and securing strong emotional ties with Indonesia's next generation. This long-term relationship is further sustained by mandatory post-program follow-up initiatives executed by alumni—including public seminars, academic publications, and collaborative community projects—all aimed at strengthening bilateral ties using the positive insights gained from the JENESYS experience.

Synthesis of Findings

Synthetically, the empirical findings confirm that JENESYS transcends the boundaries of standard youth exchange formatting to serve as a sophisticated instrument of multicultural diplomacy that advances Japan's overarching soft power strategy. By blending historical curation, deep cultural immersion, and open human interaction, the program builds a comprehensive understanding of Japan while anchoring crucial people-to-people connections between Japan and Indonesia. Ultimately, these results validate the theoretical premise that structured cultural exchange is a vital mechanism for optimizing international public relations and expanding a state's peaceful influence globally.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study demonstrates that the JENESYS program stands as an exceptionally effective multicultural diplomacy instrument that successfully drives Japan's soft power strategy among Indonesian youth. By coordinating diverse cultural exchanges, high-level institutional visits, immersive homestays, and unmediated social interactions with local citizens, the program establishes a transformative, cross-cultural learning environment. This framework not only expands participants' analytical understanding of Japan but fundamentally anchors the long-term bilateral relations between the two countries. The data indicates that the multicultural diplomacy model utilized by JENESYS transmits core national values, heritage, and identity far more persuasively than rigid, traditional, and politically defensive diplomatic maneuvers.

As an operational soft power tool, JENESYS has proven highly capable of maximizing Japan's national appeal within this critical youth demographic. The direct personal insights gained by delegates enable a holistic understanding of Japan positioning it not merely as a commercial or technological leader, but as a model society anchored by the values of social discipline, collective innovation, mutual cooperation, and deliberate heritage preservation. This direct exposure to historical trajectories and daily social systems builds an authentic, deeply personalized experience that leaves a lasting and sustainable impression. Consequently, JENESYS fulfills its role as a vital mechanism for projecting Japan as a modern, progressive, yet culturally anchored global actor. This investigation confirms that JENESYS 2024 represents a highly successful integration of grass-roots cultural exchange with sophisticated soft power statecraft. The program successfully projects an attractive image, captures public goodwill, and secures generational support for Japan among Indonesian youth while optimizing the people-to-people networks that form the bedrock of sustainable Japan-Indonesia relations. Therefore, JENESYS serves as an exemplary diplomatic model for expanding state influence through cultural affinity and human connection, establishing a more inclusive, stable, and resilient foundation for future bilateral engagement.

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