



## **Indonesia’s Digital Tourism Diplomacy : Enhancing ASEAN Regional Cooperation Through Virtual Cultural Exchanges in The COVID Era 2020-2022**

**Ahmad Sabiqun Nawa, Isna Nur Faizah, Libia Angger Amelya, Lutfi Ardiansyah,  
Muhammad Maulana Firnanda**

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional “Veteran” Jawa Timur

*Email: 21044010136@upnjatim.ac.id, 22044010058@upnjatim.ac.id,  
22044010112@upnjatim.ac.id, 22044010185@upnjatim.ac.id, 22044010187@upnjatim.ac.id.*

### **ABSTRACT**

As we know, a few years ago, especially in 2020, the world was shocked by the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. Where this virus is categorized as dangerous and can spread throughout the world quickly. The emergence of Covid-19 which is increasingly spreading certainly has an impact on all sectors. The tourism sector is no exception, of course there is a limitation of the activities of the entire community. This can be reflected in the number of international flights that have dropped dramatically in this era due to various travel restriction rules launched by the government such as PSBB and others which have made the international tourism sector even worse. Not wanting to drag on the problem, made ASEAN member countries, especially Indonesia, rack their brains to create new innovations so that Indonesia's tourism sector can revive. This research will further explain the role of Indonesia's digital diplomacy in encouraging social inclusion, focusing on the ASEAN digital literacy program as a research case study. Before getting further into the research, we need to know the definition of digital diplomacy. In short, digital diplomacy is a government effort that uses information technology media to achieve diplomatic goals in the international arena, which in this case is to encourage the process of social inclusion through increasing digital literacy in ASEAN member countries. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study that aims to associate how the ASEAN digital literacy program led by Indonesia has contributed to social inclusion in the ASEAN region itself.

**Keywords:** *Pandemic, Tourism Diplomacy, Indonesia*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the post-COVID-19 era, the tourism sector in Indonesia and other ASEAN countries is facing major challenges and new opportunities. The pandemic has changed the way of interaction and communication, forcing the tourism sector to adapt quickly through digital approaches. In this context, Indonesia's digital tourism diplomacy is emerging as an important strategy to strengthen ASEAN regional cooperation through virtual cultural exchanges, allowing Indonesia and other ASEAN countries to showcase and promote their respective cultures more widely without having to physically travel. This is particularly important, given the rich cultures and traditions of each country in the region. Virtual cultural exchanges, which include activities such as art performances, culinary festivals, and educational activities, provide an innovative way to build closer ties between ASEAN countries (Dewi & Prabowo, 2021).



One of the important questions to be solved is: “What is Indonesia's digital tourism diplomacy strategy to strengthen ASEAN regional cooperation through virtual cultural exchanges in the post-COVID-19 era?”. This leads to an exploration of the various elements that make up digital tourism diplomacy, as well as how it can be used to foster cooperation between ASEAN countries. Faced with the challenges of the tourism sector, Indonesia should create a strategy that focuses on cooperation with neighboring countries to create and promote cultural initiatives on the Internet. By using information technology, Indonesia can play an active role in building a cultural exchange network that involves not only the government, but also the private sector and communities. In addition, digital tourism diplomacy can increase community participation in promoting local culture. Through digital platforms, local communities can help spread information about the culture and uniqueness of their regions. This approach strengthens the sense of cultural heritage and enriches the desired cultural exchange experience (Putra, 2022), but the challenges in implementing this strategy cannot be ignored. The digital divide among ASEAN countries, as well as different levels of access to technology, are factors that may hinder the optimal implementation of digital tourism diplomacy. Therefore, it is important to examine the steps that need to be taken to overcome these challenges and ensure the success of the strategy implemented.

## METHODS

The author uses a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied through the description and interpretation of the data collected. Descriptive qualitative research method is an approach that aims to describe and understand social phenomena in depth. Sugiyono (2017) explains that this research focuses on understanding the social and cultural context behind a phenomenon, so that the data obtained reflects reality without changing it. Moleong (2018) adds that the data collected is narrative, which aims to provide a detailed description of the experiences that occur in the field. In addition, Creswell (2014) emphasizes the importance of describing human experiences in a broader social context, while Patton (2002) highlights the collection of rich and detailed data from informants as the key to capturing the meaning of social interactions. Thus, descriptive qualitative research methods offer a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study through comprehensive descriptions.

The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it is relevant in analyzing how Indonesia's digital diplomacy through the *ASEAN Digital Literacy Program* can influence social inclusion in the region. This method is suitable for research that wants to understand the social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding the interaction between digital diplomacy and social inclusion. This study uses secondary data, consisting of official documents, government reports, and academic articles relevant to the topic of digital literacy and digital diplomacy. The main sources of data are reports from the ASEAN Secretariat, publications from the *Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, and international reports such as from the World Bank related to the theme of digital literacy and social inclusion. Data were collected through a literature review. The



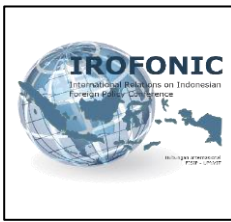
author collected various sources from official ASEAN reports, Indonesian government publications, and relevant academic studies. This technique allows the author to gain a broader understanding of how digital diplomacy is used by Indonesia, as well as how the *ASEAN Digital Literacy Program* is implemented and its impact on social inclusion.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, in which the author identified key themes that emerged from the data collected. In this study, the focus is on the role of Indonesia's digital diplomacy in improving digital literacy, Indonesia's contribution to the ADLP, and the challenges faced in the process of implementing this program. Thematic analysis allows researchers to connect the concepts of digital diplomacy and social inclusion, thus producing a more comprehensive picture of the influence of this program (Using thematic analysis in psychology, 2006, p. Braun & Clarke).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

At the end of 2019, the world was rocked by a pandemic that attacked all land masses on earth, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic decline in various sectors of life. This decline covered almost all industries, including health, pharmaceuticals, social activities, information and communication, clean water supply, waste management, and recycling waste. The transportation, travel, warehousing, and food and accommodation sectors were the most affected. Of course, there is also the tourism sector which has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which has not subsided. The tourism sector employs around 11.83% of Indonesian workers, according to BPS data in 2020, there were 409 thousand workers in the tourism sector who lost their jobs due to the pandemic (M I W Pradana, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire tourism value chain, as well as small and medium businesses and the creative economy, in addition to disrupting financial markets and consumer demand worldwide.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the tourism sector to adapt to new ways. The role of digitalization in society has become a turning point in efforts to maintain the tourism sector amidst the onslaught of the pandemic that has hit countries all over the world. This digital diplomacy serves as a substitute for traditional communication that is hampered by travel restrictions. Virtual cultural exchanges have proven to be effective in creating closer relationships between people from various countries, as well as promoting Indonesian tourism. Digital tourism diplomacy emerged as a solution to maintain relations between countries in the ASEAN regional area, although physical mobility is limited, this shows the flexibility and innovation in Indonesia's diplomatic strategy. Usually the goal of digital tourism diplomacy is to promote existing tourism through digital media with the aim of strengthening cooperative relations with other countries. Through this digital tourism diplomacy, Indonesia not only uses it as a medium to introduce tourism in Indonesia, but also as a means of cultural exchange. This can be seen from Indonesia which uses digital platforms to organize cultural events, virtual festivals, and tourism promotions. This not



only helps maintain tourist interest, but also increases the visibility of Indonesian culture at the regional level.

Virtual cultural exchange activities have strengthened ties between ASEAN countries. Through collaboration in online events, Indonesia can share its cultural heritage, arts, and cuisine, enriching the cultural experiences of ASEAN people and strengthening regional solidarity. Example activities carried out by Indonesia in diplomacy digital tourism through the Wonderful Indonesia program which is being promoted by the Indonesian government in an effort For increase visit traveler from abroad . On the other hand , digital tourism diplomacy also opens up opportunities to build a wider network of cooperation among ASEAN countries. Indonesia plays an active role in facilitating dialogue and collaboration between tourism industry players, the government, and local communities in joint recovery efforts post COVID-19 pandemic .

While there are many opportunities emerging from digital tourism diplomacy, challenges such as the gap in access to technology and the need to improve digital literacy among the public are of concern. Efforts to address these challenges are essential so that all parties can participate optimally. The success of digital tourism diplomacy during the pandemic shows the need for a sustainable strategy to leverage technology in tourism. Indonesia needs to continue to innovate and develop digital platforms that support future cooperation and cultural exchange. Indonesia’s digital tourism diplomacy has successfully adapted and optimized regional relations amidst the challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through virtual cultural exchanges, Indonesia has not only maintained but also strengthened its position as a leader in tourism cooperation in ASEAN. Moving forward, it is important for Indonesia to continue to develop strategies that support sustainability and inclusivity in the digital tourism sector (Anggarini, 2021).

Like the concept of nation branding implemented through the "Wonderful Indonesia" program. This branding has not only succeeded in attracting the attention of international tourists, but also strengthened Indonesia's cultural identity in the eyes of the world. Virtual programs initiated during the pandemic, such as the #DIIndonesiaAja campaign, have succeeded in increasing the interest of domestic tourists while introducing tourism destinations to international audiences (Sudirman, 2020). This has not only had an impact on increasing international audiences but has also inspired local tourism business actors in Indonesia to carry out the same movement, such as creating the #Wisatavirtual trend on the Instagram platform. In addition, the importance of innovation in diplomatic strategy. By utilizing digital platforms and social media, Indonesia can convey diplomatic messages more quickly and efficiently. This creates space for more open and participatory dialogue between government and society, as well as between countries (Sudirman, 2020).

Diplomacy during the COVID-19 era has strengthened ASEAN regional cooperation through virtual cultural exchanges. Through digital diplomacy, Indonesia has successfully bridged the gap caused by travel restrictions. These virtual cultural activities



have proven effective in maintaining relations between ASEAN countries, which were previously hampered by the pandemic. Digital cultural exchanges not only strengthen the cultural identity of each country but also create a new platform for collaboration in the tourism sector, it is seen that participation in these digital programs has had a positive impact on tourists' awareness and interest in Indonesian destinations. ASEAN communities have shown greater interest in Indonesian culture, which is expected to lead to an increase in tourist visits post-pandemic. Hence the importance of innovation in tourism diplomacy strategy. By utilizing digital technology, Indonesia not only maintains its existence in the eyes of the world, but also builds a positive image as a cultural center in the ASEAN region. This digital diplomacy is a relevant model to be applied in the context of other global crises in the future, allowing ASEAN countries to stay connected and support each other (Sugihamretha, 2020).

### CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic decline in various sectors of life. This decline covered almost all industries, including health, pharmaceuticals, social activities, information and communication, clean water supply, waste management, and recycling waste. The transportation, travel, warehousing, and food and accommodation sectors were the most affected. Of course, there is also the tourism sector which has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which has not subsided. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the tourism sector to adapt to new ways. The role of digitalization in society has become a turning point in efforts to maintain the tourism sector amidst the onslaught of the pandemic that has hit countries all over the world. This digital diplomacy serves as a substitute for traditional communication that is hampered by travel restrictions. Virtual cultural exchanges have proven to be effective in creating closer relationships between people from various countries, as well as promoting Indonesian tourism.

Virtual cultural exchange activities have strengthened ties between ASEAN countries. Through collaboration in online events, Indonesia can share its cultural heritage, arts, and cuisine, enriching the cultural experiences of ASEAN people and strengthening regional solidarity. The success of digital tourism diplomacy during the pandemic shows the need for a sustainable strategy to leverage technology in tourism. Indonesia needs to continue to innovate and develop digital platforms that support future cooperation and cultural exchange. Through virtual cultural exchanges, Indonesia has not only maintained but also strengthened its position as a leader in tourism cooperation in ASEAN. This digital diplomacy is a relevant model to be applied in the context of other global crises in the future, allowing ASEAN countries to stay connected and support each other (Sugihamretha, 2020).



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