

SOFT POWER 2.0

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THE NEW WAVE OF GLOBALIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOFT POWER

ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of globalization on the expansion of soft power, focusing on how state and non-state actors exert influence globally. It also highlights society's indirect or direct 'consumption' of these cultures, fostering positive images associated with them. The study was carried out by theoretically framing the concepts, interpreting case studies, and conducting a comparative analysis between Netflix and TikTok. The results obtained reveal that the interconnectedness resulting from globalization determines the development of vast soft power instruments, the present paper limiting itself only to (1) Hollywood films and the Netflix platform of the United States of America, (2) Confucius Institutes and the TikTok platform of the People's Republic of China, and (3) South Korean pop music. Lastly, our research yields a broader understanding of globalization and its role in expanding the potential of soft power to shape collective mentalities.

Keywords: *soft power, globalization, culture, influence, People's Republic of China.*

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Introduction

The current state of international relations is characterized by instability in power distribution, as the post-World War II global system has shifted from a unipolar to a bipolar, and then to a multipolar configuration. Recently, hybrid models have gained increasing attention—those which incorporate both state actors and regional blocs, such as the US, the Russian Federation, and the EU, or the US, China, Russia, and the EU (Neguț & Neacșu, 2022, p. 208). Currently, we are witnessing significant global changes driven by the rapid rise of emerging powers, the increasing influence of non-state actors on the world stage, and, most importantly, the intensification of globalization across economic, social, and cultural spheres (Atlantic Council, 2008).

Globalization has enabled some nations to expand their territory and influence through the use of material, informational, and financial resources. But what exactly is globalization? In a broad sense, “globalization refers to the broadening, deepening, and accelerating of global interconnection” (Held et al., 2004, p. 39). Thus, it represents an extension of activities across different fields, transcending borders and increasing the influence of a state or non-state actor on other entities. Transregional interconnection leads to the expansion of activity networks and the possibility of remote action (Held et al., 2004, p. 39).

One of the ways states have exerted their influence is through the use of soft power. It is a relatively new term in the dictionaries of international relations, but the practice of soft power has been used for centuries. For instance, in the 18th century, the spread of the French language and culture enhanced France's power (Nye, 2012, p. 100). This concept refers to the fact that states utilize values, traditions, culture, political tactics, informational assets, the power of media, and economic strategies to assert their supremacy and influence (Nye, 2012, p. 104).

This article aims to explain the connection between globalization and soft power. The way globalization operates creates a suitable environment for soft power, and the tools through which countries influence others are numerous. To accomplish this, we will present a theoretical framework for these concepts and examine how they are applied on the international stage.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The concept of *soft power* was first introduced by Joseph Nye in 1980, primarily in response to the neorealist theory developed by Kenneth Waltz, which did not emphasize the role of culture, values, and institutions in shaping the behavior of states (Nye, 2021, p. 4). This influence, rooted in attraction, contrasts with hard power, which relies on force and coercion from military and economic perspectives. Over time, the term gained international acceptance, particularly from the EU and Japan, which hoped that soft power could compensate for the lack of a traditional military. China also adopted the soft power approach after 2007, particularly through the Confucius Institute (Nye, 2021, pp. 9-11).

Joseph Nye states that the key aspect of exercising soft power is credibility. When governments are seen as manipulative or when information is regarded as propaganda, credibility is compromised (Nye, 2012, p. 102). Several specific factors unique to each country can directly affect its ability to wield soft power. Typically, culture stands out as one of the most crucial resources because it reflects unique qualities, encompassing elements that vary from one nation to another. Other significant factors include the country's internal political values and its foreign policies, such as the diplomacy practiced by that country (Nye, 2012, p. 103).

Over time, the international scene has become more interconnected due to widespread globalization. State governments have not lost power; instead, their authority has been reshaped to address the complexities of governance in a more interconnected era. (Held et al., 2004, p. 33). As Kofi Annan said in a speech to the UN General Assembly, in September 1999, “A global era requires global involvement” (Keohane & Nye, 2009, p. 289). The economic, informational, and cultural dimensions of globalization have brought about significant changes in the last century. From the point of view of informational interconnection, “abundance of information leads to reduced attention” (Keohane & Nye, 2009, p. 283). This is the paradox of abundance and the problem of credibility (Keohane & Nye, 2009, p. 283). The more information is disseminated through multiple sources to a broader audience, the more credible it becomes. The more information, including false information, is communicated, the less public attention and credibility the state will receive. As noted above, the credibility of a state, whether from media or government

sources, is a crucial factor in the imposition of soft power. However, access to information is vital for state and non-state actors to promote their culture and values on a global scale.

In his article, “Instrumental Factors of Soft Power in an Era of Global Turbulence”, Ofitserov-Belskiy argues that soft power is one of the most refined forms of instrumentalization of globalization. In his conception, soft power is not just an element of cultural attraction, but a form of significant power to impose norms, ideas, policies, and to control discourses (Ofitserov-Belskiy, 2024, pp. 180–186). In this context, the instrumentalization of globalization acts as a method by which particular worldviews become dominant, imposing the influence of the hegemonic state. As an example, Russia also uses the instrumentalization of globalization, but not coherently or attractively for the international scene because it has not removed traditional methods or the imposition of a historical vision of the state, which makes the soft power method more challenging to apply in this case (Ofitserov-Belskiy, 2024, pp. 189–191).

Applied research: illustrative case studies and thematic comparative analysis

Globalization has created an environment that enables actors to exercise their soft power, as a more connected world provides opportunities to utilize various tools of influence. After the Cold War, it became necessary to develop non-military methods for both states and non-state actors to impose their influence. In today's geopolitical landscape, it is internationally accepted that any global entity, if circumstances allow, has the right to use non-military force through peaceful means. The internet is the primary tool used to exercise soft power. In a globalized society, the internet enables users to stay connected to events everywhere in the world, which allows those seeking to influence on a larger scale to reach individuals quickly and broadly. While the digital environment benefits those who know how to harness it, it can also swiftly impact political dynamics, as negative information spreads just as rapidly (Bollier, 2003, pp. 16–18). However, it is essential to note that in the context of globalization, the internet is not the only tool for exercising soft power.

Hollywood films represent one of the most powerful means of imposing American soft power, as

they have been widely distributed and have influenced numerous cultures through globalization. Most of these films promote the “American Dream” and the possibility of achieving it for everyone. Furthermore, they not only promote American culture but also foster the inclusion of every individual, regardless of gender, race, or any other characteristic. The popularity and the success of these films led to the expansion of American soft power (Wu, 2023, pp. 64–65). Hollywood films promote the United States of America as a place of opportunity, freedom, and progress, which determines a positive image at a global level. The progressive perceptions that it has created facilitate international collaborations at the economic, political, and military levels, because it delivers the image of anchoring development. Likewise, in many films, America is portrayed as a hero, which at a global level affords it the possibility of military and non-military intervention from other states, carried out to help and support, rather than out of self-interest.

The music industry serves as a powerful tool for South Korean soft power propaganda. Korean pop music symbolizes, worldwide, the culture of the country, as its musical style and performance methods are a product and cultural asset of South Korea. Additionally, the government has a ministry, the Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Tourism, which provides federal funding and support to this industry (Shafie, 2025, pp. 1-2). K-Pop culture projects a positive image of South Korea through the uniqueness of its music and stage performances, characterizing it as a modern, young, and innovative nation. Globally, this phenomenon has a significant cultural impact, promoting various aspects of Korean culture, such as the language, fashion, and cuisine. The large number of fans for this musical style has also led to a tremendous increase in tourism, due to concerts held in South Korea, as well as the simple curiosity about Korean culture aroused by the admiration for K-Pop bands. Summarizing all these aspects, it is evident that this soft power instrument also has a profoundly positive impact on the South Korean economy.

One tool that China uses to exercise its soft power is the development of Confucius Institutes across various countries. The aim is to expand the reach of the Chinese language and culture to young people, especially middle school and high school students. They are organized with the help of educational institutions in the host country and also offer cultural and academic exchange programs. The Chinese state promotes the idea of creating beneficial ties with other nations, fostering multiculturalism,

and promoting a more harmonious world (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). The Western perspective on the People's Republic of China is characterized by suspicion. This opinion determines that one of the purposes of the Confucius Institutes is to diminish the negative image. These institutions promote a positive image of China, characterizing it as a modern, peaceful state that is open to global cooperation. This soft power instrument, through collaboration with various universities and the education of young people in state institutions, leads to the creation of elites more inclined to accept the Chinese regime.

To demonstrate that globalization has led to the evolution of new soft power instruments, we will conduct a comparative analysis between two highly active states on the international stage. The United States of America and the People's Republic of China impose soft power through instruments such as Netflix and TikTok. To achieve this, we will analyze why the two platforms serve as instruments of soft power and why they are more effective due to globalization.

Netflix has become a key agent of Western cultural soft power through the global distribution of its content: "We are here to entertain the world, one fan at a time" (About Netflix - Homepage, n.d.); this is the message that appears on the Netflix homepage. This global streaming platform aims to captivate its audience by constantly producing new films, series, and games that are diverse enough to appeal to a wide range of social groups. Netflix is a large-scale operation present in 190 countries and available in 50 languages. The entertainment it offers is tailored to different tastes and cultures, which has contributed to its acquisition of over 500 million users. The homepage also states, "When our series and films become cultural moments, you can feel it across music, books, fashion, travel and more" (About Netflix - Homepage, n.d.). Due to its popularity, Netflix has a significant influence that often manifests in creating new perceptions of America and other cultures. Not only does it promote cultural diversity, but it also reinforces a subtle form of Western influence on international audiences (Colman, 2024, pp. 55–56). By analyzing the number of Netflix content receivers and their ability to change their perception, it becomes clear that it represents a significant soft power tool.

TikTok operates differently; its content is created by users and is based on their ability to adapt to current trends quickly. This aspect enables the application to stay on top of the most frequently used apps. The application stands out for its participatory culture and its ability to create trends, making users adapt their conceptions about it. ByteDance created TikTok in 2016, when it was initially launched in the People's Republic of China,

and it was later introduced internationally in 2018. TikTok utilizes a customized algorithm that delivers personalized content to each user. Their interactions with the delivered product are analyzed to provide the most pleasant experience with the application. In a short time, TikTok has become one of the most widely used apps, an aspect that, together with its personalized algorithm, which determines what content to send and to whom, gives it a pervasive capacity for influence (Podosokorsky, 2022, pp. 119–120). The fact that TikTok is one of the most widely used apps today, and its ability to maintain this level of popularity, characterizes it as a relevant soft power instrument.

Although very different, what Netflix and TikTok share is that both are based on international accessibility and diffusion. Neither of these platforms would have been as effective in influencing if they had not been able to reach such a large and diverse audience. Their global impact is impressive, making them instruments of soft power. The exercise of these forms of soft power would not have been possible without globalization, because without it, they would not have had such easy and quick access to so many individuals or cultures. Globalization not only benefits certain powers but also allows actors to expand their influence, compete for it, or even overlap with that of other nations.

Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude that globalization has a significant impact on the expansion of soft power, enabling both state and non-state actors to exert influence on a global scale. The soft power strategies of these actors are supported by the digital environment, as globalization has increased connectivity and facilitated rapid information exchange. Using the theoretical framework, case studies, and comparative analysis helped to highlight the variety of tools available for exercising global influence.

Currently, various instruments are employed in soft power, each with a broad impact and providing significant benefits to those who utilize them. The accessibility to the general public and these mechanisms' ability to attract attention, both at the individual level and among other international actors, further boost their influence.

Cultural influence is one of the most important aspects of modern soft power because it draws the most positive attention. Portraying a positive image of the country on the global stage also influences other components, such as diplomatic relations and the economic sector. Globalization would not be possible

without individuals, and today, social groups are strongly influenced by trends, which drive the growth and ongoing evolution of soft power.

One limitation of this paper is the challenge of objectively measuring soft power, as it is based on perceptions, external image, and cultural factors that are

hard to quantify. A related area of research could explore how globalization impacts soft power in the current geopolitical situation, such as the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation or the changes in the United States during Donald Trump's second term.

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