



Leveraging Media for National Image-Building: A Soft Power Strategy for Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores how Pakistan can strengthen its global image and enhance its soft power through strategic use of media resources. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, the paper analyzes the current landscape of Pakistani media and identifies practical measures for leveraging it to influence international audiences. It discusses the role of cultural exports, digital diplomacy, public broadcasting and strategic narratives in reshaping perceptions of Pakistan at the global level. With growing geopolitical challenges, a strong media-driven soft power strategy is vital for promoting national interests, countering negative stereotypes, and cultivating a favorable international reputation. Through qualitative analysis and global best practices, the study proposes policy directions for the Pakistani State and media stakeholders.

Keywords: Soft Power, Pakistan, Media, Diplomacy, Strategic Communication.

Article Details:

Received on 21 June 2025

Accepted on 19 July 2025

Published on 20 July 2025

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st Century, the ability of a nation to project influence without coercion, what Joseph Nye (2004) terms “soft power”, has become central to foreign policy and international relations. Soft power hinges on attraction rather than compulsion, resting primarily on a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. For Pakistan, a country often overshadowed by geopolitical conflicts and security concerns, the strategic use of media offers a transformative opportunity to reshape global perceptions and enhance its soft power projection (Rahman, 2020).

Despite possessing a rich cultural heritage, vibrant media landscape and significant geopolitical importance, Pakistan continues to face challenges in crafting a globally appealing image (Ahmed, 2018). Media, both traditional and digital, has emerged as a critical domain for shaping narratives, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and promoting national identity internationally (Thussu, 2019). In the age of global communication, the Pakistani media can serve as a vehicle for public diplomacy, countering negative stereotypes and presenting a more nuanced portrayal of the country.

This research aims to investigate how Pakistan can utilize its media resources to bolster its soft power on the global stage. It examines both opportunities and barriers, using theoretical and empirical approaches, to offer strategic recommendations for policy and media stakeholders.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: JOSEPH NYE’S SOFT POWER

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power is the central theoretical framework for this study. Nye (2004) defines soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment”. It comprises three primary sources: culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when they are practiced at home and abroad), and foreign policy (when it is seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

Nye contrasts soft power with “hard power” which relies on military means. The integration of soft power into a nation's strategic policy allows for long-term influence and fosters a more favorable environment for diplomatic engagement (Nye, 2008). In the context of Pakistan, the effective use of soft power, especially via media resources, becomes crucial to improving international relations, enhancing trade prospects, and attracting tourism and investment.

According to Gilboa (2008), media is a core channel through which soft power operates. Public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and strategic communication depend heavily on media to reach international audiences. Therefore, Pakistan's media sector, if strategically aligned with national objectives, can serve as a soft power tool to rebrand the country's global image.

PAKISTAN’S SOFT POWER POTENTIAL: CURRENT ASSESSMENT

Pakistan possesses immense potential for soft power projection, rooted in its cultural diversity, historical heritage, Islamic identity, and geopolitical significance. However, this potential remains underutilized due to inconsistent policies, internal instability, and limited media outreach (Rashid, 2019). The perception of Pakistan in many parts of the world remains shaped by media coverage of terrorism, political instability, and economic challenges (Khan, 2020). To move beyond this, a focused effort is needed to identify and activate soft power assets.

Pakistani culture, ranging from Sufi music to Mughal architecture, has deep appeal, particularly across the Muslim world and South Asia. Its cuisine, literature, sports (especially cricket), and hospitality traditions also provide fertile grounds for cultural

diplomacy (Ali, 2017). Furthermore, Pakistan's strategic role in global issues like climate change, counterterrorism, and refugee hosting gives it moral capital that can be leveraged as soft power if communicated effectively (Aslam, 2021).

Despite these assets, Pakistan has not developed a coherent narrative that could be consistently projected abroad. A major challenge is the absence of a centralized public diplomacy strategy and limited investment in media tools that promote national interests internationally (Yusuf, 2020). This underscores the need for a deliberate, media-driven soft power strategy.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROJECTING SOFT POWER

Media serves as the primary mechanism through which narratives are constructed and disseminated in the modern world. It plays a critical role in soft power projection by shaping perceptions, influencing public opinion, and facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Thussu, 2019). For Pakistan, the media sector includes a wide array of platforms i.e. television channels, radio, newspapers, film, social media, and digital content, that can be strategically used to build a positive image.

Public diplomacy experts argue that media enables states to engage with foreign audiences directly, bypassing official diplomatic channels (Cull, 2009). This allows for the projection of national values, promotion of cultural identity, and communication of foreign policy objectives. International broadcasters like BBC, Al Jazeera, TRT, DW and Russia Today have long been tools of soft power for their respective countries. Pakistan, however, lacks an equally strong international media presence.

Channels like PTV World, Voice of Pakistan, and ISPR productions have made some contributions in this space, but their global reach need significant improvement (Niazi, 2018). Additionally, private sector media houses have yet to align their content strategies with national image-building goals. Strengthening Pakistan's media ecosystem, therefore, is essential to transforming it into a robust soft power vehicle.

MEDIA AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural diplomacy, defined as the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other aspects of culture to strengthen relationships, can be powerfully promoted through media (Mark, 2010). Media is an ideal platform for showcasing cultural events, historical narratives, national art, fashion, and linguistic diversity. Countries like South Korea, Iran and Turkey have used television dramas and movies to generate substantial soft power, often referred to as the "Korean Wave" and "Turkish Wave" (Kim, 2011).

Pakistan can pursue a similar path by exporting its cultural content via digital platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Amazon Prime. Local drama serials, films, and documentaries that highlight the country's history, landscapes, resilience, and values can create empathy and attraction among foreign audiences (Raza, 2020). Pakistani music, particularly Sufi and folk genres, can also be internationalized through collaborations and global festivals.

In addition, state-supported institutions like the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA), Lok Virsa, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting can work in synergy with media organizations to develop and distribute high-quality cultural content. Building international partnerships with film producers, curators, and artists from other countries can further enhance cultural visibility (Hassan, 2021).

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

With the advent of digital technologies, states now employ digital diplomacy, the use of digital platforms and tools in achieving foreign policy goals and influencing public opinion

abroad (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok offer opportunities for direct interaction with international audiences and the promotion of national narratives.

Pakistan's foreign ministry and diplomatic missions have increasingly adopted digital diplomacy by maintaining active social media accounts, broadcasting events, and issuing policy statements online. However, these efforts are often fragmented and lack thematic consistency (Haider, 2020). In contrast, developed countries have developed integrated digital strategies that promote their cultural icons, festivals, achievements, and international events in a systematic way (Joshi, 2021).

To enhance soft power, Pakistan must invest in training diplomats and media officers in digital communication skills and allocate resources for professional social media management. Coordinated campaigns that showcase positive stories, such as humanitarian efforts, climate initiatives, tech innovation, and youth entrepreneurship, can significantly improve Pakistan's international image (Iqbal, 2022). Moreover, the use of hashtags, digital storytelling, and influencer partnerships can amplify Pakistan's voice in global conversations. Diaspora engagement through digital platforms can also contribute to cultural diplomacy and identity-building.

COUNTERING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES THROUGH STRATEGIC MEDIA

One of the biggest challenges to Pakistan's soft power is the negative media portrayals, especially in the Indian and Western press. These narratives often associate the country with terrorism, political instability, and human rights violations (Mitra, 2019). While some of these issues reflect real internal challenges, the absence of effective media strategies has allowed these portrayals to dominate international discourse.

Strategic communication, defined as the deliberate use of communication to achieve strategic goals, can be employed to counter such narratives (Paul, 2011). Pakistan must build a narrative ecosystem that emphasizes peacebuilding, humanitarian contributions, tourism potential, gender empowerment, and economic progress. For example, stories about Pakistani women in STEM, youth-led startups, education initiatives, and sports diplomacy can offer alternative frames for understanding the country.

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) has made immense progress by producing documentaries, short films, and series that highlight national unity, sacrifice, and resilience. Yet, much more is needed from both state and private sectors. Partnerships with international media outlets, global PR firms, and academic institutions can help shape and disseminate these alternative narratives more effectively (Shahid, 2021).

ROLE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA CHANNELS

Public broadcasting remains one of the most effective state-led tools for global soft power projection. Leading examples include the BBC World Service (UK), CGTN (China), RT (Russia), and France24. These platforms are instrumental in promoting their respective nations' political perspectives, cultural narratives, and foreign policy goals (Seib, 2012). Pakistan's public broadcasting system, particularly PTV World and Radio Pakistan, has attempted to fill this space but lacks global reach and content quality.

PTV World, Pakistan's English-language state television channel, is underutilized in terms of global branding. Its content often lacks the modern production quality, thematic focus, and digital integration needed to engage international audiences (Hussain, 2018). Reimagining public broadcasting with a soft power focus would require investment in training, editorial independence, creative storytelling, and digital distribution. Pakistan could also consider launching a well-funded, multilingual, and globally accessible

international news channel to promote its worldview and counter misperceptions. This would not only allow Pakistan to control its narrative but also contribute to global media pluralism (Yousaf, 2021). Integration with YouTube, podcast platforms, and OTT services would ensure broader reach.

MOBILIZING THE PAKISTANI DIASPORA FOR SOFT POWER

The Pakistani diaspora, estimated at over 9 million people spread across Europe, North America, the Middle East and Australia, represents a powerful and underutilized soft power asset (NADRA, 2023). Diaspora communities contribute to soft power through remittances, cultural transmission, business networks, and political lobbying (Gamlen, 2014). Their success stories often reshape perceptions of Pakistan in their host societies.

China has successfully integrated its diaspora into public diplomacy efforts. Pakistan, however, has not developed formal mechanisms to engage the diaspora for soft power promotion. The government could establish cultural exchange programs, diaspora-focused media content, and ambassadorship schemes that highlight the contributions of overseas Pakistanis (Shah, 2020). Additionally, creating platforms where diaspora professionals can collaborate with Pakistani media, academia, and think tanks would enrich international debates and elevate Pakistan's image globally. Encouraging diaspora engagement through digital campaigns and social media can further enhance reach and impact (Bukhari, 2021).

SPORTS, TOURISM AND ENTERTAINMENT: VEHICLES OF SOFT POWER

Sport is a globally unifying medium with significant soft power potential. Pakistan's historical excellence in hockey, squash and cricket has long resonated across South Asia and the Commonwealth. Recent investments in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) have revived cricket diplomacy and brought foreign players and international media coverage to Pakistan (Ahmed, 2022). These events not only build goodwill but also project normalcy and hospitality.

Tourism, another soft power vector, has seen promising growth due to Pakistan's natural beauty, heritage sites, and adventure travel appeal. Global media outlets like Forbes and The Telegraph have listed Pakistan among top tourist destinations in the recent years (Khan, 2020). Strategic promotion of this potential through documentaries, travel blogs, and influencer tourism campaigns could boost Pakistan's visibility in the global travel circuits.

The entertainment industry, especially drama and film, can also serve as a soft power tool. Turkish and Korean dramas have already demonstrated how serialized storytelling can enhance national branding (Kim, 2011). Pakistan's own dramas, such as *Alpha Bravo Charlie*, *Dhuwan*, *Humsafar* and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, have attracted international viewership and can be further promoted through dubbing, subtitling, and streaming on global platforms (Raza, 2020).

CHALLENGES TO MEDIA-DRIVEN SOFT POWER IN PAKISTAN

While the potential is vast, several challenges hinder Pakistan's ability to use media for soft power. These include:

- **Lack of Strategic Coordination:** There is no centralized national soft power strategy linking media, culture, diplomacy, and education (Yusuf, 2020).
- **Resource Constraints:** Budget limitations in state media, arts, and cultural diplomacy restrict quality and outreach (Niazi, 2018).
- **Credibility Issues:** State-owned media often lack international credibility due to perceived biases, reducing their effectiveness abroad (Haider, 2020).

- **Internal Instability and Security Perceptions:** Terrorist incidents, political polarization, and governance issues create negative frames that dominate global narratives (Mitra, 2019).
- **Digital Divide and Technological Lag:** Weak infrastructure and skills gaps in digital content creation limit Pakistan's competitiveness in the digital sphere (Iqbal, 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance soft power through media, Pakistan should consider the following strategic steps:

- **Develop a National Soft Power Strategy:** Establish a dedicated body under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to coordinate media, diplomacy, culture, and diaspora engagement (Aslam, 2021).
- **Modernize and Expand Public Broadcasting:** Upgrade PTV World and Radio Pakistan with international production standards, digital integration, and multilingual content to appeal the global audiences (Yousaf, 2021).
- **Create a Global Media Platform:** Launch a Pakistani international media outlet modeled after Al Jazeera or TRT or DW with independent editorial policy and global distribution (Seib, 2012).
- **Invest in Digital Diplomacy:** Train foreign service officers and media professionals in digital storytelling, social media management, and strategic communication (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).
- **Promote Cultural Content:** Support film, drama, and music industries through public-private partnerships and international collaborations to showcase Pakistani culture globally (Raza, 2020).
- **Engage the Diaspora Strategically:** Build diaspora networks for cultural diplomacy, PR outreach, and bilateral advocacy, and recognize their contributions in global forums (Bukhari, 2021).
- **Leverage Influencer and Sports Diplomacy:** Create partnerships with sports icons, YouTubers, bloggers, and international influencers to carry Pakistan's narrative to global youth audiences (Ahmed, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Soft power is not merely a luxury for countries like Pakistan, rather it is a strategic necessity in today's globalized and image-driven world. While the country faces certain challenges, it also possesses unique assets that can be transformed into tools of attraction and influence. Media resources, both public and private, traditional and digital, offer Pakistan a powerful means to tell its own story, showcase its culture, and build international goodwill.

Through coordinated strategies, smart investments and inclusive narratives, Pakistan can reposition itself globally as a source of creativity, resilience, hospitality, and cultural richness. This transformation requires vision, collaboration and commitment from state institutions, media stakeholders, civil society, and the diaspora alike.

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