

THAILAND AND KOREAN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS IN USING SOFT-POWER ETHICS *

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, soft power has become a vital tool for developing countries to build international relationships and cultivate alliances. This research conducts a qualitative secondary analysis comparing the core soft power strategies utilized by South Korea and Thailand in their nation-rebranding efforts and cultural diplomacy initiatives. It also examines the fundamental principles, customs, and cultural exports emphasized in each country's soft power approach.

The study evaluates the successes and limitations of both strategies through international public opinion polls and global soft power rankings. It further explores how each country tailors its messaging and outreach based on target audiences. The findings reveal that both nations rely on popular media and creative content to enhance international appeal. South Korea emphasizes contemporary pop culture, such as K-dramas and K-pop, to project a modern and dynamic image, whereas Thailand highlights traditional arts and performances to showcase its timeless cultural heritage. Korea adopts a

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branding strategy cantered on innovation and youthfulness, while Thailand's approach focuses on hospitality and spiritual harmony. These insights offer valuable implications for scholars and practitioners working on soft power strategies.

Keywords: Soft Power, Nation Brand, Diplomacy, Culture, Thailand, Korea, Hallyu

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy and nation branding have emerged as key instruments for states seeking to gain allies, shape perceptions, and advance national interests through persuasive attraction rather than coercion. Middle powers such as Thailand and South Korea increasingly rely on soft power strategies to enhance their regional and global influence. Both countries have invested significantly in cultural exports, public diplomacy initiatives, and strategic messaging to cultivate favourable international images.

While soft power has been widely studied in Western contexts, there is a notable gap in comparative research focusing on Asian perspectives, particularly between countries like Thailand and South Korea. Most existing literature emphasizes Western approaches to soft power, leaving a limited understanding of how Asian states develop and implement these strategies within their unique cultural, political, and historical contexts.

This study aims to address that gap by offering a comparative analysis of the soft power approaches of Thailand and South Korea. It examines their use of cultural elements, value orientations, public diplomacy practices, and nation branding strategies. Moreover, the research integrates insights from communication, cultural studies, and management to explore how soft power strategies can inform effective organizational and governmental practices in culturally diverse environments.

This investigation also considers both state and non-state actors in the execution of soft power and draws attention to the evolving role of cultural diplomacy amid issues such as global media flows and African migration. A more holistic approach that incorporates government policy, media narratives, and international public perception is essential for a deeper understanding of soft power in Asian contexts.

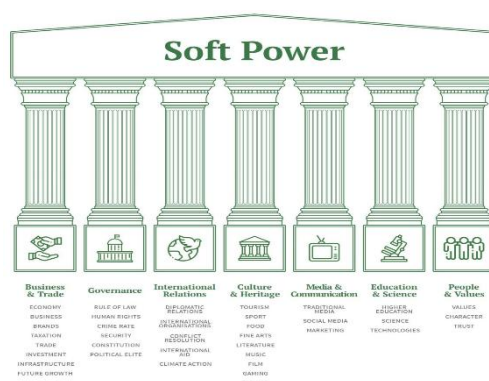


Figure 1: presents the seven pillars of soft power as referenced in the analytical framework used in this study.

- To assess and compare the central soft power strategies applied by South Korea and Thailand in their nation rebranding projects as well as cultural diplomacy.
- To compare and contrast the fundamental principles, customs, and cultural exports that are highlighted in South Korea's and Thailand's soft power initiatives by examining government directives, diplomatic campaigns, and scholarly publications.
- To assess the relative successes and limitations of the Thai and Korean approaches to wielding soft power on the global stage through metrics such as international public opinion polling and rankings of soft power strength.
- To explore how Thailand and South Korea calibrate their soft power messaging and outreach based on target audiences, such as focusing on Asian regional allies versus Western nations.

- To evaluate changes in Thailand and South Korea's soft power strategies and areas of focus over the past years through longitudinal analysis of programs and spending.

Literature Review

Soft power has become a central concept in international relations, particularly in the context of cultural diplomacy and nation branding. Roongsangjun (2023) emphasizes that both Thailand and South Korea employ culture and tradition as core components of their soft power strategies. However, their thematic emphases differ significantly. South Korea has leveraged the “Korean Wave” (Hallyu)—featuring K-pop, K-dramas, and digital media—to engage younger, global audiences and present a modern, innovative national image. In contrast, Thailand’s soft power centres on timeless values such as hospitality, spirituality, and cultural heritage, offering a more traditional representation of national identity.

Both nations demonstrate an adaptive approach in their cultural diplomacy, tailoring messaging and media to resonate with regional audiences. They often prioritize neighbouring Asian countries over Western markets in both outreach and resource allocation. This reflects a strategic alignment of cultural messaging with geographic and cultural proximity. As globalization continues to accelerate the exchange of cultural products and ideas, both countries face increasing pressure to adapt their soft power strategies in order to stay relevant. This includes not only evolving the content of their cultural exports but also diversifying delivery platforms and engagement strategies. Another major theme across the literature is the challenge of measuring soft power. Scholars agree that assessing cultural influence remains complex, often relying on indirect indicators such as international public opinion surveys, media visibility, and soft

power indices. These metrics, while helpful, do not always capture the full spectrum of cultural impact or long-term influence.

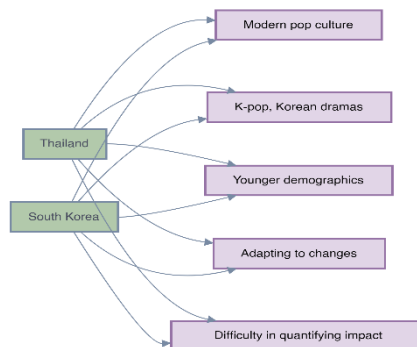


Figure 2: illustrates a comparative framework of Thailand's and South Korea's cultural diplomacy strategies, including key messaging channels and target regions.

Navigating the Intersection of Cuisine, Culture, and Soft Power

Lipscomb (2023) highlights how Thailand and South Korea use food as a soft power tool to promote their nations. Thailand pioneered "gastrodiplomacy," supporting Thai restaurants abroad and training chefs, leading to a significant global expansion. South Korea integrates food into its "Korean Wave," linking cuisine with K-pop and K-dramas, while also promoting royal court cuisine. However, sustainability issues arise, with some Korean restaurants closing despite government efforts. Thailand benefits more from government-funded programs and visa policies, whereas South Korea relies more on private sector initiatives. Overall, Thailand is seen as more successful in enhancing its international food reputation. Figure 3 given below shows the aspects of Gastrodiplomacy.

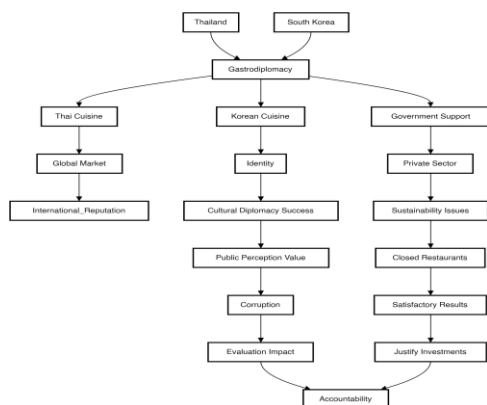


Figure 3: Aspects of Gastrodiplomacy

South Korea's Assertive Strategy vs. Thailand's Hands-Off Approach

Lee (2019) notes that South Korea and Thailand use culture as a soft power tool, but with different strategies. Thailand promotes its cuisine, traditional arts, and Buddhist heritage, relying on tourism as a key driver. In contrast, South Korea actively markets its culture through K-pop, TV dramas, and films, with government support via the Ministry of Culture. South Korea's strategic investment in cultural exports has led to global recognition, reflected in rising soft power rankings. Thailand, with a more passive approach, has not expanded its soft power outreach as extensively. Metrics like trade, tourism, and brand perception highlight South Korea's success in systematically promoting its culture worldwide. Figure 4 given below shows the key relationships.

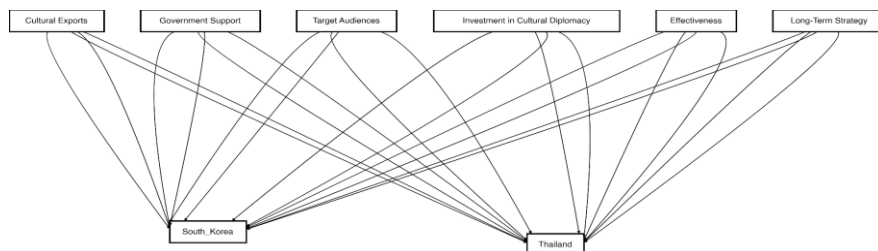


Figure 4: Key relationships

Comparative Analysis of Soft Power Strategies

Bazyar et al. (2021) discuss the soft power strategies of Thailand and South Korea in cultural diplomacy and national branding. South Korea's success is largely attributed to the global popularity of K-pop and dramas like Gangnam Style and Squid Game, supported by government policies and investments. In contrast, Thailand focuses on tourism, promoting its beaches, Buddhist monuments, and cuisine through campaigns emphasizing hospitality. Both approaches aim to enhance international standing through cultural exports. Figure 5, given below, shows soft power strategies and success factors.

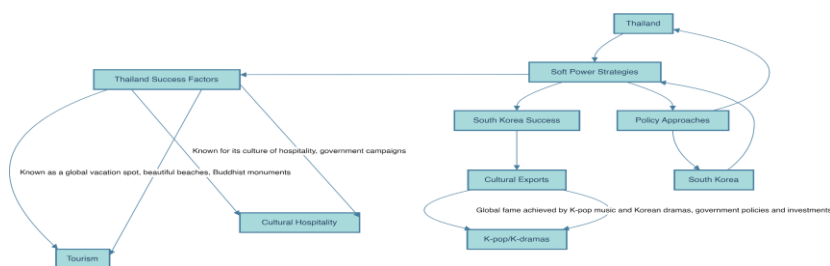


Figure 5: Soft Power Strategies and Success Factors

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Gnedash et al. (2022) highlight that both Thailand and South Korea integrate culture and public diplomacy into their foreign policy strategies to expand global influence through soft power. Both emphasize cultural exports and government-led public diplomacy initiatives. South Korea's Korean Wave, driven by Hallyu exports like K-pop and dramas, has achieved global success, while Thailand focuses on promoting traditions, values like Buddhism, and traditional arts to share its cultural heritage. Figure 6, given below, shows the similarities and differences in the soft power strategies.

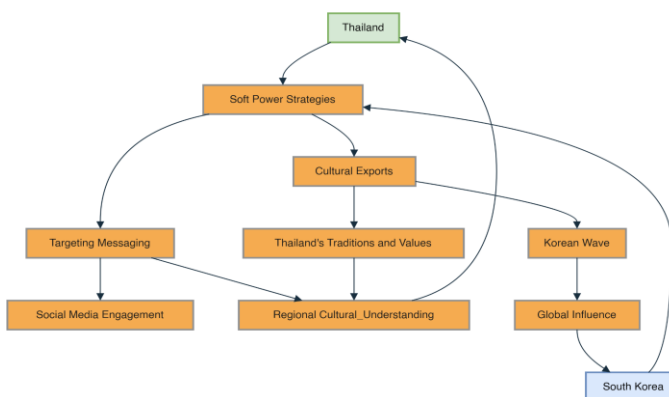


Figure 6: Key Similarities and Differences in The Soft Power Strategies

Balancing Cultural Diplomacy, Political Values, and Foreign Policy

GÜCÜ (2020) highlights South Korea's soft power success through Hallyu, enhancing its global image and tourism. While cultural exports like K-pop boost interest, over-reliance risks superficial engagement. Credibility stems from political values like democracy and human rights, though regional tensions with North Korea and Japan remain challenges. Addressing these issues through diplomacy and inclusivity could strengthen South Korea's democratic role. Despite increasing development aid and international organization participation, South Korea lacks the scale of major powers. A long-term strategy integrating culture, economics, and security is essential for sustainable soft power, balancing attraction with strategic agenda-setting in line with Nye's framework. Figure 7, given below, shows the relationship between South Korea's soft power.

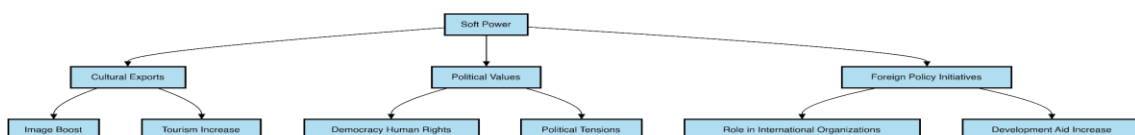


Figure 7: Relationship Between South Korea's Soft Power

Theories and Models

The soft power strategies of Thailand and South Korea are rooted in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power as the ability to attract and shape preferences. South Korea's success, driven by the Korean Wave (Hallyu), demonstrates how cultural exports like K-pop and dramas enhance national appeal, supported by coordinated government policies. Theories on globalization and cultural diffusion suggest that Hallyu may face saturation, aligning with Ahn and Lim's argument that cultural diplomacy must overcome social barriers to remain effective. Economic models further assess soft power's return on investment in cultural exports and tourism. Carminati's cascade effect model highlights soft power's long-term influence, such as language learning, which is challenging to quantify. Comparing Thailand's soft power approach reveals the impact of historical, political, and geopolitical factors. Both nations highlight the importance of ethical leadership, cross-cultural management, and adaptable approaches in leveraging soft power for global competitiveness. Frameworks like Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Trompenaars' national culture model explain how values influence management styles. Thai businesses adopting Korean-style soft skills emphasize cultural relations and ethical leadership, fostering inclusiveness and strengthening global competitiveness. Figure 8 given below shows the theoretical framework and key factors.

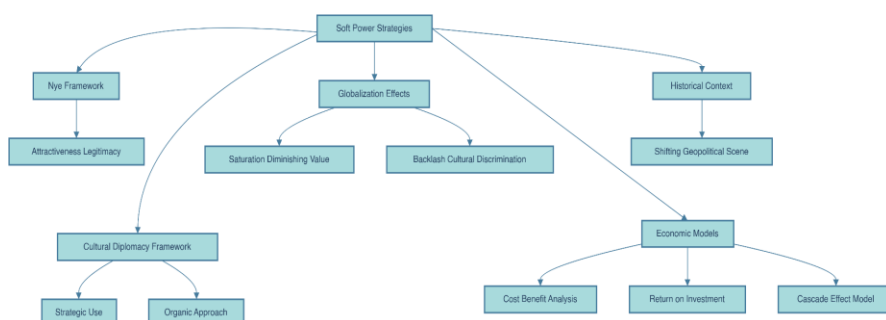


Figure 8: Theoretical Frameworks and Key Factors

Ethical Leadership and Corporate Social Responsibility

Soft power ethics involves committed leadership and CSR, aligning corporate practices with ethical and social values. In Thailand and Korea, business conduct increasingly emphasizes ethical compliance. For multinational organizations, integrating ethics into strategic decision-making is crucial to build trust and reputation among diverse stakeholders, both internally and externally.

Strategic Management Implications

Managing cross-cultural communication with soft power ethics is a critical strategic challenge. It demands managers in multinational entities to navigate multicultural dynamics with culturally sensitive strategies rooted in strong ethics. This requires multidimensional cultural knowledge and adaptable leadership styles. Implementing soft power ethics fosters a harmonious, engaged workplace, ultimately driving superior business performance.

Literature Gap

The literature provides a theoretical foundation for soft power and cultural diplomacy, but measuring returns faces methodological challenges. There's limited analysis of tangible results and program sustainability, with specific measures needed to identify best practices. Even for Hallyu, market saturation and declining distinctiveness raise concerns. Studies should explore perception changes across demographics, backlash from mainstreaming niche cultures, and shifting dynamics with familiarity. Society's reactions to government and private initiatives, along with globalization's impact on cultural phenomena, require analysis. The Korean Wave suggests a life cycle for cultural phenomena, necessitating policies responsive to political changes, leadership transitions, and scandals that affect public diplomacy. Comparing diplomatic engagements reveals balance considerations, while analysis often overlooks self-to-other dynamics in national culture promotion. Research on medical

exchange programs’ long-term effects could inform ethical paradigms to maximize benefits and minimize inequalities, emphasizing the need for dynamic exchange in soft power outcomes. Figure 9, given below, shows the conceptual framework. This framework is developed by review the gap in literature.

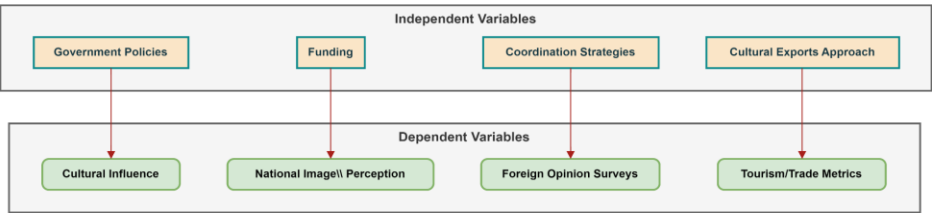


Figure 9: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative secondary study approach to compare Thai and Korean soft power strategies. Data was gathered from journal articles, government reports, policy documents, databases, media publications, official speeches, and other secondary sources. Extensive searches were conducted using library databases, governmental archives, and media publications in both countries. The study focused on materials shedding light on Thailand’s and Korea’s soft power activities and priorities over recent years. The qualitative method allowed for in-depth comparative analysis of complex social phenomena related to soft power and public diplomacy, emphasizing descriptive and interpretative insights rather than hypothesis testing or outcome prediction.

Results and Analysis

Similarities in Thai and Korean Soft Power Strategies

The comparative analysis of Thailand and South Korea’s cultural diplomacy reveals shared reliance on cultural exports like media, music, and

film to enhance global appeal, with both targeting younger audiences. South Korea's Hallyu, driven by K-pop and dramas, spreads its culture and lifestyle, while Thailand emphasizes traditions through cuisine and dance. Government support is pivotal, with Korea funding agencies for Hallyu promotion and Thailand organizing cultural festivals abroad. Tourism is a key soft power strategy for both, with Thailand focusing on hospitality, nature, and affordability, while Korea leverages Hallyu to attract fans. Regionally, Thailand strengthens ties with ASEAN neighbors through shared cultural and religious backgrounds, while Korea targets Asian countries for broader influence. These strategies align with economic growth objectives, showcasing soft power's role in fostering partnerships efficiently. Figure 10, given below, shows the cultural diplomacy and nation branding activities.

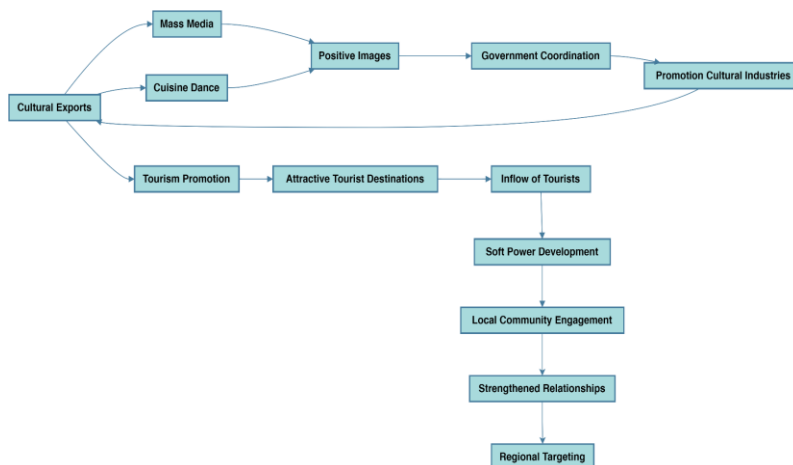


Figure 10: Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding Activities

Differences in Thai and Korean soft power strategies

Thailand and South Korea adopt distinct approaches to cultural diplomacy. South Korea emphasizes modern pop culture, such as K-pop and films, appealing to younger audiences, while Thailand focuses on traditional

elements like muay Thai, dance, crafts, and Buddhist practices. South Korea projects a dynamic image through Hallyu, supported by coordinated government strategies, whereas Thailand promotes timeless values like hospitality and spirituality through fragmented efforts. Political instability has hindered Thailand's consistency, while South Korea's structured policies and leadership support have made its soft power globally influential.

Effectiveness and impacts

South Korea's Hallyu has achieved global popularity, generating billions in revenue and boosting cultural influence, though market saturation and fading novelty pose challenges (Balraj *et al.*, 2022). Thailand has enhanced its tourism and culinary image but struggles with political instability and inconsistent branding. Both nations face regional competition and must adapt to sustain soft power effectiveness.

Adaptation to domestic and external changes

Political shifts and regional dynamics have shaped public diplomacy in both countries. Thailand's efforts are disrupted by coups, while Korea's image faces setbacks from domestic scandals. Both nations address anti-Asian sentiment through digital diplomacy and global campaigns, requiring resilient strategies backed by consistent messaging to maintain influence.

Discussion

The research compared Thai and Korean cultural diplomacy, aligning with its objectives. The first objective revealed both countries use cultural elements, but Thailand emphasizes traditional arts, while Korea focuses on contemporary pop culture. Both target regions selectively but differ in brand tone and global versus local emphasis. They both utilise cultural elements, but Thailand focuses on traditional art forms while Korea pushes contemporary pop

culture exports to accent her modern personality (Barden, 2019). The second objective highlighted Korea's active national branding based on innovation and creativity, contrasting Thailand's passive approach rooted in hospitality and spiritual legacy. The third objective showed Korea's measurable soft power success through metrics like export earnings and tourism, though both face sustainability challenges and difficulty converting soft power into diplomatic capital. As for the analysis, it revealed the active construction of a national brand identity based on innovation and creativity in Korea. Thailand has a more passive stance based on timeless qualities such as hospitality. Values-based appeals differ between Korea, emphasizing youth and dynamism, while Thailand invokes its spiritual legacy. As another research interest, the relative success of Thai versus Korean cultural diplomacy had to be evaluated. From the results, it seems Kenya has made more measurable gains in soft power and cultural influence internationally through metrics such as export earnings, polling data, and tourism revenues, amongst others (Tella, 2021). The fourth objective explored target audiences, with Korea leveraging Hallyu globally and regionally, while Thailand focuses on Asian diplomacy, requiring ongoing adaptation. The fifth objective compared strategic coordination, revealing Korea's effective Hallyu promotion and consistent policies, while Thailand's efforts are more scattered despite strengths like viral tourism marketing. The study's structured analysis provided data-driven conclusions, advancing knowledge on Asian soft power strategies and offering insights for developing countries. It also highlights effective methods and the risks of overreliance on limited cultural phenomena for practitioners.

Insights on Soft Power Strategy Formulation and Execution

Effective national soft power strategies rely on leveraging unique cultural resources and competitive strengths to create distinct national brands. Government coordination optimizes policies and resource distribution, while

strategic focus must adapt to target demographics and regional realities. Integrating digital technologies and maintaining ethical relevance are essential. Soft power requires dynamism, active listening, and relationship-building to thrive in an interdependent world. Overreliance on narrow exports risks saturation; lasting impact comes from substantive ideas and global problem-solving. Policy coherence and consistent branding protect soft power gains, with constant evaluation guiding adaptation. Both Thailand and Korea exemplify soft power's foundations in credible, ethical, and culturally appealing contributions, emphasizing mutual understanding and reciprocity.

Impact on Organizational Behavior

Cross-cultural communication and soft power ethics significantly influence multinational corporations. Thai firms adopting Korean soft power methods report higher employee commitment and satisfaction, driven by integrating cultural diplomacy into organizational practices.

Leadership and Management Practices

Leadership styles in Thai and Korean businesses reflect soft power ethics. Culturally sensitive and ethical leaders foster stronger teams and relationships, with Thai leaders integrating Korean techniques to enhance empathy, credibility, and trust.

Strategic Decision-Making

Incorporating soft power ethics and cross-cultural communication into decision-making improves business outcomes. Aligning strategies with cultural norms boosts consumer loyalty and brand recognition, enhancing organizational performance and international success.

Challenges and Limitations

While cross-cultural communication and soft power ethics offer benefits, challenges include resistance to innovation and varying outcomes across cultures. Managers must anticipate and address these obstacles proactively.

Relating Findings to Conceptual Frameworks

The analysis supports, supplements, and challenges existing theoretical concepts. Nye's soft power theory is reinforced, highlighting culture's role in boosting national attractiveness and influence, as seen in the intentional promotion of cultural exports in Thailand and Korea. Both situations show how the intentional promotion of cultural exportation and success stories can improve national reputation (Kim, 2022). Findings on target audience segmentation align with Nye's emphasis on careful audience engagement. However, literature often overemphasizes concrete cultural diplomacy policies while undervaluing the role of values, ideas, and global cooperation in shaping perceptions. A focus on quantifiable outcomes like popularity risks neglecting the limitations of superficial cultural exposure; deeper, reciprocal relationships are essential. Korea's centralized Hallyu promotion aligns with Gnedash's policy framework, while Thailand's more organic approach also succeeded, suggesting diverse strategies can be effective. Carminati's cascading effect of language learning was observed, and contrary to Ahn's ethical concerns, limited backlash occurred, indicating increased cultural familiarity and mutual understanding.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study offers key insights for academics and policymakers. For researchers, it refines soft power theories by emphasizing sustainability, bilateral exchange, and comprehensive frameworks to evaluate coordination, metrics, and audience perceptions. For policymakers, it highlights the need for moral foundations, adaptability, and collaboration among government, industry, and civil society. Digital integration and data-driven monitoring can enhance cultural diplomacy, but over-reliance on transient cultural exports risks undermining lasting relationships. Balancing short-term gains with long-term trust and global contributions is essential. At the societal level, fostering cultural understanding

can reduce prejudices and promote peace through reciprocal initiatives. For management, cross-cultural communication and soft power ethics offer strategies to create inclusive, ethical, and high-performing environments in multinational businesses.

Conclusions

This research compared Thai and Korean cultural diplomacy in alignment with its objectives, offering insights into their soft power strategies and national branding efforts. South Korea emphasizes contemporary pop culture—such as K-dramas and K-pop—to convey a modern, youth-oriented identity, while Thailand leans on traditional arts and values rooted in spirituality and harmony. Korea employs a more centralized and proactive branding strategy, in contrast to Thailand's more organic and less structured approach. While Korea's Hallyu has achieved remarkable global visibility, both countries continue to face challenges in translating soft power into concrete diplomatic leverage and maintaining long-term cultural influence.

Audience targeting also differs: Korea prioritizes global youth markets, whereas Thailand focuses more on regional engagement, especially within ASEAN. These findings underline the strategic importance of cultural adaptation based on audience demographics and regional dynamics. However, the analysis cautions against relying solely on surface-level cultural exposure, arguing that deep, meaningful bilateral and multilateral engagements are essential for sustaining influence and building mutual understanding.

Theoretically, this study expands Joseph Nye's soft power framework by contextualizing it within the Asian region, highlighting how non-Western states adapt and reinterpret soft power to fit their historical, cultural, and geopolitical realities.

Limitations of this study include its reliance on secondary sources and limited availability of direct empirical data, particularly from Thai institutions.

Future research should focus on empirical case studies, incorporating interviews, media content analysis, and audience reception studies to assess the real-world impact of cultural diplomacy campaigns. Comparative studies involving additional Asian countries could further enrich the understanding of regional soft power dynamics and contribute to the broader literature in international communication and public diplomacy.

Recommendations

Policymakers should strengthen cultural diplomacy through strategic coordination, two-way cultural understanding, and metrics to assess effectiveness. Resources should balance digital and traditional diplomacy, supported by cultural ambassador programs. Over-reliance on cultural exports risks diminishing uniqueness, requiring meaningful international engagement and ethical practices. Academics should focus on sustainability, audience perceptions, and comparative case studies to advance public diplomacy theory, emphasizing reciprocity, ethics, and diversity for long-term gains.

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