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Public Diplomacy by Korean Entities in Poland: Governmental and Corporate Actors, Soft Power, and Public Perception

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Abstract

Public diplomacy has become a central instrument of contemporary international communication, increasingly shaped by non-state actors such as corporations, cultural institutions, and educational organizations. The Republic of Korea (South Korea) represents a particularly instructive case, as its public diplomacy strategy combines coordinated governmental action with the global presence of powerful multinational enterprises and the worldwide popularity of Korean popular culture.

This article examines South Korean public diplomacy activities in Poland, focusing on the role of governmental institutions and Korean businesses in shaping the country's image among Polish publics. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of soft power and new public diplomacy, the study employs quantitative survey data collected in Poland in 2024 (N = 901) to assess perceptions of Korea, its culture, economy, and international engagement.

The findings indicate that Korean companies function as highly visible and effective public diplomacy actors, significantly enhancing Korea's economic and technological reputation, while official governmental initiatives remain comparatively less recognized by the wider public.

The article contributes to public relations and international communication scholarship by highlighting the growing importance of corporate diplomacy and

market-based actors in state-led public diplomacy strategies, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: public diplomacy, soft power, corporate diplomacy, South Korea, Poland, international public relations

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Introduction

Public diplomacy has evolved into a multidimensional field that extends well beyond the traditional confines of state-to-state communication. In the contemporary international environment, the management of a country's image increasingly depends on a complex constellation of actors, including governmental institutions, cultural organizations, multinational corporations, and civil society networks. This shift reflects broader transformations in international relations, where influence is exercised less through coercion and more through attraction, credibility, and reputation—elements commonly associated with the concept of soft power (Nye, 2004).

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) has emerged as one of the most prominent examples of a state that has successfully leveraged soft power resources through public diplomacy. Over the past two decades, Korea has transformed its international image from that of a war-torn and divided nation into a technologically advanced, culturally dynamic, and globally engaged actor. This transformation has been driven not only by governmental strategies but also by the international expansion of Korean corporations, the global popularity of Korean popular culture (commonly referred to as Hallyu), and the activities of cultural and educational institutions abroad. As a result, Korean public diplomacy increasingly operates at the intersection of state policy, corporate communication, and cultural promotion.

Poland constitutes a particularly relevant case for examining South Korean public diplomacy. Diplomatic relations between Poland and South Korea were established relatively recently, in 1989, following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Poland's political and economic transformation. Since then, bilateral relations have intensified rapidly, culminating in a strategic partnership declared in 2013. Today, South Korea is one of the most significant Asian investors in Poland, especially in sectors such as electromobility, electronics, and advanced manufacturing. At the same time, Korean culture has gained notable visibility among Polish audiences, particularly among younger generations, through music, film, television series, cuisine, and language education.

This convergence of economic engagement and cultural visibility makes Poland an instructive context for analyzing the effectiveness and structure of Korean public diplomacy. Unlike countries with a long-standing presence of Korean cultural institutions, Poland represents a space where public perceptions have been shaped within a relatively short time frame and where corporate actors often serve as the most visible representatives of Korea. This raises important

questions about the balance between governmental and corporate roles in public diplomacy, as well as about the mechanisms through which public diplomacy influences national image in host societies.

From the perspective of public relations and corporate communications scholarship, the Korean–Polish case provides an opportunity to examine public diplomacy as a hybrid practice that incorporates elements of international public relations, nation branding, and corporate social responsibility. Korean multinational companies operating in Poland not only pursue commercial objectives but also contribute—intentionally or unintentionally—to the construction of Korea’s national image. Their activities, investments, and social engagement can function as powerful communicative signals that shape public attitudes toward the country as a whole.

The primary objective of this article is to assess how South Korean public diplomacy activities—conducted by governmental institutions and business entities—affect the perception of South Korea in Poland. Building on soft power theory and the concept of new public diplomacy, the study investigates how Polish audiences perceive Korean culture, products, companies, and official promotional efforts. Empirically, the article draws on a large-scale survey conducted in 2024 among Polish respondents with varying degrees of interest in South Korea. The analysis focuses on the visibility of different public diplomacy actors, the perceived quality and impact of Korean products and brands, and the broader implications for Korea’s national image.

By situating the empirical findings within the broader literature on public diplomacy and international public relations, this article contributes to ongoing debates about the changing nature of diplomacy in a globalized communication environment. In particular, it highlights the growing significance of corporate actors as *de facto* public diplomats and underscores the need for closer analytical integration between public diplomacy research and corporate communications scholarship.

Literature Review

2.1. Soft Power as a Conceptual Foundation of Public Diplomacy

The concept of soft power constitutes one of the most influential theoretical foundations for contemporary analyses of public diplomacy. Coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the late twentieth century, soft power refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction rather than coercion or material incentives (Nye, 2004). Unlike hard power, which relies on military force or economic sanctions, soft power operates through intangible resources such as culture, political values, foreign policy legitimacy, and international credibility.

Scholars have widely adopted soft power as a framework for understanding how states influence foreign publics in an increasingly interconnected world. Culture is frequently identified as a core source of soft power, particularly when it resonates with universal values or is perceived as innovative, authentic, or

aspirational (Nye, 2011). Political values and domestic governance practices also contribute to a country's attractiveness, especially when consistency between internal policies and external messaging is perceived (Fan, 2008). Finally, foreign policy plays a critical role in shaping soft power when it is regarded as morally legitimate and aligned with broader international norms (Nye, 2004).

Despite its widespread use, the concept of soft power has been subject to criticism. Some authors argue that soft power is conceptually vague and difficult to operationalize empirically (Bially Mattern, 2005; Li, 2023). Others point out that attraction alone does not guarantee influence and that soft power effects are often indirect, delayed, and context-dependent (Vuving, 2009). Nevertheless, soft power remains a dominant analytical lens in public diplomacy research, particularly when combined with empirical indicators such as national reputation rankings, public opinion surveys, and media analyses.

In the context of South Korea, soft power theory has proven especially relevant. Scholars note that Korea's international influence has expanded significantly through cultural exports, technological innovation, and economic modernization, all of which align closely with Nye's original sources of soft power (Choi, 2019). The Korean case demonstrates how soft power can be cultivated strategically, even by states that lack extensive military or geopolitical dominance.

2.2. Defining Public Diplomacy: From State-Centered to Networked Approaches

Public diplomacy is commonly understood as the process by which states communicate with foreign publics to inform, influence, and build long-term relationships that support foreign policy objectives (Cull, 2008). Early conceptualizations emphasized governmental communication, often treating public diplomacy as an extension of traditional diplomacy or, in some cases, as a form of strategic propaganda (Melissen, 2005). This "traditional public diplomacy" model focused primarily on information dissemination, mass communication, and state-controlled messaging.

Over time, this narrow understanding has been challenged by scholars who emphasize dialogue, mutual understanding, and relationship-building. The emergence of the "new public diplomacy" paradigm reflects broader changes in global communication, including the rise of digital media, the growing role of non-state actors, and the fragmentation of audiences (Huijgh, 2016). New public diplomacy prioritizes engagement over persuasion, long-term relationships over short-term messaging, and networks over hierarchies (Melissen, 2011).

In this perspective, public diplomacy is no longer monopolized by foreign ministries. Cultural institutes, universities, non-governmental organizations, and private companies increasingly participate in shaping a country's image abroad. This shift has prompted scholars to reconceptualize public diplomacy as a collaborative and multi-actor process rather than a purely state-driven one (Zaharna, 2010). As a result, contemporary public diplomacy research often intersects with fields such as international public relations, strategic communication, and nation branding.

Importantly, the literature also highlights that public diplomacy outcomes are difficult to measure. While awareness, attitude change, and behavioral intentions are commonly used indicators, scholars emphasize that public diplomacy effects often unfold over extended periods and are influenced by external political, social, and economic factors (Banks, 2020). This has led to calls for more nuanced and mixed-method approaches to evaluation, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative analyses.

2.3. Public Diplomacy and International Public Relations

The relationship between public diplomacy and international public relations has attracted growing scholarly attention. Several authors argue that public diplomacy can be understood as a form of state-level public relations, sharing core principles such as reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communication (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; L'Etang, 2009). From this perspective, foreign publics function as key stakeholders whose perceptions can influence international legitimacy, economic cooperation, and political support.

International public relations scholarship contributes valuable insights into how communication strategies are adapted across cultural contexts and how organizational actors manage transnational reputations. These insights are increasingly applied to public diplomacy research, particularly in analyses of branding, storytelling, and identity construction (Szondi, 2008). Nation branding, although conceptually distinct from public diplomacy, is often discussed alongside it, as both aim to shape favorable national images through coordinated communication efforts (Anholt, 2007).

Critically, scholars caution against reducing public diplomacy to marketing or branding alone. While promotional activities play a role, effective public diplomacy requires credibility, authenticity, and alignment between communication and actual policies (Fan, 2010). This distinction is particularly relevant in democratic societies, where foreign publics may be skeptical of overtly promotional messaging. As such, public diplomacy increasingly relies on indirect communication channels, including cultural exchange, education, and corporate engagement.

2.4. Corporate Diplomacy and the Role of Business Actors

One of the most significant developments in public diplomacy scholarship is the growing recognition of corporations as influential diplomatic actors. Multinational enterprises operating abroad inevitably shape perceptions of their home countries through their products, employment practices, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (White, 2012). This phenomenon has given rise to the concept of corporate diplomacy, which refers to the strategic engagement of companies in managing political, social, and cultural relationships in foreign environments (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009).

Corporate diplomacy literature emphasizes that businesses often enjoy higher visibility and credibility among foreign publics than governmental institutions, particularly in consumer markets. Well-known brands can function as cultural

ambassadors, transmitting associations related to quality, innovation, or reliability that extend beyond the company itself to the country of origin. At the same time, corporate misconduct or controversy can negatively affect national reputations, illustrating the risks associated with market-based diplomacy.

In the Korean context, large conglomerates and technology firms have been identified as central contributors to Korea's international image. Scholars note that Korean companies combine commercial success with active participation in educational, environmental, and social initiatives abroad, thereby reinforcing perceptions of Korea as a modern and responsible global actor (Lee & Hocking, 2010). This aligns with broader trends in CSR and sustainability communication, which increasingly intersect with public diplomacy objectives.

The literature also suggests that effective public diplomacy requires coordination between state and corporate actors. While governments provide strategic direction and legitimacy, companies offer resources, innovation, and everyday contact with foreign publics (Copeland, 2009). However, this coordination is not always formalized, and tensions may arise between commercial priorities and diplomatic goals. Understanding how these dynamics unfold in specific national contexts remains an important area for empirical research.

2.5. South Korea in Public Diplomacy Scholarship

South Korea has become a frequently cited case in public diplomacy literature, largely due to the global spread of Korean popular culture and the state's proactive engagement in cultural promotion. Studies on Hallyu highlight its role in enhancing Korea's visibility and attractiveness, particularly among younger audiences (Jin, 2016). Popular culture is often described as an entry point that stimulates interest in language learning, tourism, and consumer products, thereby generating broader soft power effects.

Beyond culture, scholars emphasize Korea's institutionalization of public diplomacy through legal frameworks and strategic planning. The adoption of a Public Diplomacy Act and multi-year master plans reflects an effort to systematize activities and integrate non-state actors into a coherent strategy (Choi, 2019). This distinguishes Korea from countries where public diplomacy remains fragmented or ad hoc.

However, existing scholarship also identifies challenges. Some studies suggest that Korea's public diplomacy remains overly focused on cultural promotion, with less emphasis on political values or global public goods. Others note disparities in visibility across regions, indicating that Korea's image is unevenly constructed depending on local contexts. Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, remains underrepresented in empirical research, despite its growing importance as a destination for Korean investment and cultural exchange.

2.6. Research Gap and Contribution

The reviewed literature reveals several gaps that this article seeks to address. First, while corporate actors are increasingly acknowledged in public diplomacy theory, empirical studies examining their role alongside governmental institutions remain limited. Second, much of the existing research on Korean public diplomacy focuses on Asia, North America, or Western Europe, leaving Central and Eastern Europe comparatively understudied. Third, there is a need for more audience-centered research that examines how foreign publics perceive and differentiate between various public diplomacy actors.

By focusing on Poland and integrating survey-based evidence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of public diplomacy as a hybrid practice involving both state and corporate communication. It also strengthens the dialogue between public diplomacy scholarship and international public relations research, offering insights relevant to academics and practitioners alike.

Research Questions and Methodology

3.1. Research Objectives and Analytical Focus

The primary objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of South Korean public diplomacy in Poland, with particular attention to the differentiated roles of governmental institutions and corporate actors. Building on the theoretical frameworks of soft power and new public diplomacy, the article seeks to assess how South Korea is perceived by Polish publics and to identify which actors and instruments exert the strongest influence on that perception.

Unlike traditional evaluations of public diplomacy that focus primarily on state-led communication, this study adopts a broader analytical lens. It conceptualizes public diplomacy as a multi-actor process in which governmental institutions, multinational corporations, cultural organizations, and creative industries collectively shape national image. This approach is especially relevant in the Korean–Polish context, where Korean companies and cultural products are highly visible, while official governmental initiatives may operate more discreetly.

The study further aims to contribute to public relations and corporate communications scholarship by empirically examining corporate diplomacy as an integral component of public diplomacy. In doing so, it addresses the growing overlap between international public relations, nation branding, and state-led strategic communication.

3.2. Research Questions

Based on the literature review and the empirical context outlined above, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does South Korea's public diplomacy influence the overall image of South Korea among Polish publics?

RQ2: What role do Korean corporate actors and brands play in shaping Polish perceptions of South Korea's economy, technological advancement, and global standing?

RQ3: How does exposure to Korean popular culture (e.g., K-pop, film, television series, cuisine) affect Polish audiences' attitudes toward South Korea?

RQ4: To what extent are Polish respondents aware of official public diplomacy activities conducted by South Korean governmental institutions in Poland?

RQ5: What gaps and challenges can be identified in South Korea's public diplomacy efforts in Poland from the perspective of Polish audiences?

These research questions reflect both descriptive and evaluative objectives. While RQ1–RQ3 focus on identifying dominant perception patterns and influential actors, RQ4 and RQ5 aim to reveal structural weaknesses and opportunities for improvement in Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

3.3. Research Design

To address the research questions, the study employs a quantitative research design based on a structured online survey. Quantitative audience research is widely used in public diplomacy and international communication studies, as it allows for systematic assessment of awareness, attitudes, and perceptions among foreign publics (Banks, 2020). Given the study's focus on public perception rather than institutional intent, a survey-based approach was considered appropriate.

The survey was conducted in 2024 using an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms. The research design prioritizes breadth of responses and statistical robustness, while acknowledging the contextual limitations inherent in non-probability sampling methods.

3.4. Sampling Strategy

The study employed a purposive, non-probability sampling strategy. The survey targeted Polish citizens with at least minimal exposure to or interest in South Korea. To reach this audience, the questionnaire was distributed in several Polish-language Facebook groups dedicated to Korean culture, language, and entertainment. These groups included communities focused on Korean popular music (K-pop), television series (K-dramas), language learning, and broader cultural exchange.

The total number of members across the selected groups exceeded 100,000 at the time of data collection. The survey remained open for three weeks, from early to late June 2024, and yielded a total of 901 completed responses, which constitutes a large sample size by the standards of public diplomacy audience research.

While this sampling strategy does not allow for full generalization to the entire Polish population, it is well suited to the study's objectives. Public diplomacy effects are often most visible among engaged audiences who actively consume cultural products or interact with foreign brands. Consequently, the selected sample provides valuable insight into how South Korea is perceived among

publics most likely to encounter Korean public diplomacy outputs.

3.5. Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, combining closed-ended, Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended items. It was administered in Polish to ensure clarity and accessibility for respondents. For the purposes of academic analysis and reporting, all questions and responses were subsequently translated into English.

The questionnaire included the following components:

Demographic variables

Respondents were asked about gender, age, level of education, and place of residence. These variables enabled descriptive analysis of the sample and contextual interpretation of the findings.

Perceptions of Korean products and brands

Several Likert-scale statements measured respondents' assessments of the presence, quality, and reputational impact of Korean products and companies in Poland.

Corporate diplomacy indicators

Items assessed whether respondents perceive Korean companies as effective representatives of South Korea's economy and innovation.

Awareness of governmental public diplomacy

Respondents were asked to evaluate their awareness of promotional activities conducted by South Korean authorities and institutions in Poland.

Cultural influence and soft power

Questions explored respondents' exposure to Korean popular culture and its influence on their perception of South Korea.

Open-ended questions

Optional open questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their associations with South Korea and to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses of Korea's presence in Poland.

Most evaluative items used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). This scale enabled the calculation of mean values and facilitated comparative analysis across variables.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequency distributions, percentage shares, and mean scores were calculated for all Likert-scale items. These measures allowed for clear identification of dominant trends in respondents' perceptions and levels of awareness.

Open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively using thematic categorization. Although qualitative analysis played a secondary role in the study,

it provided contextual depth and illustrative examples that complemented the quantitative findings.

The analytical focus was placed on:

- the visibility of different public diplomacy actors,
- the relative impact of corporate versus governmental activities,
- and perceived gaps between cultural popularity and institutional awareness.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical principles for social science research. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were analyzed in aggregate form. The use of online platforms complied with data protection regulations applicable at the time of data collection.

3.8. Methodological Justification

The chosen methodology aligns with best practices in public diplomacy and international public relations research, where audience-centered perception studies are commonly employed. By combining a large sample size with structured measurement instruments, the study provides empirically grounded insights into how South Korean public diplomacy functions in a specific national context.

At the same time, the methodology reflects the realities of contemporary public diplomacy, where engagement often begins with culturally and commercially oriented audiences rather than the general population. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how soft power is generated, transmitted, and received in practice.

Results

4.1. Profile of Respondents

A total of 901 respondents participated in the survey, providing a robust empirical basis for the analysis. The demographic structure of the sample reveals several important characteristics relevant to the interpretation of the results.

Women constituted a dominant majority of respondents (over 90%), while men represented less than 10%. This gender imbalance reflects patterns commonly observed in online communities focused on cultural consumption, particularly in areas such as popular music, television series, and language learning. While this structure limits the representativeness of the sample, it also underscores the centrality of cultural engagement in shaping public diplomacy audiences.

In terms of age, the largest group consisted of respondents aged 18–24, followed by those aged 25–34. Together, these two cohorts accounted for more than two-thirds of the sample. Older age groups were progressively less represented. This distribution suggests that South Korea's public diplomacy activities—especially cultural ones—resonate most strongly with younger

audiences, a finding consistent with previous studies on Korean popular culture and youth engagement.

Educational attainment among respondents was relatively high. More than half reported having completed higher education, while the majority of the remaining respondents held secondary education. This indicates that engagement with Korean culture and interest in South Korea may be associated with higher levels of cultural capital and educational background.

Geographically, respondents were predominantly residents of large urban centers, particularly cities with populations exceeding 500,000. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of respondents came from smaller towns and rural areas, suggesting that Korean cultural and commercial presence extends beyond major metropolitan areas.

4.2. Visibility and Evaluation of Korean Brands and Products (RQ2)

One of the most striking findings of the survey concerns the high visibility of Korean brands and products on the Polish market. An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that numerous Korean brands are present in Poland. The mean score for this item exceeded 4.5 on a five-point Likert scale, indicating near-universal recognition.

Respondents also evaluated Korean products very positively in terms of quality. The perception of high quality achieved a mean score above 4.3, with very few negative responses. This suggests that Korean companies have successfully established reputational capital in Poland, particularly in sectors such as electronics, automotive manufacturing, cosmetics, and household appliances.

The frequency of purchasing and using Korean products yielded more varied responses. While many respondents reported frequent use, others indicated occasional or neutral engagement. This discrepancy suggests that although Korean brands are widely recognized and positively evaluated, actual consumption patterns may be influenced by factors such as price sensitivity, availability, or competition from European brands.

Importantly, respondents strongly agreed that the presence of Korean companies in Poland is beneficial for South Korea's national reputation. Korean corporations were perceived not merely as commercial entities but as effective representatives of Korea's economic potential, technological advancement, and innovation capacity. These findings directly address RQ2, demonstrating that corporate actors function as highly influential public diplomacy agents.

4.3. Corporate Actors as De Facto Public Diplomats (RQ1 & RQ2)

The results provide compelling evidence that Korean companies operating in Poland play a central role in shaping perceptions of South Korea. Respondents largely agreed that Korean corporations successfully demonstrate the strength and modernity of Korea's economy. The mean scores for statements related to corporate representation of Korea's economic potential were consistently high (above 4.3).

This pattern suggests that, for many Polish respondents, everyday encounters with Korean brands—through consumer products, employment opportunities, and corporate social initiatives—constitute the primary channel through which Korea is experienced and evaluated. In this sense, Korean companies act as de facto public diplomats, even when their activities are not explicitly framed as public diplomacy.

The findings further indicate that corporate credibility may surpass that of governmental institutions in the eyes of foreign publics. Unlike official promotional campaigns, corporate communication is embedded in practical, tangible experiences, which may enhance trust and perceived authenticity.

4.4. Awareness of Governmental Public Diplomacy Activities (RQ4)

In contrast to the strong visibility of corporate actors, awareness of official public diplomacy efforts conducted by South Korean authorities was comparatively low. Responses to statements measuring awareness of governmental promotion clustered around neutral or negative values, with mean scores below 3.0.

A substantial proportion of respondents indicated that they were either unaware or only vaguely aware of activities organized by the South Korean government, embassy, or affiliated institutions in Poland. This suggests that official public diplomacy initiatives, while present, may not be effectively reaching broader audiences or may be overshadowed by corporate and cultural channels.

Similarly, respondents assessed the general level of Polish public awareness of bilateral cooperation between Poland and South Korea—across areas such as business, defense, education, and culture—as low. This finding highlights a communicative gap between strategic-level cooperation and public-level awareness.

4.5. Influence of Korean Popular Culture (RQ3)

The survey results confirm that Korean popular culture exerts a strong influence on Polish perceptions of South Korea. Many respondents reported that exposure to K-pop, Korean films, television series, and cuisine positively shaped their attitudes toward the country. Cultural consumption was frequently associated with curiosity, emotional attachment, and a desire to learn more about Korean society and language.

For a significant portion of respondents, popular culture served as the initial point of contact with South Korea. This supports existing scholarship that identifies popular culture as a gateway to broader soft power effects, including interest in tourism, education, and consumer products.

However, the results also suggest that cultural popularity does not automatically translate into awareness of political or institutional aspects of Korea's international engagement. While respondents expressed positive feelings toward Korean culture, their knowledge of Korea's public diplomacy strategy or bilateral cooperation remained limited.

4.6. Overall Impact of Public Diplomacy Activities (RQ1)

When asked to evaluate the overall impact of promotional activities conducted by Korean authorities, companies, institutions, creators, and artists in Poland, respondents generally expressed positive views. The majority agreed that these activities positively influenced their perception of South Korea.

Notably, respondents did not clearly distinguish between different types of actors when assessing overall impact. Instead, perceptions appeared to be shaped by an aggregated image constructed through culture, brands, and personal experiences. This reinforces the notion that public diplomacy outcomes emerge from the combined effects of multiple actors rather than from isolated initiatives.

4.7. Identified Challenges and Gaps (RQ5)

The results reveal several challenges in South Korea's public diplomacy in Poland. First, there is a visible asymmetry between corporate and governmental visibility, with companies playing a disproportionately large role in shaping perceptions. Second, official diplomatic and strategic cooperation remains insufficiently communicated to broader publics. Third, public diplomacy activities appear to be concentrated in large urban centers, potentially limiting their reach to peripheral regions.

At the same time, the findings point to opportunities for greater integration between governmental and corporate efforts. By leveraging the strong reputational capital of Korean companies and aligning it more closely with official public diplomacy objectives, South Korea could enhance coherence and visibility in its communication with Polish audiences.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to examine public diplomacy conducted by South Korean entities in Poland, with particular emphasis on the roles of governmental institutions and corporate actors in shaping public perceptions of the Republic of Korea. Drawing on soft power theory and the concept of new public diplomacy, and supported by quantitative survey data collected among Polish respondents in June 2024, the article offers several key conclusions relevant to both academic scholarship and public diplomacy practice.

First, the findings clearly demonstrate that South Korea enjoys a highly positive image among Polish respondents, particularly in relation to its economy, technological advancement, and cultural attractiveness. This positive perception is strongly associated with the visibility and reputation of Korean corporations operating in Poland. Korean brands such as those in the electronics, automotive, and cosmetics sectors are not only widely recognized but also perceived as symbols of quality, innovation, and reliability. As a result, corporate actors emerge as the most influential public diplomacy agents in the Polish context.

Second, the study confirms the growing relevance of corporate diplomacy as an integral component of public diplomacy. For many respondents, everyday encounters with Korean products and companies constitute the primary channel through which South Korea is experienced. These interactions appear to be more

tangible and credible than official diplomatic messaging, reinforcing the argument advanced in the literature that multinational enterprises often enjoy higher levels of trust and visibility than state institutions. In this sense, Korean companies in Poland function as *de facto* ambassadors of national image, even when their activities are primarily commercially motivated.

Third, the findings reveal a significant discrepancy between the effectiveness of corporate and governmental public diplomacy. While respondents overwhelmingly recognized the presence and impact of Korean companies, awareness of official public diplomacy initiatives conducted by South Korean authorities remained limited. Many respondents indicated little familiarity with cultural, educational, or promotional activities organized by governmental institutions, as well as with broader areas of bilateral cooperation between Poland and South Korea. This suggests that official public diplomacy efforts, although present and diverse, do not sufficiently penetrate public awareness or are overshadowed by corporate and cultural channels.

Fourth, the influence of Korean popular culture—including music, film, television series, and cuisine—was confirmed as a powerful soft power resource. Cultural consumption frequently served as an entry point for interest in South Korea and contributed to positive emotional associations with the country. However, the results also indicate that cultural popularity alone does not necessarily translate into deeper knowledge of Korea's political system, foreign policy, or strategic partnerships. This finding underscores the importance of integrating cultural diplomacy with informational and relational components of public diplomacy.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports and extends the new public diplomacy paradigm, which emphasizes multi-actor engagement, networked communication, and long-term relationship building. The Polish case illustrates that public diplomacy outcomes are not produced solely by state-led initiatives but emerge from the cumulative effects of governmental, corporate, and cultural activities. This reinforces calls for a more holistic understanding of public diplomacy that bridges international relations, public relations, and corporate communications research.

Practically, the conclusions point to several implications for South Korea's public diplomacy strategy in Poland and comparable contexts. Greater coordination between governmental institutions and corporate actors could enhance coherence and visibility. By aligning official messaging with the reputational strengths of Korean companies and cultural products, South Korea could more effectively communicate its strategic interests and values to foreign publics. Additionally, expanding outreach beyond major urban centers and diversifying communication channels could help address gaps in awareness identified by the survey.

Overall, the study contributes to public diplomacy scholarship by providing empirical evidence from Central and Eastern Europe, a region that remains underrepresented in existing research. It also highlights the necessity of incorporating corporate actors more explicitly into analytical and strategic

frameworks of public diplomacy. In doing so, the article advances the understanding of how contemporary public diplomacy operates in practice—through markets, culture, and everyday experiences as much as through formal diplomatic channels.

6. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings and considering their generalizability.

First, the research employed a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy, targeting Polish respondents who already demonstrated an interest in South Korea through participation in online communities related to Korean culture and language. While this approach is appropriate for examining public diplomacy effects among engaged audiences, it limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to the entire Polish population. Individuals with no prior exposure to Korean culture or brands may hold different perceptions that are not captured in this study.

Second, the demographic structure of the sample—particularly the strong overrepresentation of women and younger respondents—introduces potential bias. This reflects broader patterns of participation in cultural fan communities but may skew results toward more favorable evaluations of Korean popular culture and consumer products. Future studies could benefit from more balanced samples or stratified designs that include older age groups and less culturally engaged respondents.

Third, the study relies on self-reported perceptions, which are inherently subjective and may be influenced by social desirability bias or respondents' current media consumption patterns. While perceptions are central to public diplomacy research, they do not necessarily translate directly into behavioral outcomes such as political support, investment decisions, or tourism choices.

Fourth, the research design is cross-sectional, capturing perceptions at a single point in time. Public diplomacy effects are often cumulative and long-term, shaped by evolving political contexts and sustained engagement. Longitudinal studies would allow for a more precise assessment of how perceptions change over time and how durable public diplomacy impacts are.

Finally, while the study identifies corporate actors as particularly influential, it does not systematically compare South Korean public diplomacy with that of other countries active in Poland. Comparative research could provide deeper insight into whether the observed patterns are unique to South Korea or indicative of broader trends in contemporary public diplomacy.

Acknowledging these limitations, the study nonetheless offers valuable empirical insight into the dynamics of public diplomacy in a Central and Eastern European context and provides a foundation for future research that further integrates public diplomacy, corporate communications, and international public relations perspectives.

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