
Strengthening Surakarta's Image Through Masks: Alignment Between the 2025 International Mask Festival (IMF) 'Awesome Mask' Surakarta and City Branding

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana Festival Topeng Internasional (IMF) 2025 "Awesome Mask" berfungsi sebagai strategi paradiplomasi dan soft power untuk memperkuat branding Kota Surakarta sebagai kota kreatif. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah membahas festival budaya dan branding kota secara terpisah, perhatian yang diberikan terhadap bagaimana acara budaya internasional berperan sebagai instrumen diplomasi subnasional yang secara bersamaan memperkuat identitas lokal dan pengakuan global masih terbatas. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, penelitian ini menggabungkan tinjauan pustaka dengan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan pemangku kepentingan utama dalam penyelenggaraan festival. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap literatur dengan mengusulkan bahwa festival budaya internasional yang diselenggarakan secara berkala berfungsi sebagai platform paradiplomasi yang dilembagakan, di mana pemerintah subnasional mengubah warisan budaya lokal menjadi sumber daya soft power yang memperkuat citra kota. Temuan-temuan ini memperluas pembahasan yang ada mengenai diplomasi budaya dengan menunjukkan hubungan sebab-akibat antara pertunjukan budaya, jaringan internasional, dan pembangunan reputasi perkotaan.

Kata Kunci: Festival Topeng Internasional, Pemasaran Kota, Paradiplomasi, Kekuatan Lembut.

Abstract

This study examines how the 2025 International Mask Festival (IMF) "Awesome Mask" function as a Paradiplomacy and soft power strategy to strengthen Surakarta's city branding as a creative city. Although previous studies have discussed cultural festivals and city branding separately, limited attention has been given to how international cultural events operate as subnational diplomatic instruments that simultaneously reinforce local identity and global recognition. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, this research combines literature review with semi-structured interviews involving key stakeholders in the organization of the festival. This study contributes to the literature by proposing that recurring international cultural festivals function as institutionalized paradiplomatic platforms through which subnational governments transform local cultural heritage into soft power resources that strengthen city branding. The findings extend existing discussion on cultural diplomacy by demonstrating the causal linkage between cultural performance international networking, and urban reputation building.

Keywords: International Mask Festival, City Branding, Paradiplomacy, Soft Power.

PRELIMINARY

Globalization is a situation of shrinking space and time, characterized by increased interaction between people around the world. This interconnectedness creates interdependence

among nations. Therefore, globalization has broadened and deepened international issues. Deepening leads to the specification of target issues, shifting from state-centred to issues that can affect anyone. Broadening occurs when issues that were initially high politics are expanded to include low politics (Nurika, 2017). Cultural issues are beginning to receive increased attention in international relations (Ilhami, 2025). Several contemporary IR theories also suggest that culture shapes international relations. Besides being an instrument of soft power, culture also strongly influences a nation's foreign policy. International politics is cultural, and we are in a period of global cultural politics. Therefore, nations tend to focus on the power of culture in international competition across various fields (Bakry, 2017).

To face globalization, Indonesia must also strengthen its influence through a soft power approach derived from cultural appeal (Wijanarka and Sari, 2023). Soft power stems from identity and appeal, both of which strongly influence the continuity of a relationship (Yani and Lusiana, 2018). A country's strength is not only assessed based on its military strength or hard power, but also from soft power, which includes culture, tourism, culinary arts, education, and a country's global image. The main focus of soft power is building influence without coercion and violence (Alunaza et al., 2025). With globalization and modernization, a country's soft power also tends to more easily influence other countries. This shift demonstrates the crucial role of culture on the international stage in winning the attention of the global community.

The Surakarta City Government inaugurated the tagline "Solo, The Spirit of Java" in 2003 with the aim of introducing the culture and potential of the city of Surakarta. This slogan also serves as a promotional tool to introduce the city's image, characteristics, culture, and potential to the local and international community (Nilawati et al., 2016). In 2019, Surakarta City officially became a creative city in the field of folk arts or performing arts through a randomized test from PMK3I (Creative Regency/City Independent Assessment). Article 4 of the Regional Regulation concerning the Surakarta City Spatial Plan for 2021-2041 states that culture is one of the basic instruments in the spatial planning objectives of Surakarta City. Data from the Surakarta City Bappeda regarding the ranking of the main priorities of the creative sector states that crafts and folk arts are the main priority of the creative sector in Surakarta City, followed by culinary, fashion, and crafts. Surakarta is categorized as ready to become a creative city after meeting the pillars of creation, production, distribution, consumption, and conservation (Atmaja and Swasto, 2023). The "Solo, The Spirit of Java" branding is the foundation for the Surakarta City tourism exhibition, which has now become an annual event. As a promotional effort, the Surakarta City Government has compiled a tourism calendar featuring various cultural activities, one of which is the IMF (Adjie and Anggina, 2023).

The International Mask Festival (IMF) is a public diplomacy medium involving cross-border cultural communities. The 2025 IMF in Surakarta upheld the theme ‘Awesome Mask’, this theme was adopted as a form of affirmation that masks are objects of art, symbols of tradition, folklore, and social values of a nation. The IMF was held with mask dance performances and an international conference on masks, as well as support and involvement of UMKM culinary bazaars. Enlivened by 21 delegations consisting of 15 domestic delegates and 6 delegates from abroad, this also serves as an indicator of the IMF’s success in the context of international recognition of Indonesia’s cultural and inclusive identity (Ryanthie, 2025). Organizing the IMF with global standards also represents a global promotional effort. The involvement of 21 delegates demonstrates Indonesia’s potential to become a dynamic and credible centre of gravity for global culture. Involvement in social, environmental, cultural, and economic issues demonstrates local community support for a global agenda focused on cultural and environmental preservation (Batubara et al., 2024).

Paradiplomacy explains that Surakarta City plays an active role in global cooperation autonomously. The involvement of international artists reaffirms the belief in Surakarta City’s capabilities and active involvement in international networks, one of which is a reflection of its membership in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) (Atmaja and Swasto, 2023). The cultural appeal of Surakarta City has succeeded in becoming an international language that transcends the boundaries of national sovereignty. Soft Power is used as a tool to shape Surakarta City’s image on the world stage without any involvement of violence (Trisnaningtyas et al., 2016). The concepts of Paradiplomacy and Soft Power implemented through the IMF offer strengthening of Surakarta City’s city branding as a Creative City. Thus, the collaboration of these two concepts allows for an understanding of the strategy and role of the Surakarta IMF in strengthening the city branding of Surakarta, known as a Creative City. This research explains the collaborative roles of actors, such as the arts community, city government, and the international community, in the strategy of strengthening Surakarta’s city branding on the international stage through the organization of the IMF Surakarta.

This research was conducted with the hope of providing additional insight into the International Mask Festival (IMF) in Surakarta. It is hoped that this research will provide the public with a better understanding of the alignment of IMF Surakarta 2025 as a strategy for strengthening Surakarta’s city branding. It can also serve as a reference for students writing on similar topics. To avoid excessive discussion or straying from the core topic, this research will focus on the role of the IMF ‘Awesome Mask’ Surakarta 2025 as a city branding strategy for Surakarta City and also focus on the outputs of the IMF ‘Awesome Mask’ Surakarta 2025.

Despite the growing body of literature on cultural festivals, city branding, and cultural diplomacy in Indonesia, existing studies have primarily examined these issues from tourism promotion, event management, or cultural preservation perspectives. Likewise, research on Surakarta has largely focused on the “Solo, The Spirit of Java” branding strategy or on the organization of individual cultural events, without systematically analysing how an international cultural festival operates simultaneously as an instrument of Paradiplomacy and soft power. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how subnational governments and local cultural actors employ international cultural exchanges to strengthen city branding and expand global recognition.

To address this gap, this study adopts the concepts of Paradiplomacy and soft power as complementary analytical frameworks. Paradiplomacy highlights the increasing role of subnational governments in international engagement beyond conventional state diplomacy, while soft power explains how cultural attraction and identity can generate influence without coercion. Examining these concepts together enables a more comprehensive understanding of how the IMF functions not merely as a cultural event but also as a strategic instrument for projecting Surakarta’s identity internationally. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does the 2025 International Mask Festival “Awesome Mask” function as a Paradiplomacy strategy in strengthening Surakarta’s city branding? (2) How is mask culture employed as a form of soft power to enhance Surakarta’s international image? And (3) What roles do governmental institutions, cultural communities, and international stakeholder play in supporting this process? Based on these questions, the objective of this research is to analyze the strategies, mechanisms, and impacts of the IMF in reinforcing Surakarta’s position as a creative city through the interaction of Paradiplomacy and soft power. Although previous studies have examined city branding, cultural festivals, and Paradiplomacy independently, limited scholarship explains the mechanism through which recurring cultural festivals convert local cultural assets into internationally recognized urban identities. Existing research often treats festivals as tourism promotion or heritage preservation activities without analysing how they institutionalize transnational cultural networks and produce long-term reputational benefits for cities. This study addresses that gap by integrating Paradiplomacy, soft power, and city branding into unified analytical framework.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive case study approach to examine the role of the 2025 International Mask Festival (IMF) ‘Awesome Mask’ in strengthening Surakarta’s city branding through Paradiplomacy and soft power. A qualitative approach was selected because

it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, institutional interactions, and cultural practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Neuman, 2014). The research draws upon both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants directly involved in the planning and implementation of the IMF, including representatives of the organizing committee and officials from Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar). Secondary data consist of academic publications, books, policy documents, government regulations, official reports, media publications, and festival documentation relevant to the study.

Data were collected using literature review, document analysis, and interviews. The selection of interview participants was based on purposive sampling, prioritizing individuals with direct knowledge and experience regarding the festival's organization, cultural diplomacy activities, and city branding initiatives. The collected data were analysed through descriptive-analytical techniques involving data reduction, categorisation, interpretation, and comparison across multiple sources to identify recurring themes related to Paradiplomacy, soft power, and city branding. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation by comparing interview results with documentary evidence and secondary data. Credibility was strengthened through cross-validation between different categories of informants and official records, while confirmability was pursued by ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence obtained from the collected data. These procedures improve the reliability and transparency of the qualitative analysis. The interview transcript and documentary were analysed through thematic coding. Initial codes were derived deductively from the concepts of Paradiplomacy, soft power, and city branding, while additional themes emerging from the data were incorporated inductively. The interpretation process involved iterative comparison across interviews, policy documents, and festival reports.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Surakarta's Identity – City Branding in the Cultural Sector

Geographically, Surakarta, formerly known as Sala Village, is a strategic area for access and distribution of trade commodities, surrounded by small rivers (Surjono, 2025). This condition also impacts the lives of its multicultural community. Surakarta experienced a dual government system between the Surakarta Palace and the Colonial Government. This dual government system also impacted the city's spatial planning and the construction of buildings rich in cultural values and symbols (Kusumastuti, 2016). Consequently, Surakarta boasts a variety of city attractions that express local customs, religious values, and culture influence

local tourism. Since 2018, the Surakarta City Tourism Office has approved a tourism development plan focused on urban tourism. According to Tondobala, supporting factors for urban tourism include natural beauty, artistic beauty, and other attractions (Zakiya et al., 2025).

Figure 1. Gatot Subroto-Ngarsopuro Corridor



Source: (TribunSolo, 2022).

The creative industry is closely related to the regional and national economy due to its contribution to economic and non-economic aspects. In addition to creating a business climate and its turnover, the creative industry also contributes positively to the Gross Regional Domestic Product (PDRB). The strategy for developing a creative economy culture is implemented in the 2018-2025 National Creative Economy Development Master Plan, with the vision of the Creative Economy as the Main Driver of National Economic Growth. Therefore, a program was developed that is aligned with the 2018-2025 National Creative Economy Development Master Plan to realize it, namely the empowerment of human resource creativity implemented through increasing the capacity of creative economy actors and the development of competitive creative economy businesses (Kuncoro and Harjono, 2022). The Surakarta City Government inaugurated the tagline “Solo, The Spirit of Java” in 2003 with the aim of introducing the culture and potential of Surakarta City (Nilawati et al., 2016).

Figure 2. The New Logo of “Solo, The Spirit of Java”



Source: (Solo Tourism Promotion Board, 2022).

The tagline “Solo, The Spirit of Java” reflects Surakarta’s position as a centre of Javanese culture. This is evident in the recognition of several cultural aspects of Surakarta as world cultural heritage by UNESCO. Surakarta’s development as a Festival City focuses on economic, social, and cultural development. In addition to its promotional role, city branding also plays a role through city development policies, including multi-actor collaboration that determines the brand concept of the place. This multi-actor collaboration reflects the nature of collaborative governance. Thus, the Surakarta City Government has successfully established Surakarta as a Festival City, presenting a collaboration between ancient and modern cultural heritage (Suwarna, 2023). In 2022, the Surakarta City Government developed a new logo aimed at increasing local community involvement in market development, reflecting the residents’ hospitality and enthusiasm for development. This logo redesign is guaranteed to align with Solo’s values. The new Solo City logo communicates the strong Javanese hospitality and culture, balanced with relevance to changing times (Andhika, 2025).

Figure 3. Cultural Tourism Calendar of 2025



Source: (Disbudparska, 2025).

The achievements of the Surakarta City Government in the tourism sector have been proven through the achievement of the Indonesian Meeting, Incentive Conference and Exhibition (MICE) Award 2009 in the category of Best Regional Head, the Indonesia Tourism Award 2010, the increase in domestic and international tourist visits to the City of Surakarta, the pioneering of Surakarta as a center for keris studies and development, and the inauguration of Surakarta as a ‘City of Charm.’ The City of Surakarta is considered successful in the synergy between city branding and government programs related to tourism reaching the stage of product management and city image arrangement. The government continuously revitalizes and regularly holds cultural events to support tourism in the City of Surakarta. In addition, the government also established other institutions that support city tourism, such as the Regional Tourism Promotion Agency (BPPD) and the Tourism Information Centre. There are classifications of tourist attractions according to the Directorate General of Government, namely (1) natural tourist attractions, (2) socio-cultural tourist attractions, and (3) special interest tourist attractions. The “Solo, The Spirit of Java” branding showcases the region’s distinctive characteristics, such as (a) a rich cultural heritage, (b) distinctive community character, and (c) a strong tradition of commerce and industry (Krisnawati, 2015).

Table 1. Surakarta City Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) 2021-2026

No	Long-Term Regional Development Plan (RPJPD) for the City of Surakarta 2005-2024	Surakarta City Medium-Term Regional Development Plan (RPJMD) 2021-2026
	Vision	

<i>Surakarta is A Cultural, Independent, Advanced, and Prosperous City</i>	<i>Vision: To realize Surakarta as a Modern, Resilient, Agile, Creative, and Prosperous City of Culture</i>
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Source: (Disdukcapil, 2021).

Surakarta City Regional Regulation Number 2 of 2010 reaffirms the long-term development vision of Surakarta City 2005-2025 as a Cultural, Independent, Advanced, and Prosperous City. Meanwhile, Surakarta City Regional Regulation Number 12 of 2010 concerning the Surakarta City Medium-Term Development Plan for 2010-2015 explains that as a Cultural City, Surakarta is home to various arts and cultural groups. Complemented by Surakarta City Regional Regulation Number 6 of 2021 concerning the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan for 2021-2026, it focuses on increasing development in the cultural sector because tourism is a supporting aspect in marketing as a Cultural City (Suwarna, 2023). The appeal of urban tourism reflects the life of the city's people, such as a focus on service centers and economic activities. The creative industry relies on human capital, intellectual capital, and creative capital to generate creative and innovative ideas that are implemented into products with economic value. According to Presidential Regulation Number 72 of 2015, one of the products of the creative economy is performing arts. The creative economy must meet four indicators: (a) knowledge creativity, (b) technological creativity, (c) cultural and place creativity, and (d) economic creativity. The government must harmonize simple, fast, and accommodating regulations to support the advancement of the creative industry, which prioritizes innovation and creativity (Riyadi et al., 2022).

Table 2. Surakarta City Regional Regulation Number 2 of 2010

*CHAPTER III
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT VISION AND MISSION
OF SURAKARTA CITY 2005-2025*

*Based on the conditions, challenges, and basic capital possessed
by Surakarta City, the long-term development vision and mission for the
2005-2025 period are as follows:*

*SURAKARTA IS A CULTURAL, INDEPENDENT, ADVANCED, AND
PROSPEROUS CITY*

Source: (BPK, 2010).

One implementation of Surakarta's branding as a City of Culture and a reflection of the community's openness to culture is through the holding of the Solo International Performing Arts (SIPA). SIPA is an international-scale arts festival that is held regularly every year. SIPA becomes a medium to introduce and promote the culture of Surakarta City to local and even international tourists (Sari et al., 2019). The IMF is one of the cultural attractions held under the umbrella of the SIPA Community. The IMF series of events consists of mask dance shows, mask exhibitions, workshops, and conferences. IMF is also the result of a collaboration

between cultural heritage performances and modern performing arts creativity (Ryanthie, 2025). The Chair of the 2025 IMF, Putri Pramesti Wigaringtyas, often known as Mrs. Memez, stated that 2014 marked Solo's first year of membership in the UNCCN network for Crafts and Folk Arts. Therefore, the IMF has become a flagship event to fulfil UNESCO's commitment to international cultural preservation and exchange.

Beyond fulfilling UNESCO-related commitments, the IMF demonstrates how a subnational government can strategically utilize cultural events as instruments of international engagement. Rather than function solely as a tourism attraction, the festival enables Surakarta to establish and maintain transnational networks involving artists, cultural organizations, and international institutions. This finding illustrates the practical application of Paradiplomacy, where local governments pursue international objectives while remaining aligned with national foreign policy frameworks. Rather than functioning merely as a promotional slogan, "Solo, The Spirit of Java" constitutes a long-term branding strategy that aligns cultural identity with governance objectives. The IMF reinforces this branding by translating symbolic cultural assets into recurring international experiences, thereby strengthening consistency between official narratives and public cultural performances.

Anatomy of the formation of the IMF

SIPA is an international performing arts event held annually in Surakarta. Its purpose is to disseminate education and enhance public appreciation for the performing arts. Furthermore, Surakarta serves as a platform for diverse performing arts, bringing together diverse styles and styles of art, directly impacting the social, economic, educational, and political sectors related to cultural resilience. SIPA addresses the challenges of the creative economy in Surakarta, as it has become a vital force for the city, drawing on its pre-existing culture. In organizing the event, the Surakarta City Government collaborates with the SIPA Community and several other cultural institutions (Darlenis, 2021). SIPA serves as a destination image tool for Surakarta. This concept consists of two fundamental concepts: cognitive image and affective image. Based on the audience assessment, SIPA also fulfills the 3 objectives of arts and culture festivals, namely (1) attracting audiences and participants, (2) reconstructing city branding, and (3) facilitating cultural and social activities (Wiyana et al., 2018).

Figure 4. The Logo of SIPA



Source: (SIPA, 2009).

SIPA is a cultural festival initiated by the 7th former President of Indonesia, Ir. Joko Widodo, and led by the Chair of the SIPA Community, R.Ay. Irawati Kusumorasri, an artist and cultural figure. SIPA has been held annually since 2009. SIPA was formed to carry out its mission as a forum and medium for regional, national, international, and even inter-society diplomacy. With this broad objective, SIPA implements a curatorial system in determining the theme, selecting a mascot, and curating the performers each year. Good public conditions are the capital for a successful festival (Dana and Putri, 2022). SIPA is always held in historical places in Surakarta City, such as Pamedan Pura Mangkunegaran (2009-2012 and 2024-2025), Vastenburg Fort (2013-2019 and 2022-2023), Central Java Cultural Park or TBJT (2020), and Bengawan Solo Park (2021).

Figure 5. Korean Children Choir performing the song ‘Bengawan Solo’ at SIPA 2009



Source: (Antarafoto, 2009).

SIPA Community also organizes the International Mask Festival (IMF). The IMF was first held in 2014. The desire of the Surakarta City Government to create an annual cultural event was realized by raising masks as the cultural identity of Solo and Indonesia. The choice of masks as a cultural object was also motivated by the aim of positioning Solo on a par with other cities that have large mask festivals. Based on a statement from the Chairman of the IMF,

she also mentioned the reasons for choosing Solo as the host city, among others: (1) Solo has many cultural tourism destinations such as the Mangkunegaran Palace and the Surakarta Kasunanan Palace which are also centers for research, knowledge, and preservation of Surakarta-style masks; (2) as a form of realization of the commitment with UNESCO for the policy of a cultural city which is also included in the UNCCN membership in the field of Crafts and Folk Arts; and (3) The infrastructure and ecosystem of living arts are reflected in the maintenance of the Pendhapi Gede Balaikota, Pura Mangkunegaran, Ndalem Djojokoesoeman, the existence of an active artist community, and a supportive city government. The IMF also provides space for performances, exhibitions, and academic forums. Mask dance performances involve artists from Indonesia, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Mask artisans participate in craft exhibitions, covering the process of mask making, buying, and selling. Meanwhile, academic forums and workshops are hosted by professional speakers, and discussions on masks are attended by national and international participants. From a Paradiplomacy perspective, the IMF institutionalizes Surakarta's engagement with transnational cultural actors. Annual interactions with artists, organizations, and researchers generate sustained international networks that extend beyond event-based cooperation and contribute to the city's external legitimacy as a creative hub.

Figure 6. The Gong beating at the opening of IMF 2025



Source: (SoloEvent, 2025).

The IMF is held under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf) through the National Kharisma Event program, abbreviated as KEN. This program is a form of collaboration between Kemenparekraf and regional governments through event organizing. The program aims to promote tourism destinations, the creative economy, increase tourist visits, and empower local potential. In other words, the IMF serves as a medium

for intercultural dialogue (Ryanthie, 2025). As conveyed by the Chair of the IMF 2025, this year's IMF chose the theme 'Awesome Mask' to create a cool, spectacular, and memorable impression on social media. Gen-Z and foreign tourists are the main targets of this year's IMF. This theme explains how masks become objects of art, symbols of tradition, folklore, and social values of a nation. With 21 participants, 15 delegates from within the country and international delegates, it proves that Indonesia is trusted by the global community in its role as a dynamic and credible center of gravity of global culture. This is also reinforced by the existence of global standardization in its implementation, making this event also an international promotional strategy (Batubara et al., 2024). The participation of domestic and international delegations should not be interpreted merely as evidence of a successful festival. Instead, it reflects Surakarta's capacity to mobilize international cultural cooperation through decentralized initiatives. The repeated involvement of foreign participants indicates that the IMF has evolved into a platform for sustained cross-border interaction, reinforcing the city's visibility and credibility within international cultural networks.

Analysis of the Concept of Paradiplomacy and the Concept of Soft Power

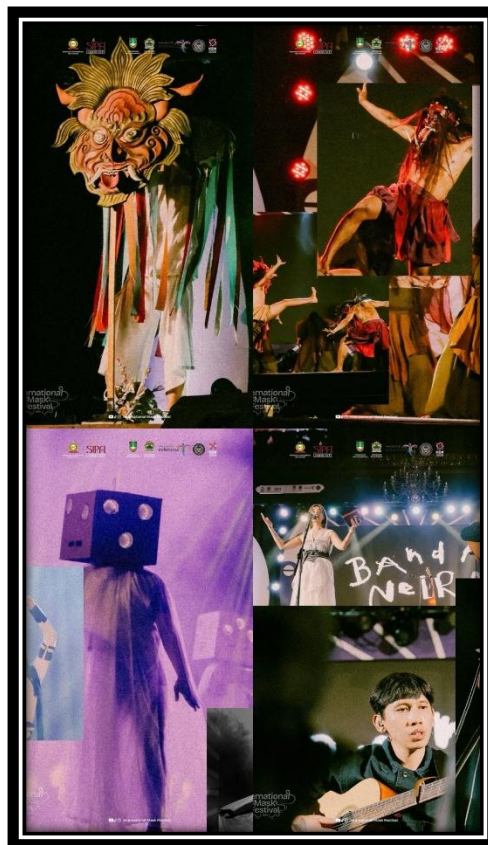
The empirical findings from The International Mask Festival provide an opportunity to operationalize the concepts of Paradiplomacy and soft power in practice. Rather than treating these concepts as abstract theoretical construct, this study uses them as analytical lenses to explain how Surakarta projects its cultural identity internationally and develops collaborative relationship beyond the national level through recurring cultural events.

Soft Power has five characteristics, namely (1) traditional or based on culture, (2) temporary or based on past history, (3) widespread and competitive, (4) changing or adapting to conditions at any time, and (5) interdependent with Hard Power. To balance the potential of Soft Power and Hard Power, a synergistic relationship is needed between the two. To achieve good relations, countries need to know each other's character. Character can be shown through culture that has an impact on government policy and foreign policy (Rizkyana, 2017). Not only can it be done by the central government, but character can also be reflected by sub-state entities, such as through city branding by the city government, which can also collaborate with existing local communities. Soft Power is traditional in nature and can take the form of cultural wealth and natural resources. With strong promotion, it will bring an increase in the tourism sector, especially in the aspect of tourist visits. City branding is a tool to create identity, attract tourists, and develop the creative economy (Putra et al., 2025).

The tourism sector is a driving force for the nation's economic growth and development, ranking second as a leading sector after the palm oil industry. This is stipulated

in Law Number 10 of 2009, which emphasizes the concept of multidimensional sustainability in tourism, which is implemented in an environmentally friendly manner, in accordance with local socio-cultural contexts, serves as a core resource for development, and provides economic benefits. The tourism sector also has a positive impact on the prospects for introducing the nation's culture and wisdom globally. Therefore, the national tourism policy focuses on tourism development on Indonesia's cultural diversity. With its rich natural and cultural heritage, Indonesia ranks first in ASEAN and third in Asia. Cultural tourism aims to preserve culture through wise development, protection, and utilization. Furthermore, cultural tourism also disseminates understanding, information, and influence of Indonesia to other nations through cultural aspects and without coercion or violence (Yulliana, 2021). Culture bridges international relations through cultural festivals featuring performances of traditional arts, music, and dance. These cultural festivals minimize the potential for conflict and foster understanding and tolerance between cultures (Sabina and Sugito, 2024).

Figure 7. Documentation of Several Appearances at the IMF 2025



Source: (IMF, 2025).

As part of Soft Power, culture is not coercive, but rather leverages its inherent appeal. This concept aligns closely with the 'ASEAN Way' identity, which strongly emphasizes the principle of non-interference in decision-making while still providing flexibility in treatment.

The uncertainty of globalization can be addressed by strengthening national resilience, balancing economic, political, and social relations with other countries, and creating a strong image and increasing the attractiveness of tourism, investment, and international cooperation, all of which can be grounded in culture as a diplomatic tool (Saebani, 2023). Cultural diplomacy is a public diplomacy strategy for enhancing nation branding. The Ministry of Education and Culture states that promoting culture in the performing arts, culinary arts, and language increases foreign interest in Indonesia (Kemala et al., 2025).

The IMF is one example of a cultural festival. Cultural festivals are a popular medium for introducing culture to the global world. International cultural festivals aim to disseminate a country's culture. Through international dialogue, sub-state entities develop cultural communication strategies that are not solely focused on the central government (Dewi, 2025). Paradiplomacy is carried out based on the belief that subnational actors are more familiar with local identities and potential. The IMF is categorized as a form of paradiplomacy, which takes the form of establishing joint projects and sending delegations between subnational actors (Alam and Sudirman, 2020). Cultural communication is built through visuals, symbols, and direct interaction. Cultural exchange is also clearly reflected in mask dance performances, workshops, and conferences on mask art. These activities create a space for informal diplomacy between international artists and audiences, thus creating an image of Surakarta as a city rich in culture, with a high level of humanism, and a collaborative government (Dana and Putri, 2022). The findings indicate that Paradiplomacy in Surakarta is exercised not through formal diplomatic negotiations but through repeated cultural exchanges that normalize international collaboration at the municipal level. Consequently, the IMF operates as a governance instrument that enables the city to accumulate symbolic capital and international recognition while remaining within Indonesia's national foreign policy frameworks.

Figure 8. The Mask Statues on Slamet Riyadi Street



Source: (Tunawisma, 2025).

Based on an interview with the Chair of the IMF 2025, it was stated that the mask was chosen as a cultural icon because it represents Indonesia's diversity. Many regions have mask dance traditions, such as Malang, Cirebon, Bali, Banjar, and the masked version of Reog Ponorogo. Furthermore, masks tend to be flexible with modernization, making them a means of engagement for young audiences and the international market. The choice of masks as cultural objects is a preventative response to the extinction of mask art. Therefore, the establishment of the IMF in 2014 was a response to documenting and showcasing masks from various regions, facilitating dialogue between senior and younger artists, and an effort to attract the attention of the younger audience through an international festival. The mask therefore functions as more than a heritage artifact. It becomes a strategic soft power resource whose attractiveness lies in its adaptability across artistic traditions, enabling Surakarta to communicate cultural authenticity while remaining accessible to global audiences.

Collaboration in cultural festivals also involves the community and government in strengthening relations between countries through culture. This demonstrates the application of the concept of paradiplomacy in strengthening Surakarta's image as a Creative City. Paradiplomacy is an international activity carried out by sub-state entities (Ilham, 2024). Not only as an art performance, SIPA is also recognized as one of Surakarta City's Soft Power instruments by various parties, as evidenced by the signing of cooperation agreements. Cities and cultural institutions that have signed diplomatic cooperation agreements with SIPA include Andong City, CheongSong City, Daegu City in South Korea, Vientiane City in Laos, and Shanghai City in China, the International Mask Arts and Culture Organization (IMACO), the Korean Culture Center (KCC), IOV, Andong Mask Festival (AMF), and ABraSOffa Brazil (Dana and Putri, 2022). These institutional partnership demonstrate that the IMF extends beyond cultural exhibition into structured international cooperation. Through collaboration with overseas organizations, embassies, and cultural institutions, Surakarta exercises a form of subnational diplomacy that complements Indonesia's national foreign policy. This networked engagement exemplifies Paradiplomacy by enabling local actors to pursue international objectives through cultural collaboration rather than formal state-to-state negotiations.

Paradiplomacy is a tool for local governments to face globalization and modernization. Paradiplomacy is not only an expansion of diplomatic actors, but also a strategy to accelerate the local development process carried out with the support of local Soft Power. However, there are Indonesian national regulations that state that foreign cooperation agreements by local governments can only be carried out without involving third parties. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 25 of 2020,

it reiterates that paradiplomacy must be based on national political and security considerations, and within the framework of state authority (Luhukay et al., n.d.). Meanwhile, based on the Regulation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia No. 09/A/KP/XII/2006/01, regional tourism must have the ability to utilize and maintain its potential with the support of the government and community in its development, so as to produce widespread impact expansion. The requirements for carrying out international cooperation include, (1) the country has diplomatic relations with Indonesia, (2) in accordance with the area of authority of the regional government stipulated in national regulations, (3) with the approval of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), (4) supporting political stability and national security, and (5) supporting the implementation of government, national and regional development, and community empowerment (Mansyur, 2021). In addition to DPRD approval, Paradiplomacy cannot be carried out without a Full Power Letter issued by the central government. This letter is a sign of pro-paradiplomacy support through central government policies (Faishal and Yulianti, 2024).

The 2025 IMF Chair explained that since its inception, the IMF has routinely invited international mask groups, this also seeks to build collaboration under the umbrella of IMACO and international artist exchange. The IMF also has a strategy to balance the involvement of local and international artists, namely through the Co-Creation and Collaboration format. The committee coordinates with international artists who participate in IMF stage performances and also presents collaborations with local artists. This collaboration reflects a direct form of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, the IMF also provides financial support for participants. For foreign delegations, the IMF will fully cover transportation, accommodation, and logistics for each delegate. Meanwhile, for domestic delegations, the IMF will provide financial assistance in the form of stimulus funds, transportation, accommodation, and logistics for selected groups. This effort demonstrates that local artists are not marginalized, and that international artists are not merely ceremonial guests. This aligns with the IMF's mission of Cultural Preservation and Exchange.

The Impact of the IMF in Strengthening the Image of Surakarta City

The IMF has had a direct impact on strengthening Solo's image as a creative city, a living heritage city, and an international partner city. The impact is not merely symbolic, but measurable through data on international participant attendance, media coverage, and local economic involvement. Many international artists and researchers who have come through the IMACO collaboration network have learned that masks are more than just accessories or dance props. The reaction of foreign artists who have watched and participated in the IMF series of

events has been amazement that Surakarta-style masks have different names, rules, and philosophical meanings in each expression. This has elevated Solo's identity from a 'heritage city' to a 'city with a living arts knowledge system.'

Table 3. IMF Visitors Data 2025

<i>No</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Total Visitors	13.030
2	Live streaming visitors	3.956
3	Local visitors	8.921
4	International visitors	45
5	National visitors	153

Source: (IMF, 2025).

The significance of these figures lies not simply in attendance but in their reputational implications. Recurring participation by international performers and audiences enhances Surakarta's credibility within global cultural networks, suggesting that city branding emerges from cumulative interactions rather than isolated promotional campaigns. International audiences were particularly captivated when traditional masks were combined with electronic music, contemporary dance, or visual technology. This enabled them to see that Solo's identity was not frozen. To gauge audience satisfaction and perception, a QR code containing a questionnaire regarding satisfaction with the event was provided at the venue. Furthermore, the committee monitored social media posts related to the IMF. Although visitors statistics alone cannot fully measure changes in city branding, they provide supporting evidence of the festival's outreach and attractiveness. Combined with international participation and digital engagement through live streaming, these figures suggest that the IMF contributes to expanding Surakarta's cultural visibility beyond local audiences. Therefore, the festival's significance lies not only in visitor numbers but also in its capacity to generate sustained public attention and international recognition.

Table 4. List of Foreign and Domestic Delegates to The IMF 2025

<i>No</i>	<i>Delegate</i>	<i>Origin</i>
1	Komunitas Among Roso	Semarang
2	Aswolo Wonosobo	Wonosobo
3	Darmawan Dance Company ft Bejho Indonesia Got Talent	Yogyakarta
4	Sanggar Sarwi Retno Budaya	Solo
5	RUAS	Siak, Riau
6	Yayasan Seni Pulau Cerita	Bali
7	Komunitas Tari Prajna Srikandi	Yogyakarta
8	Badan Penghubung Daerah Provinsi Jawa Timur di Jakarta	Jakarta
9	Rianto Dance Studio	Banyumas
10	Marwah Dance Company FKIP UNRI	Riau
11	Rumah Seni Tegal	Tegal
12	Semarak Candrakirana Art Center	Solo
13	Kembang Batavia Jakarta	Jakarta

14	ANTERDANS Dinas Kebudayaan (Kundha Kabudayan) Kota Yogyakarta	Yogyakarta
15	Reog Singo Yogo ft Dhenata Ponorogo	Solo
16	Dr. Teguh Djaka Sudarmana, S. T., M. Sn. (Guh S Mana)	Solo
17	China Indonesia Culture Exchange	Hongkong
18	Chinese Youth Goodwill Association	Taiwan
19	DWM Company (Khin Mon Thu)	Myanmar
20	Anak Seni Insan	Malaysia
21	Su Yeong Ya Ryu	South Korea
22	The Place that Makes Culture is Yeolte	South Korea

Source: (IMF, 2025).

KEN is a collection of information about recommended tourist destinations in Indonesia. KEN is a promotional strategy to enhance development in the tourism sector, pursued by the central government. This strategy targets not only the international community but also local communities as an effort to preserve culture. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are three KEN projection targets: international, national, and local. Therefore, decentralization policy is considered an executor's role in managing political interests at the regional level (Pasan, 2017). The existence of a region can be crucial because its bargaining power can open up opportunities for international cooperation that impact economic progress. The challenge facing the government is managing paradiplomacy so that it can become a sustainable collaboration. The development of paradiplomacy is related to various objectives, must adapt to the internal conditions of the country, and the opportunities and potential for democratic development. Therefore, the government needs to navigate paradiplomacy to prevent the potential for conflict and separatism (Novialdi and Rassanjani, 2022).

Table 5. Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in IMF 2025

SECTOR	ACTOR
Government	1. Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf)
	2. Surakarta City Government
	3. Surakarta City Culture and Tourism Office
Academics	1. Indonesia Mask Organization (IMO)
	2. International Mask Arts and Cultural Organization (IMACO)
Artist Community	1. Sanggar Solo
	2. Foreign Delegations
	3. Maestros
	4. Mask Craftsmen
Industry	1. Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI)
	2. Indonesian Tour and Travel Association (ASITA)
	3. UMKM

<i>Media and Public</i>	4. <i>Sponsors</i>
	1. <i>Media</i>
	2. <i>Key Opinion Leader (KOL)</i>
	3. <i>Schools and Educational Institutions</i>
<i>International Network</i>	4. <i>Audience</i>
	1. <i>International Mask Arts and Cultural Organization (IMACO)</i>
	2. <i>Embassy of The Republic of Indonesia (KBRI)</i>
	3. <i>United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)</i>

Source: (IMF, 2025)

The performance stage composition is usually divided 50:50 or 60:40 for local and international artists. This aims to ensure that domestic delegates remain a priority and Solo's reputation remains prominent in the international network. Domestic delegates are selected through a curatorial selection process to maintain quality on par with foreign delegates. Not only is artistic quality considered, but the curation of foreign delegates is also carried out with cultural diplomacy in mind. The IMF has the autonomy to freely select and curate domestic and international artists. The IMF also signs non-binding Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) or cooperation contracts directly with delegates. After the IMF has determined the invitation list, the diplomatic corps is involved in ensuring the smooth running of the administrative and diplomatic processes. The Indonesian Embassy, through its education and cultural attaché, is involved in promoting the IMF to local cultural studios and institutions and serves as the first official contact for interested delegates. This involvement of governments agencies, cultural organizations, private industries, media, and international partners indicates that the IMF is implemented through collaborative governance rather than unilateral action. Such multi-actor participation strengthens the effectiveness of Paradiplomacy by combining public authority, community initiatives, and transnational cultural networks in promoting Surakarta's identity as a Creative City. The collaborative governance structure observed in the IMF demonstrates that successful city branding depends on coordinated participation among governmental institutions, cultural organizations, private actors, and international partners. This multi-actor configuration reinforces the sustainability of Paradiplomacy by embedding cultural diplomacy within local governance arrangements.

The committee acts as a two-way liaison, conveying the City Government's policies and targets to cultural institutions/organizations, while also conveying artists' aspirations to the Culture and Tourism Office. The committee also ensures that City Government programs run without losing the essence and authenticity of the work of artists, communities, and cultural organizations/institutions. The committee also maintains strict curation quality, and delegates

must also have a good track record. Beyond the committee's role, the IMF also has a network called IMACO, with member communities from more than 30 countries as members. In addition, the IMO also facilitates mutualistic relationships for local cultural studios/communities asked to perform at partner country festivals. This is also a factor in the IMF's success in maintaining the quality and continuity of the event. Not only does it stop at being a forum for organizing the annual festival, but it also serves as a medium for joint research and an artist exchange program.

Figure 9. The IMF 2026 is included in KEN 2026



Source: (IMF, 2026).

Mr. Burhan Andi N. H, S. Par., as Adyatama Tourism and Creative Economy, and Mr. Fathurosy Yustisiawan N. I, S. Sos., as Operational Service Administrator of the Surakarta City Culture and Tourism Office, stated that by seeing the lack of natural tourism potential, Disbudparska fully supports efforts to create culture-based city tourism through organizing events. Culture is seen as one of the city's attractions. In accordance with the 4A concept, namely Amenities, Attractions, Accessibility, and Accommodation, these requirements must be met by Solo City before tourists visit. In fact, Solo City is nicknamed the City of 1000 events by the community because of the Indonesian Umbrella Festival (FESPIN), Sriwedari Wayang Orang Art, Solo Menari, and many other cultural festivals. Therefore, Disbudparska is also very optimistic about the existence of local cultural performing arts. The IMF is seen as one of the instruments that reflects the city branding of Solo City.

Based on interviews with the Surakarta City Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudparska), it was discovered that since its inception, the IMF has received government funding from the regional budget (APBD). However, since 2023, the IMF has been independently organized. This is due to the government's curation of events based on their frequency. Since the IMF has hosted more than three events in 2023, this supports the IMF's funding independence. This also aligns with one of Solo's city branding initiatives, the Creative City. Not only does the IMF apply, but events with aligned trends are encouraged to fund events independently.

The Surakarta City Government, through Disbudparska, plays the role of communicator. Coordination between agencies and Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPD) is assisted by Disbudparska. Currently, Disbudparska recommends developing cultural tourism tour packages at more affordable prices. With globalization, Gen Z and Millennials are digital-native generations, and innovation and creativity are among the tools that can sharpen Solo's promotional strategy through the 2025 IMF. Therefore, Disbudparska also sees that the IMF strongly supports Solo's identity as a Creative City.

On the other hand, Disbudparska also faced difficulties in obtaining complete data on the number of tourist visits. This was because there was no database integrated with the central government. Only after the implementation of the KEN were city governments required to report each visit to the government. Furthermore, the committee and several accommodations integrated with Disbudparska did not always report tourist visits. Therefore, there are no definitive figures regarding the number of tourist visits before, during, and after the 2025 IMF. Similarly, the multiple effects directly felt by the community through UMKMs, transportation services, and accommodation owned by local communities have limited access to data collection for Disbudparska.

Based on research findings, the IMF ensures alignment with Surakarta's city branding, which is a Creative City. This was also confirmed by Disbudparska, which has supported the IMF's administrative requirements. Through the involvement of complementary multi-actor roles, the IMF provides a platform to develop the creativity of the Solo community while strengthening city branding. By organizing the IMF, the local community is also directly impacted by the economic sector. The IMF also provides an answer when limited natural resource potential, the local government truly creates a culture-based tourism promotion strategy that is also successful in competing internationally.

Overall, the findings suggest that the International Mask Festival functions as more than an annual cultural celebration. It operates as a strategic instrument through which Surakarta

combines soft power resources with Para diplomatic practices to strengthen its international reputation and reinforce its identity as a creative city. While comprehensive longitudinal tourism data remain limited, evidence from stakeholder collaboration, international participation, and cultural exchange demonstrates the festival's contribution to expanding Surakarta's global cultural presence.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the 2025 International Mask Festival (IMF) 'Awesome Mask' functions not merely as a cultural event but as strategic instrument through which Surakarta strengthens its city branding as a Creative City. The findings show that recurring cultural festivals, supported by collaboration among local government, cultural communities, and international partners, can project local identity while expanding international engagement. Conceptually, this study proposes that recurring international cultural festivals should be understood as institutionalized mechanism through which local governments convert cultural heritage into strategic soft power assets and employ Paradiplomacy to reinforce city branding. This integrated perspective extends existing literature that has tended to analyse these concepts separately.

In this regard, the IMF serves as a practical manifestation of the 'Solo, The Spirit of Java' vision and reinforce Surakarta's commitment as a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Networks. From a theoretical perspective, the study highlights the complementary relationship between Paradiplomacy and soft power. Paradiplomacy provides the institutional mechanism that enables subnational actors to establish international cultural cooperation, while soft power explains how cultural assets such as mask traditions generate attraction and international recognition without coercion. Their interaction contributes to strengthening city branding by transforming local cultural heritage into globally visible and collaborative platform.

Nevertheless, this study several limitations. The availability of comprehensive tourism economic impact data remains limited, making it difficult to quantify the festival's long-term contribution beyond participation records and stakeholder perspectives. Future research may therefore adopt comparative approaches across different creative cities or employ longitudinal methods to assess the sustained impacts of cultural festivals on international reputation, tourism development, and local economic performance. From a policy perspective, maintaining the sustainability of the IMF requires continued collaboration between government institutions, cultural organizations, local communities, and international partners. Capacity building for local artists and transparent governance should remain priorities to ensure that cultural

preservation and community empowerment to accompany the international promotion of Surakarta's identity.

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