# The Role of Culture Power: Examining the Influence of Popular Culture in Shaping Global Power Dynamics

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## Abstract

Establishing a causal link between popular culture and global power dynamics is challenging as it does not produce tangible outcomes. There is a lack of academic consensus on whether cultural power equates to soft power despite the growing influence of the media and entertainment industry. Considering popular culture a soft power in cultural diplomacy, this article examines the changing paradigms of content moderation and regional lockout in the global power dynamics through case studies of the Korean wave, American Pop culture, and Japanese Manga and Anime. It uses the Saunders Research Onion method with an interpretive approach to subjectively explore the aspects of cultural influence. Similarly, it analyses the evolution of recurring themes in the case studies. Data collection employs a longitudinal approach to study the impact of technology and changing audience preferences. The primary data sources include expert interviews, supplemented by secondary sources such as relevant literature, reports, and media contents. The findings highlight that cultural diplomacy as a soft-power approach effectively contributes to the nation-branding concept that now incorporates new demands, actions, and goals.

## Introduction

In 2023, the world mourned the death of Satoru Gojo (Fig. 1), an anime character from Jujutsu Kaisen. It was termed a 'massive blow' to the anime fans (Sen, 2023). Therefore, the starting point for this article is bridging pop culture and its wider influence to shape perceptions through mass consumption for individuals and soft power strategies for the states. Popular culture, is it a culture at all? Cultural anthropologists diverge at this point because there are various strains of thoughts as to what culture is. Scholars who differentiate between high culture and inferior culture do not account for popular culture in the same plain as ethnic cultural practices or high culture. Post-modernists do not distinguish between them, while political analysts follow the Gramscian philosophy of popular culture as a means to exert power and establish hegemony. The complexities of defining popular culture lie within the use of the term culture as it has no

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uniform definition. Storey (2013) adopts three broad possibilities for defining culture: one is a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; second, as a particular way of life; and then practices of creative expression as a third way (p. 21). To link popular culture and its role in the global power process (if it has any) I adopt a post-structuralist view of culture as a direct or indirect process of signifying intellectual and creative expression through any means.
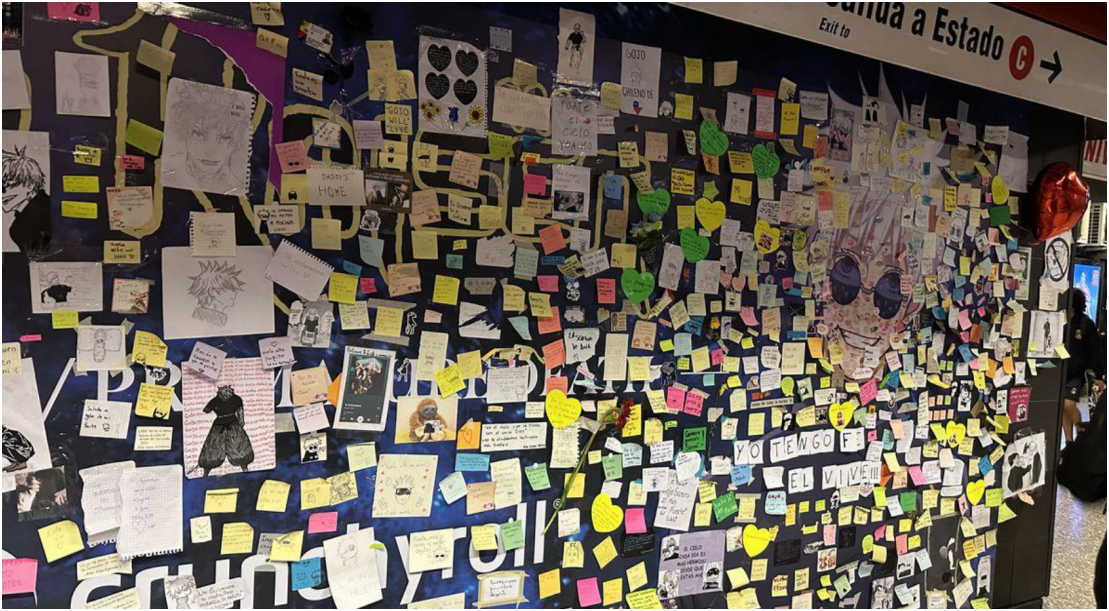


*Fig. 1: Death of Satoru Gojo*
*Source: The Hindustan Times, Sumanti Sen (2023). Accessed 27th October 2023*

Similarly, conventional power is broadly a 'contest', a contest of advancing personal objectives at an individual level or the collective interest of a group or states. Fiske (1993) and Torelli & Shavitt (2010) orient power as a 'basic force in a social relationship' (p. 703). Indeed, cultural antecedents, nurtured beliefs, attitudes, and interests influence power perspectives. Therefore, I propose that popular culture vividly creates an environment to supplement cultural orientation through content consumption from a socio-cognitive and behavioural perspective. The interlink between content consumption and its effect in a global scenario to create perceptions and develop a power struggle is hard to ignore. After all, cultural differences can create friction in approaching any issue and inevitably create power struggles and manifest in various forms. In this light, I aim to bridge global pop culture consumption on a geopolitical scale with soft power policies and how they affect nation branding through cultural diplomacy.

**Theoretical Assumptions**

The critical discussion on whether popular culture exists in geopolitical interplay is counterproductive for the conceptual framework of popular geopolitics because it may propagate a specific worldview. Saunders and Strukov (2018) maintain that interrelating pop culture with international politics can hybridize 'real politics' and 'impression-based politics' (p. 3). However, orthodox disciplines (e.g. history or sociology) cannot web a methodology

to incorporate pop culture within geopolitics. Therefore, to explore alternative meanings of popular geopolitics with a post-structuralist paradigm is a must. Since the subsequent chapters divulge how states may employ pop culture to extend their influence in the geopolitical arena, certain theoretical assumptions are required. First, post-structuralism considers the 'popular' as a 'culture' because it does not distinguish between high and inferior cultures. Hence, post-structural parameters create a political space where dominant powers can build pop culture institutions to penetrate 'nation branding' without conventional power usage. Thus, the soft power of popular culture is a vital tool to promote international relations in global power dynamics. It gives us a perspective of how ideological battles are fought in the digital realm through content production for global audience. For instance, in 2016, the UN designated the American Pop culture character Wonder Woman as an honorary ambassador for Women's Empowerment (dropped later), which could imply women's freedom of expression is at its peak in the United States.
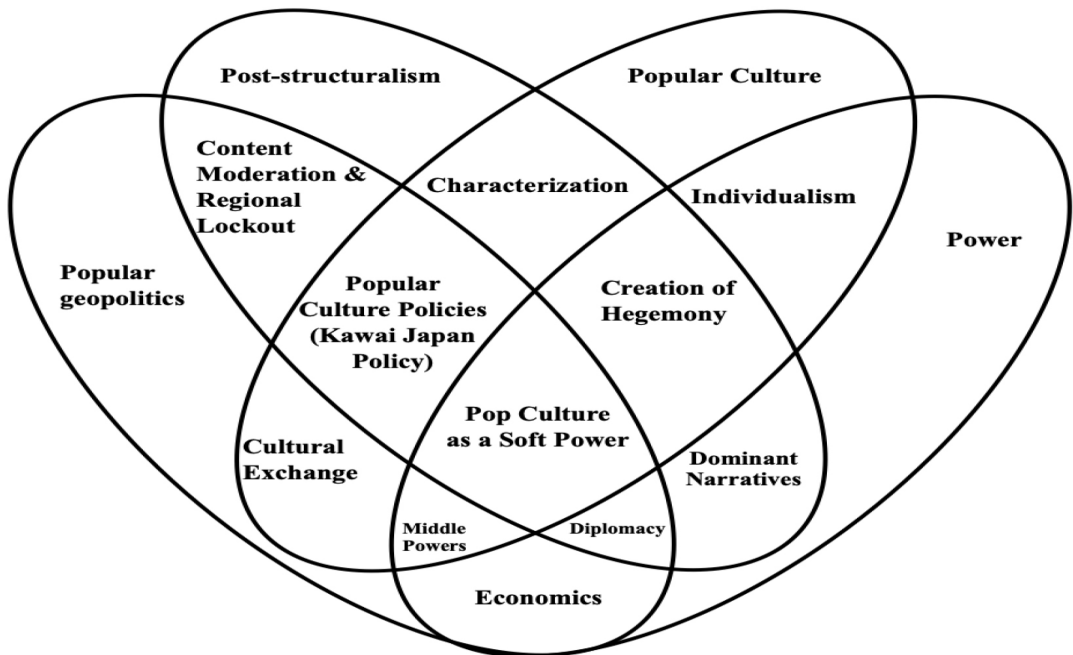


*Fig. 2: Theoretical Assumptions of the Study*
*Prepared by the Author*

Likewise, analysis of pop culture power dynamics needs to demarcate boundaries to how they envision the concept of power. I apply the cross-cultural distinction method developed by Torelli & Shavitt (2010) that distinguishes between individualism and collectivism (p. 705). However, I extend their effect in pop culture to construe a theoretical basis for 'culture power' in popular geopolitics. I primarily distinguish two distinctive lines of horizontal and vertical conception of power. It provides us with four categories of popular power concepts broadly encompassing geopolitical interaction based on pop culture. First, vertical individualism (USA) focuses on acquiring status via competition, while horizontal individualism (Sweden) wants uniqueness rather than status. Similarly, horizontal collectivism (Israel) emphasizes interdependence

and collective responsibility without authority, and vertical collectivism (Japan) supports competition of the in-groups with out-groups (Torelli & Shavitt, 2010).

This distinction allows us to assume that cultural attraction to various popular cultures is an intangible power or soft power (Nye, 2004). Additionally, such a soft power regime can be understood as a form of nation branding without direct control. The subsequent section clarifies these positions of different countries through case studies of the USA, South Korea, and Japan. This line of thought shares similarities with the Gramscian hegemony concept because popular culture can persuade public opinion, intertwining political and civil aspects of influence. The current geopolitical dynamics in which regional lockout and content moderation have led to debates on who controls what and for whom. It effectively demonstrates that the soft power approach is an approach considered by nations while shaping their policies.

## Research Methodology

The analysis is based on the Saunders Research Onion Method (Fig. 3) with a post-structuralist philosophy and interpretive approach to subjectively explore the aspects of popular culture influence. Similarly, it applies thematic analysis to reveal the evolution of the recurring themes in the case studies such as American Pop Culture, Korean Wave, and Japanese Anime. Data collection employs a longitudinal approach to study the impact of technology and changing audience preferences on cultural influence.

The primary data sources for this study include expert interviews and surveys, supplemented by secondary sources such as relevant literature, reports, and media content. The findings are utilized to understand the changing paradigms of content moderation, and regional lockout in the geopolitical arena. Finally, the concept of cultural diplomacy as a soft-power approach is suggested based on the analysis of various pop culture regimes.

## Culture Power in Global Power Dynamics
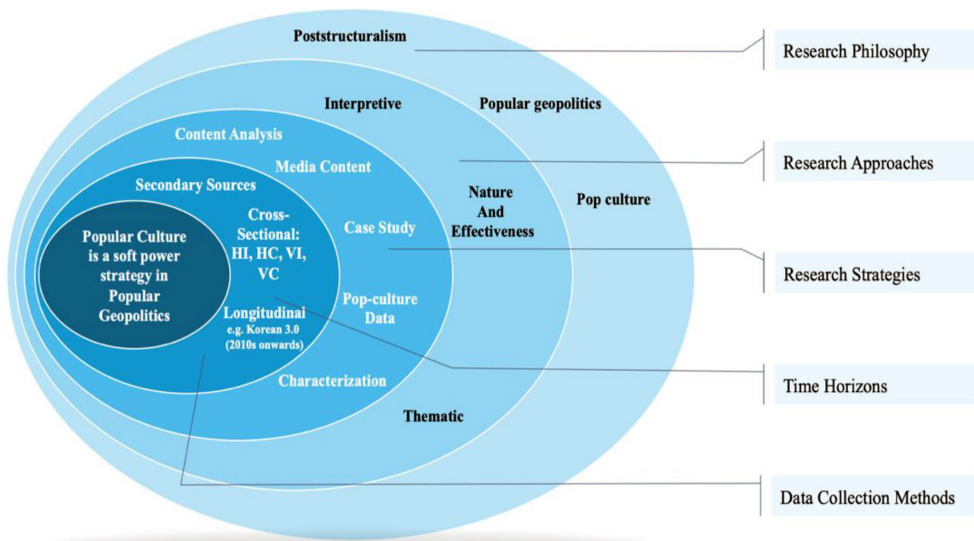


*Fig. 3: Research Onion Method*
*Prepared by the Author, 2023*

*Korean Wave*

The Korean Wave or Hallyu is a cultural phenomenon in which the global popularity of South Korean popular culture has risen drastically since the 1990s. The term primarily refers to the spread of K-dramas, K-pop, film, and fashion, but can also include animation, video games, technology, literature, beauty products, and food. It expanded rapidly into Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe during the 2000s evolving into a global phenomenon. Following the financial crisis in 1997 and the end of military rule over the South Korean entertainment industry, South Korea has emerged as a major exporter of popular culture (Kim, 2021).

The first generation of the Korean wave (Hallyu 1.0) was the initial period of popularity of K-dramas and movies in China, Taiwan, Japan, and some other parts of Asia. During this period from the late 1990s to  through mid-2000s, it remained confined to Southeast Asia. During the second generation (Hallyu 2.0), k-pop groups gained significant attention from global audiences. The use of popular websites like YouTube, the use of social media for communication with fans, diversity of popular content led to rapid growth of cultural influence beyond Asia to Europe. The third generation (Hallyu 3.0) is the period starting from mid-2010. Additionally, cartoons, animation, publications, and video games are included in the export content (Kim, 2021). Geographical boundaries have expanded further, and South Korean movies and dramas are now aired through global OTT streaming services such as Netflix, contributing to increased recognition of South Korean content.

The Korean wave has been recognized as a form of soft power and as an important economic asset for South Korea. Hallyu also increases the international audiences' interest in South Korean culture and South Korea overall, and thus,  indirectly boosting the country's economy through tourism. The consumers of Korean culture might more broadly acquire interest in, and sympathy for, Korea's geopolitical and historical challenges and its values. For example, many international fans learned about several historical events such as the Japanese occupation of Korea, and the Korean War from Korea's perspective through K-drama and K-pop. Given that the bulk of international fans are young and that they are potential future authority figures, the cultural industry could produce some lasting soft power rewards (Kim, 2021).

The South Korean entertainment industry, including K-pop music, K-dramas, and Korean cinema has made Korean culture popular among many of the people across the world. This cultural phenomenon has extended beyond entertainment, as people around the world have been fascinated with  all the things Korean, including its cuisine, fashion, and beauty products. K-food with diverse flavors, delicious street food, and iconic dishes, such as kimchi and bibimbap have tremendous influence on people the worldwide. K-fashion, known for its unique blend of tradition and innovation, has captured the attention of fashion enthusiasts with its stylish and often unconventional designs. K-beauty products, celebrated for their innovative skincare routines and high-quality cosmetics, have been phenomenal in the global market. These Korean products have opened up market opportunities for Korea all around the world with increasing demand. South Korea not only prioritizes the preservation of its cultural heritage but also promotes its culture on a global scale (Kim, 2021). In these lines, the Korean Wave has the potential to emerge as a focal point for public interest, thereby turning it into a diplomatic tool for the nation in question. Among the East Asian nations, South Korea has become a country that has managed to retain and uphold its cultural identity, even in the face of the rapid dissemination of Western culture.

### Korean Drama (K-drama)

Korean dramas are renowned for their exceptional production quality, well-developed characters, and engaging scripts. Consequently, Korean drama series have evolved into a vital component of South Korean tourism promotion, driven by the immense enthusiasm of individuals eager to visit the actual filming locations. Historical Korean dramas, in particular, offer valuable insights and spark interest in Korea's history. For instance, "Mr. Sunshine" delves into the struggles of activists fighting for Korean independence in the face of impending colonization. The drama received acclaim for its outstanding cinematography, profound storytelling, as well as its portrayal of resilient female characters and the lives of the lower classes (Ju, 2021).

The 2021 South Korean drama, "Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha," received predominantly positive critical acclaim, especially for its straightforward storyline, exceptional performances by the cast, stunning cinematography, and the charming and soothing atmosphere it conveyed. Variety recognized the show as one of "The Best International TV Shows of 2021," ranking it sixth on their list (Ju, 2021). The drama's straightforward light-hearted narrative offered a welcome escape from the gloom and uncertainty of the pandemic. The drama's popularity triggered a significant surge in inquiries about the bags, clothing, jewellery, and shoes featured in the series. Moreover, the wine, bags, and poetry books showcased in the drama became bestsellers, and there was also a notable increase in visitors to various filming locations (Ju, 2021).

"Twenty-Five Twenty-One," a 2022 South Korean drama, portrays the lives of five characters and their challenges during the IMF era in Korea. The series achieved a remarkable feat by consistently making it to Netflix's "Global Top 10" list (non-English edition) for ten consecutive weeks, up to May 1, 2022 (Ju, 2021). The drama's triumph can be attributed to its evocation of a "retro-sentimental" atmosphere, achieved through the use of props, fashion, and settings that stirred nostalgia in those who lived through the 1990s. It also resonated with viewers by depicting the hardships of the IMF period in Korea, drawing parallels to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This drama also had a positive impact on tourism and the sales of products featured in the series. In the Philippines, the drama's focus on fencing generated increased interest in the sport. Additionally, "Goblin," a 2016 series, gained international popularity, leading to parodies of the drama on various social media platforms, including participation from celebrities and political figures (Ju, 2021).

K-beauty, as popularized by Korean dramas and celebrities, has become a global phenomenon known for its holistic approach to the body aesthetics. This beauty trend emphasizes Asian-Oriental features with fair skin, and the use of skincare products, makeup, and accessories. Korean beauty products, boasting ingredients like ginseng and traditional medicinal qualities, have gained the worldwide recognition, resulting in South Korean cosmetics experiencing substantial growth in the global beauty market (Ju, 2021). Additionally, the influence of K-beauty has extended to cosmetic surgery practices, notably in Seoul, as individuals seek to embody the idealized beauty standards promoted by Korean celebrities. This "Koreanized" version of beauty, blending elements of Oriental and Occidental ideals, sets a global beauty standard that transcends cultural boundaries and underscores the consumer-driven, neoliberal logic of modernization (Ju, 2021).

K-drama has ignited various fashion trends, with items and accessories worn by the cast members experiencing surges in sales. For instance, Gong Yoo's Lanvin coat, Kim Go-eun's

Lancôme lipstick, and Lee Dong-wook's Fedora became highly sought after. Kim In-yook's poetry book, "The Physics of Love," regained popularity when one of its verses was featured in the series. Moreover, the drama significantly boosted tourism at its filming locations, positively impacting the local economy. Additionally, the original soundtracks from the series dominated the local digital music charts. Since 2017, it has even surpassed "Descendants of the Sun" (2016) in terms of video-on-demand sales. *The Korea Times* noted that the drama's success can be attributed to its innovative plot and the profound perspective it offers on the life of the goblin, cursed with eternal life as punishment for bearing a bloody sword in his chest. This narrative immerses the audience in a captivating fantasy story, enriched by the intricate exploration of life and death, making the plot all the more intriguing (Ju, 2021).

K-dramas initially had limited recognition in the Middle East. However, their popularity surged in the early 2000s following the broadcast of series like Autumn in My Heart, Winter Sonata, and Jumong in various Middle Eastern countries. K-dramas, such as Jewel in the Palace found widespread praise in the region, which was unexpected given cultural differences between Korea and the Arab world (Kaptan & Tutucu, 2021). The success of K-dramas in the Middle East can be attributed to socio-cultural factors, such as shared family values, romantic love stories and less explicit content, and themes of friendship and altruism. Despite the geographical and cultural distance, the emotional realism portrayed in K-dramas has allowed Middle Eastern viewers to connect with the content. Arab women, in particular, have formed a transcultural digital fandom around K-dramas, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural proximity (Kaptan & Tutucu, 2021). The success of K-dramas has also had economic implications, increasing exports of Korean consumer goods to the Middle East. Additionally, the soft power of K-dramas has become a valuable resource for South Korea in enhancing its international image and cultural diplomacy in the region. This soft power is harnessed through K-dramas' emotionally powerful and self-reflexive narratives, which transcend cultural boundaries and appeal to global audiences. Ultimately, the attractiveness of K-dramas has contributed to deeper engagement between Middle Eastern fans and Korean culture, promoting Korea's international image and economic ties, and elevating the concept of soft power (Kaptan & Tutucu, 2021).

K-dramas have significantly influenced American popular culture, leading to the adaptation of several K-dramas into American TV series such as "Somewhere Between" and "The Good Doctor" (Jo, 2021). The popularity of K-dramas in the United States has exceeded the representation of Korean Americans in American media, creating a positive synergy between the success of Korean American and Korean Canadian artists and the appeal of K-dramas. K-dramas have not only generated economic gains for South Korea but also played a role in promoting the Korean language, creating a desire for transnational migration, and enhancing South Korea's soft power. This soft power is built on the perceived value of Korean cultural and commercial products and contributes to cultural diplomacy and international relations (Jo, 2021). However, it also faces challenges such as "K-fatigue," the potential impact of individual celebrities' behaviors on the national image, and geopolitical vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, K-dramas, supported by digital technology, have the potential to further strengthen South Korea's soft power, especially among younger generations in the United States. Despite its success in the Asian region, South Korea's soft power influence in the United States is rapidly evolving, with K-dramas being part of this cultural diplomacy effort (Jo, 2021).

**American Pop Culture**

America's dominance in the global pop culture is not often contested. Primarily, it is often traced back to the Cold War era (1947–1991), a period of geopolitical rift between the US and USSR and their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc. The victory of the US–backed European Allies, basically of UK and France had made non–European countries gave American advantages. As a result, the US could spread influence over countries across the world through its popular culture. Eventually, its popular cultures, including music, film, dance, and fashion spread American values of individualism, and freedom as well as diminish the influence of communism (Nowaki, 2015). However, its role as a tool to promote American interests was recognized long before. President Woodrow Wilson declared that film is the "highest medium for the dissemination of public intelligence" and that it "lends itself… to the presentation of American plans and purposes" (Nowaki, 2015). During the WW II, when Japan was an ally to the Nazi Germany, there was an increasing trend of production of anti-Japanese films, conducive to portraying it as a threat to national security and values (Nowaki, 2015). In 1947, the House of Representatives' House Un-American Activities Committee, began questioning actors, directors, writers, and other Hollywood-affiliated individuals about whether they had connections to the Communist Party (Crothers, 2021). Those who declined to testify or were identified as adherents of the Party were subjected to blacklisting and had their careers virtually destroyed (Crothers, 2021).



*Fig. 4: The Hollywood Ten*
*Source: Retrieved from skyscape. Accessed 27ᵗʰ October 2023.*

In the Soviet Union, while Hollywood films were banned, they were widely disseminated through the black market, and support for American producers and actors was significant (Tsvetkova, 2018). In that way, the US penetrated different communities the worldwide with its politically charged narrattives. Cultural tools were once again used after the 9/11 attacks, and subsequently the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The 2002 *Sum of All Fears* received

hardware from the Pentagon. Eventually, CIA and military officials consulted this Hollywood blockbuster since it  supposedly squared  a positive image of the American military (Fraser, 2015).

Similarly, the US used its popular music to heighten the American assertive actions in different parts of the world over the course of history. While patriotic songs and performances were echoed, anti-war protests were not promoted or succeeded in mainstream radio (Garofalo, 2013). The Telecommunications Act of 1996, which included the Communications Decency Act, led to the concentration of media ownership being tied to a select group of industry giants, some with explicit affiliation to the conservative Bush administration (Garofalo, 2013).

By the 1990s, four companies controlled 90% of radio ad revenue in the country. During the decade, radio channels had begun to prohibit certain songs that were seen as sensitive or inappropriate (Garofalo, 2013). Notably, the band *The Dixie Chicks* was banned from around seventy-four radio stations after the lead singer criticized Bush's military actions in Iraq (Garofalo, 2013).  Meanwhile, songs such as "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" by Alan Jackson topped the commercial charts, and, eight years later,  "Empire State of Mind" with the line "Long live the world trade!" abruptly became popular the worldwide. All of these events embody how the US, through its policies, exerts influence over people in international communities.  Another example is an iconic comic book hero Captain America, a character who epitomizes American ideals in the hero – courage and sense of duty, diversity and multiculturalism – who invariably defeats American enemies in battle (Dittmer, 2005). The international outreach of the character is significant, with the Marvel film *Captain America: Civil War* being one of the highest-grossing films of all times globally, having grossed more than one billion USD.

The influence of American culture through mediums of entertainment has not been entirely unchallenged. Regional lockout policies have resulted in some movies being banned in certain countries because of content deemed culturally sensitive or politically controversial. The documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) was banned in Kuwait as it was deemed insulting to the Saudi royal family. The film 2005 *Brokeback Mountain* was banned in parts of the Middle East and China because of its portrayal of homosexuality. *Zoolander* (2001) was banned in Malaysia for seemingly portraying Malaysian sweatshops. More recently, the 2023 film *Barbie* was banned in Vietnam for a scene that portrays a cartoon map showing China's territorial claim over the South China Sea. Kuwait also banned the film, citing that it promoted beliefs "alien to Kuwaiti society".

Mass consumption of American products alarmingly surges with the US's promotion of popular cultures. As a result, people across the world have been immensely fascinated with the US and its industrial products. Moreover, people gradually changed their perceptions of and attitudes toward America and American people. It creates a situation where US narratives and and values are sought after by other communities as well, such as the American dream. The US can subtly advance their diplomatic or economic agendas. Further,  American pop cultures have been amplified with an increasing trend of social media in Nepali societies. In Europe, American movies account for around 70% of European box-office sales every year. Platforms like Netflix and Spotify are used globally, with their most popular contents originating from the US. Furthermore, American social media networks, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become powerful channels for exporting American entertainment, fashion, lifestyles, and cultural trends to international audiences.

## Japanese Manga and Anime Culture

Manga and Anime (Japanese Animation) have gained popularity the worldwide. Global Pop icons include anime characters, such as Luffy (One Piece), Light Yagami (Death Note), or even Eren Yeager (Attack on Titan). The growing influence of anime worldwide has enabled a 'cultural corridor' for the Japanese cultural diplomacy approach. Japan has officially pushed Anime and Manga as a cultural attraction policy to enhance its 'cultural power' as a soft power. Taro (2006) outlined that Japan aims to leverage this industry to substantiate its cultural diplomacy (Iwabuchi, 2020). For instance, Japan also started the International Manga Award to promote the industry worldwide, inviting international artists. Thus, anime has become one of the Japanese popular culture icons because any anime fan critiques that anime is not any other form of animated cartoons; they are animations, not necessarily 'anime'. The cultural branding of anime has allowed Japan to hegemonize cultural products such as Manga and Anime or even characters. For instance, Japan appointed Doraemon as its official anime ambassador to increase the 'cultural appeal' to brand the country as 'Cool Japan'. It has placed anime as a pop culture element with equal recognition of sumo wrestling and kabuki theatre (Iwabuchi, 2020).

Anime has evolved into a multifaceted entity with economic significance and cultural importance, becoming a crucial element in Japan's efforts to boost its economic prowess (Onemu, 2020). The approach to managing export markets has shifted away from traditional methods as it seeks innovative ways for economic growth. While the automotive and electronics sectors were once Japan's economic pillars, they have faced challenges from rival industries in other countries (Onemu, 2020). The future of Japan's economy is now marked by uncertainty, transitioning from a focus on technological sectors and investing in the USA for export opportunities to a greater emphasis on culture and overseas market investments. Anime's cultural appeal is a driving force, contributing immensely  to Japan's revenue. However, it is worth noting that anime sales are no longer experiencing a rapid growth. Consequently, the Japanese government has launched initiatives aimed at enhancing the global understanding and acceptance of Japanese cultural content Onemu, 2020). These efforts serve a dual purpose: elevating Japan's economic status and piquing international interest in Japanese culture. The individual interest in Japan, in turn, leads to increased tourism and the sale of Japanese export goods. Moreover, the allure of Japanese culture fosters the development of economic and cultural connections with Western nations and businesses, including media giants like Disney and Studio Ghibli, known for their profit-sharing collaborations Onemu, 2020).

## 'One Piece' of Japanese Anime Culture

*One Piece* unfolds as an epic adventure, with the protagonist Monkey D. Luffy, whose aspiration is to follow in the legendary footsteps of the pirate known as Gold Roger. While most characters perceive the *King of the Pirates* title as a gender-neutral distinction granted to the strongest living pirate and the possessor of the One Piece treasure, both Luffy and Roger associate it with absolute freedom at sea. Thus, Luffy's ultimate dream is to become the King of the Pirates. Eiichiro Oda's extensive narrative, showcased in the manga, has allowed him to craft a rich and intricate world, characterized by its multifaceted characters, captivating storytelling, and distinct rules. Each crew member holds a distinct dream that complements Luffy's aspiration, making them a tightly-knit and formidable group. The concept of 'Nakama' denoting a bond stronger than family, is central to their identity. Oda's meticulous attention to detail extends to side characters and antagonists, each with their origin, history, and aspirations,

adding layers of complexity to the narrative and forging a captivating and unique world that has a prominently Japanese cultural influence (Singh, 2021).

The primary emphasis of academic research on *One Piece* has been on its literary significance in comparison to Western or European counterparts, along with its portrayal of the rich historical cultures of Asia and Japan. Despite its prominence in Japanese pop culture, academic attention on Eiichiro Oda's creation has been somewhat limited. Oda's short-term storytelling captivates readers on a page-to-page basis, while his long-term narrative planning incorporates various folk tales of Japanese culture. *One Piece* has created fan practices and engagement on social media platforms and fan-generated content associated with One Piece which promotes the Japanese 'Cool Japan' policy (Singh, 2021)

*One Piece* fans engage with the series through online platforms, primarily Reddit and YouTube. On Reddit, the *One Piece* subreddit serves as a hub for discussions and threads related to manga and anime, where fans can dissect the latest chapters and episodes (Merila, 2020). Reddit uses flairs to categorize discussions, with 'current chapter' flairs enabling fans to engage in community discussions about the most recent chapter's contents and discoveries, mirroring the experience of YouTube chapter reviews. Fans on Reddit share their emotions, ratings, likes, dislikes, speculations, character development insights, and plot progression thoughts like YouTube videos. *One Piece* has maintained an already established perception of the positive message of Japanese pop culture. It has also allowed the Japanese media industry to tie up globally to create other anime. For instance, Netflix partnered with Shueisha to create the live-action of *One Piece* (Merila, 2020).

However, several anime series have faced regional lockout in various countries due to their content. For instance, *Shojo Tsubaki*, banned in almost every country, was deemed inappropriate for its gruesome and sexually explicit content, including pedophilia. In India, *the Record of Ragnarok* was banned because of the depiction of Shiva, in a manner seen as disrespectful. *Attack on Titan* faced a ban in China due to its graphic and violent scenes. *Hetalia: Axis Powers* was banned in South Korea for its offensive portrayal of certain countries. *Pokémon* was banned in Saudi Arabia for allegedly promoting Christianity. *Inuyashiki* was initially without age restriction was banned in Russia(Clement, 2023). *High School DxD* was banned in New Zealand for its explicit nudity. *Crayon Shin-Chan* was banned in India due to concerns about its influence on children and nudity. *Tokyo Ghoul* was banned in Russia because of cannibalism. *Death Note* was banned in China because high school students were creating "Death Note" books targeting classmates. *Kite* was banned in Norway because of its sexual and ferocious content, violating the law on Child Sexual Assault Material (CSAM). These examples of ban demonstrate that not every anime is received in the same manner by state authorities (Clement, 2023).

Nevertheless, Japan has effectively harnessed its cultural exports, notably manga and anime, to cultivate a positive global image that reinforces its identity as a modern, innovative, and culturally rich nation. Initiatives, such as the Manga Ambassador program illustrate how countries can employ their cultural assets to build relationships and positively influence others. Furthermore, Japan's private sector, notably through the "Toyota Way" management style, has played a role in public diplomacy by emphasizing continuous development, cooperation, and respect for people, enhancing Japan's reputation as a pioneer in quality control (Clement, 2023). These public diplomacy efforts have significantly bolstered Japan's soft power and

global impact, fostering a favorable perception of Japan as a contemporary, creative, and culturally rich nation, and solidifying its position as an international leader and a responsible global citizen. These endeavours have also fortified connections with other nations, particularly in Asia, where support for Japanese culture and business practices is robust, expanding Japan's influence and economic presence in the region (Clement, 2023).

### Nation Branding and Cultural Diplomacy

### Nation Branding
Khoshnevis & Rojas-Méndez (2023) define nation branding as a systematic process of involving public and private sectors to design a marking strategy for the nation, communicate the nation's core values and national identity, and apply branding tactics to promote a nation's image, improve the country's reputation among all different audiences, differentiate a nation from other nations and reach economic, social, political, business and international gains' (p. 118). It comprises emotional and experiential elements and is primarily geared toward achieving political and economic benefits, such as boosting tourism, attracting foreign direct investment, increasing exports, and drawing talent. This concept is relevant on both domestic and international fronts and necessitates collaboration among multiple stakeholders. It spans political, economic, social, and cultural aspects and wields a substantial influence on market dynamics and economic outcomes (Khoshnevis & Rojas-Méndez, 2023)

Scholars have proposed multiple  concepts of nation branding. Khoshnevis & Rojas-Méndez (2023) list out various concepts of nation branding such as Florek (2005) characterizes it as the process of creating positive associations for a nation, its people, and its products. At the same time, while Gudjonsson (2005) underscores its role in shaping a favourable environment for a nation's brands to compete in markets, emphasizing its intersection with both politics and diplomacy. Similarly, Fan (2010) sees nation branding as the application of marking and marketing techniques to enhance a nation's image. Further, Anholt (2008) defines it as a systematic process aligning a country's actions, investments, innovations, and communications to strengthen its competitive identity. Simultaneously, de Chernatony (2008) describes it as a cluster of values that allows a nation to promise a unique and welcoming experience, and Jansen (2008) highlights the selective deployment of a nation's identity to boost its marketability. Additionally, Szondi (2008) posits that nation branding involves the strategic presentation of a country to create reputational capital through various forms of promotion.

Dinnie (2022) views the quality of the product that a nation wants to market as the main factor that determines the success of a nation's branding initiatives. Successful examples, such as Slovenia and Croatia demonstrate the value of strong marketing strategies by highlighting their countries' natural beauty and unique cultural identities following their secession. Another noteworthy achievement is Tony Blair's "Cool Britannia" campaign for the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, frustration and a lack of cooperation at the highest levels of the public and business sectors are to blame for nation branding failures, as seen in Switzerland and Belgium. To prevent contradicting signals that could undermine the overall branding efforts, effective nation branding requires coordinated efforts across several sectors.

### Kaneva–proposed Branding Approaches

#### Technical-Economic Approach

The technical-economic approach to nation branding primarily finds its place in the realm of marketing. This perspective is characterized by a functionalist view, considering nation branding as a strategic tool to enhance a nation's competitive advantage in the global marketplace. It emphasizes the importance of attracting investments, tourists, human capital, or trade to bolster national well-being. This approach is instrumentalist, treating national identity as a commodity to be managed and deployed strategically, akin to branding products. Practitioners argue that nations should embrace branding to maintain their competitive edge in a global market while acknowledging the hegemony of global competition. This perspective largely neglects the political dimensions and implications of nation branding, focusing instead on marketing and economic considerations (Kaneva, 2011).

#### Political Approach

The political approach to nation branding focuses on the interplay between nation branding and public diplomacy. Unlike the technical-economic perspective, political studies often explore the relationship between public diplomacy and nation branding. It views that nation-states operate in a globally competitive context and that managing their reputation is crucial for advancing their interests in international relations. While the political approach spans both the US and European perspectives, it tends to see public diplomacy as part of a broader strategy for national image or reputation management. This perspective sometimes envisions nation branding as a means to influence strategic decisions about national policies, making it appear almost equivalent to public diplomacy (Kaneva, 2011).

#### Cultural Approach

The cultural approach to nation branding offers a distinct perspective characterized by its grounding in critical theories of culture, communication, and society. Unlike technical-economic and political approaches, cultural studies do not aim to advance a theory of nation branding for practical application but instead focus on critiquing nation branding's discourses and practices as they relate to national identity, culture, and governance. The central theme in this category is the examination of how nation branding limits the range of possible national identity narratives and shapes them for the benefit of external (Western) audiences, often perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing neo-colonial discourses (Kaneva, 2011).

Though it is headquartered in the Netherlands, IKEA maintains a close association with Sweden through its advertising and branding, using the Swedish flag's yellow and blue in its iconic logo, serving Swedish meatballs in its stores, and naming products after Swedish locations and words (Soni, 2019). Similarly, Apple, whose products are largely manufactured in China, promotes its products with their label as "Designed by Apple in California" to emphasize their origin. Brands like Tag Heuer capitalize on their heritage by incorporating the brand's history alongside its logo, as seen in "Swiss avant-garde since 1860" Soni, 2019). This connection to a country of origin has long been a marketing strategy to convey product quality, credibility, and value based on established perceptions about certain countries. By associating a brand with its home country, marketers aim to extend the brand's lifespan, leveraging trust and reputation cultivated over time. Meanwhile, for states, it provides a way to promote its international image.

**Cultural Diplomacy**

Cultural diplomacy involves engaging with foreign states and cultures to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation, often as part of a nation's foreign policy. It serves various objectives, from economic development to security, but can also aim to create goodwill and positive sentiment without specific goals (Hurn, 2016). Cultural diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy, which encompasses all government-funded programs intended to influence public opinion abroad. It plays a unique role in promoting understanding between nations and building relationships, with music, art, sports, and other cultural elements being significant tools during the Cold War (Hurn, 2016). Cultural diplomacy is most effective when it operates as a two-way, long-term strategy, and should not be a substitute for broader foreign policies. Instead, it complements and strengthens relationships, even when other aspects of international relations are strained, promoting flexibility, creativity, and the nurturing of human connections between countries.

Cultural diplomacy, for instance, in Morocco began to take shape in the shadow of an autocratic regime that had historically relied on economic and military means for its foreign policy objectives (Wust & Nicolai, 2023). The Moroccan leadership, under King Mohammed VI, has emphasized the importance of promoting the "Label Maroc" or the Moroccan nation brand, focusing on characteristics such as democracy, safety, openness, tradition, peace, international cooperation, and cultural diversity. To propagate this image, Morocco has employed economic and cultural diplomacy as key foreign engagement strategies (Wust & Nicolai, 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the authoritarian context in which these policies operate, where the king's vision significantly influences political life, and red lines exist regarding the king's personality, his interpretation of Islam, the Western Sahara issue, and the royal version of democracy. Additionally, the authoritarian political system in Morocco involves strategies of repression and legitimation, which influence and restrict public discourse and the development of a free creative industry (Wust & Nicolai, 2023).

Similarly, World Expos (Dubai Expo) revolve around the core principles of cultural diplomacy, focused on art, culture, and technology, to construct a positive image of a nation and support its political objectives (Engelland-Gay, 2023). They grant nations, especially host nations, the opportunity to present idealized versions of themselves and their future, even if that vision diverges from reality. These grand events have evolved over the years, adapting to the changing priorities of our world, from celebrating industrial and technological progress to addressing global issues like sustainability (Engelland-Gay, 2023). The ambitious nature of World Expos, as global gatherings dedicated to solving pressing challenges and promoting a universal theme, underscores their significance in shaping cultural narratives, even though the US interest in them has lately waned. Despite this decline in American enthusiasm, World Expos continue to draw massive global audiences, making them an enduring cultural and political force with the power to influence perceptions of nations and their aspirations (Engelland-Gay, 2023).

China employs film as a tool for cultural diplomacy, influenced by President Xi Jinping's vision of the "Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation" (Zhu, 2023). This approach seeks to balance domestic and international objectives, including promoting its soft power. The Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC) serves as a case study for this cultural diplomacy strategy, acting as both a political and commercial entity (Zhu, 2023). The festival was originally established in 2003 as a cultural showcase but has evolved to incorporate international co-productions and transnational intellectual property rights (IPR)

trade, emphasizing commercial and diplomatic aspects. The festival's agenda shifted from artistic orientation to one driven by political and commercial forces, aiming to enhance China's national identity and contemporary cultural image. While it seeks to promote its national brand globally, GZDOC has yet to gain significant international recognition in the Western market (Zhu, 2023).

The landscape of cultural diplomacy has evolved significantly over the past decade. It has been government-led with a strong foreign policy agenda, the recent shift emphasizes the desirable outcomes of diplomatic activities, such as mutual understanding, respect, peace, and stability between nations, as fundamental purposes of cultural diplomacy (Grincheva, 2023). It is apparent that the role of non-state actors in achieving these goals, expanding beyond traditional government-driven cultural diplomacy has become vital. With an increasing level of heterogeneity of actors on the global stage and the complex web of intersecting cultural relations, non-governmental players, including museums, corporations, and digital platforms, are now taking center stage in cultural diplomacy (Grincheva, 2023).

## Conclusion

This article underscores the profound influence of popular culture on global power dynamics and the vital role it plays in shaping both individual perceptions and state-level soft power strategies. By adopting a post-structuralist perspective, it illuminates the complex nature of culture as a vehicle for intellectual and creative expression. An in–depth analysis of the soft power dynamics emphasizes the significance of nation branding through cultural diplomacy, showcasing how popular culture consumption can influence power struggles and ideological battles in the digital realm. Drawing insights from case studies of the US, South Korea, and Japan, this research exemplifies the tangible impact of popular culture on soft power and nation branding. As the global landscape continues to evolve, cultural diplomacy emerges as a pivotal soft-power approach, revealing the enduring importance of culture in contemporary international relations and the shifting dynamics of geopolitical interactions.

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