

Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05, Issue 03, 2026

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



Check for updates

Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding Assessing Pakistan's Soft Power Competitiveness in South Asia

Muhammad Shakoor Anwar¹ Prof. Dr. Muqarrab Akbar²

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-05-27	Revised	2026-06-26	Accepted	2026-07-15
----------	------------	---------	------------	----------	------------

Citation (APA):

Anwar, M, S & Akbar, M (2026). Cultural diplomacy and nation branding assessing Pakistan's soft power competitiveness in South Asia. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(3), 203-224. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.03.577>

Abstract

This study examined the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping Pakistan's nation branding and assessed its soft power competitiveness within South Asia. Grounded in Soft Power Theory and Nation Branding Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods convergent parallel design. Quantitative data were collected from 250 respondents using a structured questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 experts. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses were employed for quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was used for qualitative findings. The results revealed significant positive relationships among cultural diplomacy, nation branding, international reputation, and soft power competitiveness. Nation branding emerged as the strongest predictor of soft power performance. Qualitative findings highlighted Pakistan's cultural heritage, tourism resources, creative industries, and diaspora as key soft power assets, while institutional barriers and global stereotypes remained major challenges. The study recommends strengthening cultural diplomacy, digital engagement, and strategic nation branding to enhance Pakistan's regional and global influence.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Nation Branding, Soft Power, International Reputation, Pakistan, South Asia.

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Chairman, Department of Political Science, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Prof. Dr. Muqarrab Akbar, **Correspondence through:** muqarrabakbar@bzu.edu.pk



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is a tool of soft power in today's international relations that helps a country to project its culture, values, heritage and identity through cultural exchange, education, tourism, arts and media rather than through force or military presence (Dikanbayeva et al., 2025). Joseph Nye's idea of soft power refers to the capacity of states to 'attract and persuade' others through culture, political values and foreign policies (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022). Nation branding is intimately connected with cultural diplomacy, given the growing globalization of the world and the importance nations attach to using cultural assets and public diplomacy campaigns to cultivate a positive international image and improve their global competitiveness (Kayani & Rehman, 2022). The importance of culture as a strategic diplomatic tool that can influence perception and win international partnerships has been highlighted in recent scholarship (Warraich et al., 2023; Mbira, 2024; Brand Finance, 2025). South Asia is a competitive environment, where countries like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan are using cultural heritage, tourism, media and diasporas to build influence in the region and around the world (Kousar et al., 2026). In this context Pakistan has rich cultural resources such as civilizational heritage, religious diversity, literature, arts, cuisine, sports and historical sites. However, despite these assets, Pakistan's international image has often been overshadowed by security-related narratives and political challenges, limiting the effective projection of its cultural identity abroad (Warraich et al., 2023; Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022; Rehman & Hafeez, 2025). As a result, the study of cultural diplomacy and its impact on hard power has gained significance in gauging Pakistan's status in the changing diplomatic scenario in South Asia (Syed et al., 2020; Kayani & Rehman, 2022).

Cultural diplomacy has become an important tool for states to promote their own image and reputation, and is increasingly being used as a means to gain international recognition and respect (Mbira, 2024). Even though Pakistan has rich cultural resources, it is still struggling to create a positive and attractive image in the international community (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022). Moreover, with the rising competition among South Asian states for global and regional fame, it is crucial to evaluate Pakistan's soft power competitiveness and the success of cultural diplomacy efforts (Kousar et al., 2026; Jadoon et al., 2024).

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the contribution of cultural diplomacy to Pakistan's nation branding and international reputation.
2. To compare Pakistan's soft power competitiveness with selected South Asian countries through cultural and heritage-based initiatives.

Research Questions

1. How does cultural diplomacy influence Pakistan's nation brand and global image?
2. How does Pakistan's cultural soft power performance compare with that of other South Asian countries?

This study contributes to the literature on soft power, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding by examining their interrelationship within the South Asian context and providing evidence on Pakistan's soft-power competitiveness (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022; Mbira, 2024). The results will be useful to the scholars, diplomats and practitioners in the understanding of how Pakistan's cultural resources can be used wisely to create positive image and build cultural engagement in the international realm (Syed et al., 2020; Rehman & Hafeez, 2025). The study offers policy-relevant insights for government institutions, cultural organizations, and foreign policy stakeholders in

designing effective cultural diplomacy and nation-branding strategies to enhance Pakistan's regional and global influence (Warraich et al., 2023; Bano & Khalid, 2025; Jadoon et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Understanding Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and cultural expressions between countries to promote understanding and build connections between them. In today's international relations, cultural diplomacy has taken a different form from the traditional exchange of cultures, and has become a powerful tool of foreign policy, which is closely connected with soft power (Dikanbayeva et al., 2025). Culture is an important source of influence in Nye's theory of soft power, in which he suggests that countries can pursue their desired outcomes without resorting to force. Recent scholarship highlights that cultural diplomacy is a force that connects societies together, builds intercultural dialogue and helps to develop peaceful international relations (Saaïda, 2023; Melissen, 2022; Mbira, 2024). Cultural diplomacy is therefore a vital tool that can be used to convey national values and enhance foreign perceptions (Rehman & Hafeez, 2025; Syed et al., 2020).

Nation Branding and Soft Power

Nation branding is a form of reputation management and image management that relies on the strategic management of the image of a country among the international community. It is about increasing the cultural, economic, tourism and political values of a nation to enhance its competitiveness in the world (Biswas, 2022). However, as per the latest research, there is no contradiction between the concepts of nation branding and soft power. However, based on recent research, the concepts of nation branding and soft power are mutually reinforcing. Soft power involves the resources of attraction while nation branding is the process of communicating the same resources to the international audience (Kayani & Rehman, 2022). Countries with better national brands have more tourism and investment, and are seen as more influential in diplomatic relations (Brand Finance, 2024; 2025). Thus, effective nation branding is regarded as a crucial tool to support soft power capabilities (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018).

Cultural Diplomacy in Contemporary International Relations

Cultural diplomacy has become a marked part of public diplomacy (PD) in the twenty first century (Mbira, 2024). The participation of foreign publics is becoming more and more common in cultural programs, educational exchanges, exhibitions, festivals and international partnerships, in which governments play a growing role. Projects like these foster lasting connections and help build greater understanding between countries without formal diplomatic relations. Moreover, digital technologies have changed the landscape of cultural diplomacy and provided the state with capabilities to communicate with audiences worldwide via social media, virtual exhibitions and digital storytelling. Digital cultural diplomacy enables countries to effectively convey their national narratives to younger and more geographically distant audiences. Recent studies have shown the importance of digital platforms in terms of cultural influence and soft power projection (Bjola & Manor, 2022; Chang & Chang, 2025; Ayaz, 2025).

Components of Cultural Soft Power

Cultural soft power is derived from multiple sources. Historical monuments, archaeological sites and traditions are important features that attract international visitors. The arts and creative industries like film, music, fashion and visual arts also provide national visibility and cultural

influence (Farooqi, 2022). Language and literature help to spread culture and ideas. Tourism promotion is another significant aspect, in which the tourist can directly experience cultural heritage. Furthermore, sports and entertainment diplomacy has emerged as a strong tool to boost national prestige and people to people diplomacy. These cultural resources are being increasingly used by countries to heighten their international recognition, appeal and impact (Mbira, 2024).

Pakistan's Cultural Diplomacy Landscape

Pakistan has potential cultural assets which can be utilized for the development of soft power. It has ancient civilizations like Mohenjodaro and Taxila, various ethnic traditions, Islamic heritage, Sufi culture, literature, music and handicrafts. Saifullah and Qaisrani (2022) believe that these cultural assets can improve the image of Pakistan in the international arena. Pakistan also has a variety of tourism resources such as mountain scenery, religious and archaeological sites (Syed et al., 2020). The government has initiated a programme of recognition of the heritage sites both internationally, by nomination to UNESCO and by promoting tourism. However, these resources are not being fully tapped due to institutional constraints and lack of international outreach (Rehman & Hafeez, 2025; Farooqi, 2022). Cultural institutions such as the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA), Lok Virsa, and various cultural centers contribute to preserving and promoting national culture. Pakistan's cultural diplomacy is further bolstered by international cultural festivals, exchanges in education and arts, and cultural collaborations (Syed et al., 2020).

Nation Branding Efforts in Pakistan

Pakistan has increasingly recognized the importance of nation branding in improving its international reputation. The government has been promoting the country through the campaigns like “Emerging Pakistan” and “Tourism Pakistan” with the goal of showcasing the cultural diversity, investment opportunities and natural beauty of Pakistan. Digital media platforms have emerged as vital tools of promoting Pakistan's heritage and tourism destinations to the international audience. Recent research shows that social media campaigns, travel documentaries, and international tourism partnerships have helped to shift perceptions of Pakistan in certain areas (Ayaz, 2025; Kayani & Rehman, 2022). However, the impact of these brand efforts has been inconsistent, with a lack of coordination and policies among stakeholders (Warraich et al., 2023).

Cultural Diplomacy in South Asia

Cultural diplomacy is an emerging initiative in South Asian countries to strengthen their foreign presence. Bollywood, yoga, Ayurveda, food and the Indian diaspora are considered to be the tools of India's soft power. Bangladesh has been promoting its identity through its cultural heritage, culture and festivals based on the Bengali language and its literature (Talukder, 2023). Sri Lanka leverages its Buddhist heritage, tourism and cultural engagements for international cooperation building (Samantha & Shehara, 2025). Nepal capitalizes on its Hindu and Buddhist religious tourism and culture and its Himalayan identity (Sharma, 2025). Through its Islamic heritage, Sufi traditions, archaeological sites, sports diplomacy, and cultural diversity, Pakistan contributes to the world, to the humanity, and to Pakistan. The cultural diplomacy efforts in Pakistan are less institutionalized than those in other parts of the region, although they do have some cultural resources (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022; Warraich et al., 2023).

Comparative Soft Power Competitiveness in South Asia

South Asia shows marked differences in terms of soft power performance, as shown by comparative assessments. India consistently features high on international soft power indices because of its cultural exports, touristic appeal, educational institutions and its diaspora networks.

Sri Lanka and Nepal are among the countries that get heritage tourism and religious diplomacy benefits (Sharma, 2025; Dikanbayeva et al., 2025). The cultural richness has a positive impact on the soft power competitiveness of Pakistan, yet it is hindered by image related issues (Jadoon et al., 2024). Soft Power indicators are such as the international reputation, tourist flows, cultural exports, heritage recognition, attractiveness of education and international cultural outreach. In recent years, the importance of cultural diplomacy as a means of influencing the region and contributing to a country's global presence has been acknowledged by South Asian nations, as evidenced by recent rankings (Brand Finance, 2025; Kousar et al., 2026).

Pakistan's Cultural Diplomacy: Challenges

There are several obstacles in the way of Pakistan's cultural diplomacy. The country's negative image in the world is continuing to be driven by security issues. Cultural outreach programs are less effective due to limited institutional capacity and the lack of coordination among cultural organizations. Limited resources limit investments in international cultural promotion and various policy developments make it difficult to plan strategic investments over the long term. Moreover, positive cultural changes are often not given the attention or coverage they deserve in international media, thereby diminishing the visibility of the strengths in Pakistan's culture (Warraich et al., 2023; Rehman & Hafeez, 2025). These challenges are seen as requiring long-term efforts and institutional change.

Opportunities for Strengthening Pakistan's Cultural Diplomacy

Despite existing challenges, Pakistan possesses significant opportunities to strengthen its cultural diplomacy. Social media and virtual platforms are effective means of digital cultural promotion which can be used to reach people worldwide at relatively low costs (Ayaz, 2025). Diaspora communities can be cultural ambassadors, and can promote people-to-people engagement (Bano, Khalid, 2025). Given the archaeological and religious heritage sites of Pakistan, there is huge potential in the field of heritage tourism. International cultural collaborations with partner institutions outside the country can bring about greater visibility and cultural exchange. Moreover, investments in the creative sector, youth, film, music and creative digital content will increase Pakistan's cultural appeal and enhance the nation-branding results (Farooqi, 2022; Kayani & Rehman, 2022).

Research Gap

Cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power, as critical tools in international relations today, have been recognized in the existing literature. However, most of the studies conducted on Pakistan have concentrated on identifying the cultural resources and theoretical soft power potential but failed to come up with a quantitative assessment of the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy initiatives (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022; Syed et al., 2020; Rehman & Hafeez, 2025). Second, though the country brand and nation branding have been gaining traction in the field of academia, there is very little research that systematically compares the soft power competitiveness of Pakistan with the other South Asian countries in the region (Kayani & Rehman, 2022; Warraich et al., 2023). Although some of the studies mentioned above have addressed cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, digital diplomacy, and national image-building in Pakistan, comparative studies investigating Pakistan's situation vis-à-vis the other South Asian countries are limited in scope. The lack of empirical and regionally comparative studies to explore cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft-power performance presents a major research gap (Biswas, 2022; Mbira, 2024). Hence, this study aims to evaluate Pakistan's soft-power competitiveness among the South

Asian nations by focusing on the level of success of its cultural diplomacy and nation-branding efforts in comparison to that of the rest of the region.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Soft Power Theory

Soft Power Theory by Joseph S. Nye Jr. is the concept of how a state is able to achieve desired outcomes through means of attraction as opposed to coercion. In modern scholarship, culture, political values and legitimacy of foreign policy are considered as the main sources of attraction shaping the influence and international appeal of a country (Nye, 2021; El-Dabt, 2025). Culture is especially vital in the soft power dimension as it provides positive impressions of foreign audiences and enhances international engagement through cultural heritage, arts, language, education, sports and media. For example, cultural diplomacy is one of the most important tools for states to transform cultural resources into diplomatic power, as El-Dabt et al. (2025) argue.

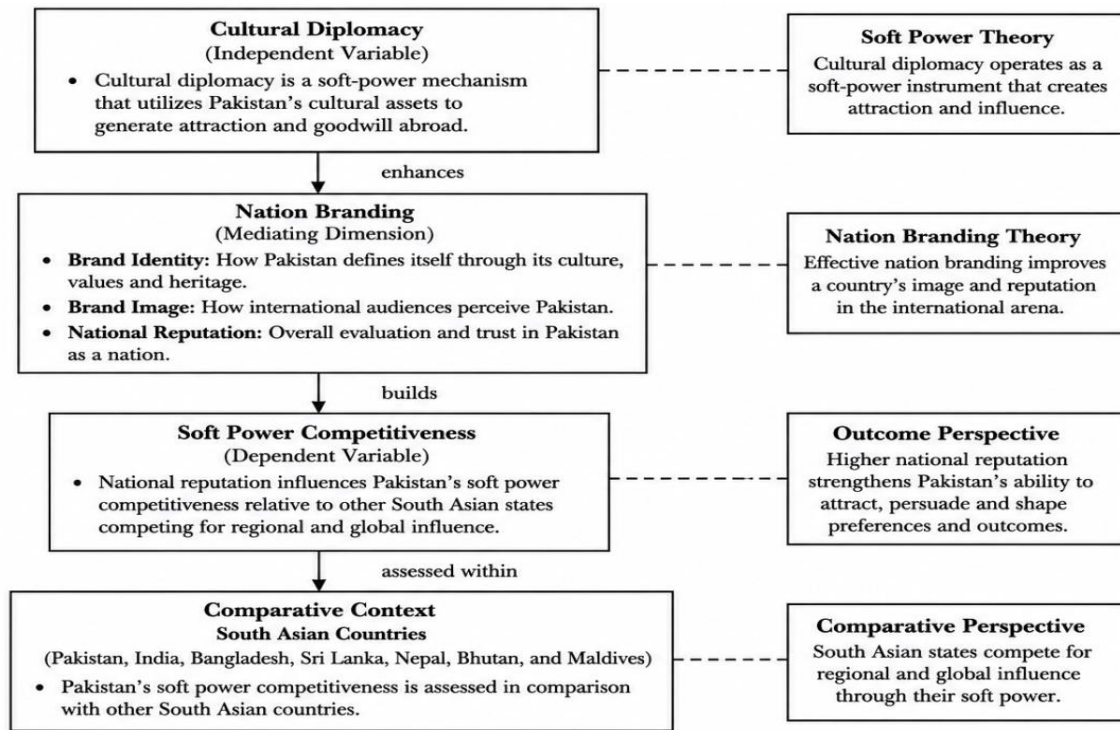
Nation Branding Theory

The theory of nation branding is concerned with the deliberate creation and promotion of a nation's image to the rest of the world. The three dimensions that are stressed in the theory are the brand identity (how the nation wants to be seen), the brand image (how the nation is seen by an outside audience), and the national reputation (the sum of the perceptions over time). Recent research suggests that the nation branding is a strategic communication which increases the international visibility, legitimacy, tourism attractiveness, and diplomatic influence of the country (Biswas, 2022; Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018).

Application of Theories to the Study

In this study, the Soft Power Theory and Nation Branding Theory is combined and the study focuses on the position of Pakistan in the South Asia region. Cultural diplomacy is seen as a 'soft power diplomacy' tool in which Pakistan's cultural resources are leveraged to create attraction and goodwill. A successful cultural diplomacy can enhance the country image and reputation abroad, thus contributing to the nation branding. This reputation in the nation impacts the country's soft power status vis-à-vis other South Asian countries vying for influence in the region and the world (Mbira, 2024).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power competitiveness in the South Asian context.



Research Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach with Convergent Parallel Design, which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to be interpreted together. Mixed-methods research was deemed to be suitable as it allowed the researcher to understand the cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft power competitiveness of Pakistan in a holistic manner, and incorporate both numerical trends and expert viewpoints (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Research Design

This study adopted comparative mixed-method design to evaluate the soft power competitiveness of Pakistan in the context of South Asia. The design enabled the analysis of the relationships between cultural diplomacy, nation branding, international reputation and soft power competitiveness, with the addition of comparative regional analysis.

Quantitative Component

The target groups were university students, international relations scholars and media and communication professionals. 250 respondents were sampled using stratified random sampling for proper representation of each sub group. A structured questionnaire was used to collect the data, which was adapted from existing soft power and nation-branding literature (Brand Finance, 2025; Long et al., 2024). The questionnaire was designed to assess four variables as follows: cultural diplomacy, nation branding, international reputation and soft power competitiveness, which have been measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative part was done with 15 experts using purposive sampling. The interviewees consisted of four diplomats, four international relations scholars, four cultural diplomacy experts, and three media and nation-branding specialists. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews, which was often used in qualitative studies of the past decade (Kallio et al., 2016) to gather in-depth information about Pakistan's cultural diplomacy efforts and the competition for its soft power in the region.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data were gathered through Global Soft Power Index reports, Nation Brands Index reports, government policy documents, tourism statistics, cultural diplomacy reports and UNESCO cultural heritage reports. These sources gave a contextual and comparative knowledge of Pakistan's status and image in the region and internationally.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collecting was done in three steps. The first phase comprised application of the questionnaire survey to the selected respondents. Phase 2 consisted of conducting expert interviews. The third phase was document analysis of the policy reports, cultural diplomacy initiatives and international soft power ranking.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, and comparative mean analysis were used to analyze quantitative data. The qualitative interview data were analysed using the reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to thematic analysis. The main topics covered were: (1) Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding, (2) Heritage and Cultural Promotion, (3) Regional Soft Power Competition, (4) Challenges and Constraints and (5) Future Opportunities. The findings from both the above obtained datasets were triangulated to increase the validity of the data and to interpret the findings in a comprehensive manner.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with regard to ethical principles of research. All participants were given informed consent before data was collected. The participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the study, their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time. Data were solely used for academic purposes and stored securely according to the guidelines of research ethics of the institute (as per American Psychological Association, 2020).

Results and Findings

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristic of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	145	58.0
	Female	105	42.0
Age	18–25 Years	128	51.2
	26–35 Years	82	32.8
	36 Years and Above	40	16.0
Profession	University Students	120	48.0
	Media Professionals	65	26.0
	IR Scholars	65	26.0
Education	Undergraduate	98	39.2
	Graduate	97	38.8
	Postgraduate	55	22.0

Table 1 shows that 58% of the respondents were male and 42% were female. The age group 18–25 years was the most representative (51.2%). The majority (48%) were university students, followed by those working in media and international relations. The educational profile shows an educated sample representative of their culture to assess cultural diplomacy and soft power competitiveness.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cultural Diplomacy	250	3.98	0.68
Nation Branding	250	3.85	0.72
International Reputation	250	3.71	0.77
Soft Power Competitiveness	250	3.65	0.74

The highest mean score was reported for Cultural Diplomacy ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.68$), suggesting that respondents generally perceived Pakistan's cultural diplomacy initiatives positively. Nation Branding also received a positive evaluation ($M = 3.85$). The lowest mean ($M = 3.65$) was for Soft Power Competitiveness, suggesting there remains scope for improvement in Pakistan's soft power positioning in the region.

Reliability Analysis

Table 3: *Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics*

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural Diplomacy	8	.884
Nation Branding	7	.869
International Reputation	6	.847
Soft Power Competitiveness	7	.891
Overall Instrument	28	.902

The values of Cronbach's Alpha for all constructs were above 0.80, which is a threshold for internal consistency and reliability. The internal consistency of the overall instrument was satisfactory (alpha coefficient = .902).

Correlation Analysis

Table 4: *Pearson Correlation Matrix*

Variables	CD	NB	IR	SPC
Cultural Diplomacy (CD)	1			
Nation Branding (NB)	.712**	1		
International Reputation (IR)	.654**	.738**	1	
Soft Power Competitiveness (SPC)	.681**	.769**	.744**	1

Note: $p < .01$

The result of correlation indicates that all the study variables showed good positive correlation. Both Nation Branding ($r = .712$, $p < .01$) and Soft Power Competitiveness ($r = .681$, $p < .01$) had a significant positive correlation with Cultural Diplomacy. Nation Branding was the most positively correlated with the Soft Power Competitiveness with the value of .769 ($p < .01$). This indicates that the region's soft power of Pakistan is significantly improved by good nation branding.

Regression Analysis

Model Summary

Table 5: *Model Summary*

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
1	.821	.674	.669	.425

The model explained 67.4% of the variance in Soft Power Competitiveness ($R^2 = .674$), indicating substantial explanatory power.

ANOVA Table

Table 6: ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	88.426	3	29.475	162.783	.000
Residual	44.546	246	.181		
Total	132.972	249			

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(3,246) = 162.783$, $p < .001$, indicating that the independent variables significantly predicted Soft Power Competitiveness.

Coefficients Table

Table 7: Multiple Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	0.587	0.183		3.207	.002
Cultural Diplomacy	0.241	0.049	.268	4.918	.000
Nation Branding	0.387	0.053	.412	7.302	.000
International Reputation	0.298	0.051	.331	5.843	.000

All the predictors were significant for Soft Power Competitiveness. Nation Branding emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .412$, $p < .001$), followed by International Reputation ($\beta = .331$, $p < .001$) and Cultural Diplomacy ($\beta = .268$, $p < .001$). The results indicate that there is a significant improvement in the soft power competitiveness of Pakistan after improving the worldwide reputation and nation brand.

Comparative Assessment of South Asian Countries

Using secondary data from recent soft-power reports and respondent perceptions

Table 8: Comparative Assessment of South Asian Countries

Country	Cultural Heritage	Nation Branding	Tourism Appeal	International Reputation	Overall Soft Power Score
India	4.52	4.61	4.48	4.57	4.55
Sri Lanka	3.91	3.84	4.12	3.88	3.94
Bangladesh	3.78	3.70	3.65	3.72	3.71
Pakistan	4.02	3.85	3.74	3.71	3.83
Nepal	3.82	3.69	4.15	3.76	3.86

The comparative assessment shows that India holds the best soft-power position in South Asia in all dimensions. The scores of cultural heritage resources were high ($M = 4.02$) for Pakistan while the scores for nation branding and international reputation were comparatively low. The results indicate that there is great cultural potential in Pakistan but it's in need of better branding and promotion strategies for international competition with leading regional countries.

Qualitative Findings

A total of 15 experts were interviewed, consisting of diplomats (4), international relations scholars (4), cultural diplomacy experts (4), and media and nation-branding specialists (3), using semi-structured methods. Thematic analysis resulted in five broad themes and some interrelated sub-themes that gave insight into the cultural diplomacy environment, nation-branding initiatives and the competitiveness of soft power in South Asia of Pakistan. The findings were also aligned with the quantitative results, giving an insight to opportunities and challenge that Pakistan's cultural diplomacy programs were facing.

Theme 1: Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding

Participants underlined that cultural diplomacy is core mechanism that can help to build Pakistan's image in the world and bolster its nation-branding.

Cultural Representation

The majority of the participants believed that Pakistan had a rich and diverse culture which is not properly represented in the international arena. Experts emphasized the significance of the linguistic diversity, traditional crafts, music, literature and Sufi culture of Pakistan, which can attract foreign attention.

“Pakistan’s cultural diversity is one of its greatest strengths, but it is not adequately showcased on global platforms.” (Participant 3)

International Visibility

One thing that was mentioned by respondents is that International visibility is still an important part of effective nation branding. Cultural fest, international exhibitions, academic exchange, and campaigns aimed at tourism could help promote Pakistan further in the world, several experts said.

“Countries gain influence when their culture becomes visible internationally through consistent engagement.” (Participant 7)

Image-Building Strategies

The participants highlighted the need to have strategic image-building initiatives. They said that a nation's brand needs a coordinated communication programme between government agencies, media outlets, cultural institutions, diplomatic missions, etc.

“Pakistan needs a long-term branding strategy rather than isolated promotional campaigns.” (Participant 11)

This research indicates that cultural diplomacy is an effective means of nation branding by means of cultural representation, visibility and image building strategies. Participants felt that greater coordination and continued involvement is required to achieve maximum results.

Theme 2: Pakistan’s Cultural Assets and Soft Power Potential

The respondents were unanimous in recognizing the cultural assets as an important medium of soft power assets that can help improve the country's international image.

Heritage and History

The ancient civilizations and ruins of Pakistan, UNESCO sites, Islamic architecture and historical structures were focused on as important cultural heritage.

“Sites such as Mohenjo-Daro and Taxila provide Pakistan with unique historical legitimacy and global cultural significance.” (Participant 2)

Tourism Resources

The majority of the respondents considered ‘tourism’ as an untapped soft power tool for Pakistan. They talked about the natural beauty, religious tourism sites, mountain areas and cultural festivals of the country.

“Pakistan possesses tourism potential comparable to many successful destinations but requires stronger international promotion.” (Participant 9)

Arts and Cultural Industries

People spoke about the increasing role of film, music, fashion, literature and digital creative industry in influencing international perceptions.

“Creative industries can communicate cultural narratives more effectively than traditional diplomacy.” (Participant 13)

Diaspora Contributions

The participants highlighted the crucial role of the overseas Pakistanis in the propagation of national culture and strengthening people to people relationship.

“The Pakistani diaspora serves as an informal ambassador network capable of enhancing cultural understanding abroad.” (Participant 5)

The results show that Pakistan has huge cultural assets which can be utilized for soft power. Heritage, tourism, creative industries and diaspora engagement were the most significant sources of cultural attraction.

Theme 3: Comparative Soft Power Competitiveness in South Asia

The participants did a comparison of Pakistan's soft power with other South Asian countries and they identified strengths and weaknesses of Pakistan.

Pakistan versus India

Most participants saw India as the dominant soft power player in the region in the field of Bollywood, yoga diplomacy, educational outreach, tourism promotion and its wide spread diaspora networks.

“India benefits from institutionalized cultural diplomacy and globally recognized cultural exports.” (Participant 1)

However, a few experts pointed out that Pakistan has special cultural assets which set it apart from India.

Pakistan versus Bangladesh

Participants viewed Bangladesh as increasingly successful in promoting cultural identity through language heritage, cultural festivals, and economic progress.

“Bangladesh has improved its international image through consistent cultural and economic messaging.” (Participant 8).

Regional Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths that experts found in Pakistan were cultural diversity, historical heritage, religious tourism, and geopolitical strategic relevance. Achievements were few, with a lack of branding, inconsistent policy implementation, and less international visibility.

Competitive Advantages

Some of the participants highlighted the specialties of Pakistan such as its cultural diversity, archaeological heritage, mountain tourism and Sufi culture as a competitive advantage.

“Pakistan has unique cultural experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere in South Asia.” (Participant 14)

The result shows that despite the fact that Pakistan is lagging behind India in total soft power, it does have some special cultural resources to increase the competitiveness of the region.

Theme 4: Challenges to Cultural Diplomacy

Participants recognized several challenges that limit the effectiveness of Pakistan's cultural diplomacy.

Global Stereotypes

Most of the respondents identified the negative perception by the international community as the greatest challenge.

“Global narratives often focus on security issues rather than Pakistan’s cultural strengths.” (Participant 6)

Institutional Barriers

Participants pointed to the lack of institutional integrity and low level of coordination among cultural organizations.

“Different agencies work independently without a unified cultural diplomacy framework.” (Participant 10)

Resource Limitations

Financial and human-resource limitations were pointed out by several experts as obstacles to the promotion of culture internationally.

“Limited budgets reduce the scale and consistency of cultural diplomacy initiatives.” (Participant 4)

Media Influence

The respondents highlighted the fact that international media portrayal has a much greater impact on perceptions of Pakistan than official diplomatic initiatives.

“Media narratives significantly shape how foreign audiences perceive Pakistan.” (Participant 12)

The results show that stereotypes, institutional fragmentation, lack of resources and media narratives are all contributing factors that affect the effective creation of a positive national image.

Theme 5: Future Opportunities for Cultural Diplomacy

The participants shared some opportunities which can enhance Pakistan's cultural diplomacy and its soft power competitiveness.

Digital Cultural Diplomacy

The majority of participants were convinced of the potential of digital platforms to promote culture and connect with the world.

“Social media provides Pakistan with cost-effective opportunities to reach global audiences.”
(Participant 15)

Tourism Branding

Experts strongly recommended investing in tourism branding campaigns that emphasize Pakistan's heritage, natural beauty, and cultural diversity.

“Tourism branding can simultaneously improve image, generate revenue, and strengthen soft power.” (Participant 9)

International Partnerships

Participants highlighted the importance of collaborations with foreign universities, cultural institutions, museums, and international organizations.

“Partnerships create sustainable channels for cultural exchange and international visibility.”
(Participant 7)

Youth Engagement

Many of the respondents highlighted the need to empower young people through cultural exchange, digital content production, and international educational programs.

“Young people are the future ambassadors of Pakistan's culture and identity.” (Participant 5)

The results indicate that there are various opportunities for improving the cultural diplomacy of Pakistan, such as digital diplomacy, tourism branding, international partnerships, and youth engagement, in order to further boost its competitiveness in the region for soft power.

In conclusion, the qualitative results revealed that cultural diplomacy has a significant influence on the image of Pakistan and its country branding. The participants regularly identified the significant cultural resources and soft-power potential that Pakistan has and discussed the issues of perceptions, institutional constraints and limited resources. The experts also stressed the importance of using digital platforms for diplomacy, marketing Pakistan as a tourist destination, international cooperation and youth-focused programs for boosting Pakistan's soft power in South Asia and elsewhere. The findings are congruent with findings from quantitative research, which revealed cultural diplomacy, nation branding and international reputation as important factors that predict soft-power competitiveness.

Discussion

The results of this study shed light on the linkage and interdependence of cultural diplomacy, country/branding and soft power competitiveness of Pakistan in South Asia. The discussion is presented based on the research questions and the theoretical bases of the study. The first research question was related to the role of cultural diplomacy in the process of nation branding and international image of Pakistan. Results indicated that significant positive relationships between

cultural diplomacy, nation branding, international reputation and soft power competitiveness exist in the quantitative results. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy was a major determinant of soft power competitiveness. Qualitative results also revealed the importance of cultural representation, international visibility and image building strategies in the process of constructing Pakistan's image outside. The findings indicate that cultural diplomacy can positively affect the nation's profile by fostering positive international image and making Pakistan more attractive in the eyes of international community.

The second research question was to compare cultural soft power performance of Pakistan with selected countries of South Asian countries. Comparative assessment showed that India's position in the region is better than other countries with regard to institutional cultural diplomacy, cultural exports to the world and the large number of cultural diasporas. Pakistan also has cultural assets which are unique, such as its cultural heritage, Sufism, tourism potential and cultural diversity. The qualitative data corroborated the qualitative data and revealed that cultural resources can be a good opportunity for enhancing the competitiveness of the region in Pakistan despite facing image-related challenges.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Most of the quantitative and qualitative results are congruent. The statistical analyses showed that cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in nation branding and soft power competitiveness, whereas the interview participants described how cultural promotion, heritage preservation, tourism marketing and engaging with the diaspora positively affect international image. This convergence results in overall validity of the findings.

Linking Findings with Soft Power Theory

The results of this study very strongly validated the Soft Power Theory by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. The theory states that states are successful in gaining influence without being coercive. The findings of this study indicate the immense impact of cultural diplomacy, nation branding and international reputation of cultural resources as sources of attraction which can improve Pakistan's international image (Nye, 2021).

Linking Findings with Nation Branding Theory

The results are also consistent with the Nation Branding Theory, which focuses on the management of the national identity and national reputation. The nation branding nation soft power competitiveness relationship is strong, with branding strategy effective countries having higher chances for improvement in their nation's competitiveness (Dikanbayeva et al., 2025). Repeatedly participants highlighted the value of coordinated image-construction processes, agreeing that national reputation is the result of a deliberate communication and branding process.

Comparative study of literature

The results align with other research which suggests that cultural diplomacy is an important tool of soft power and nation branding (Dikanbayeva et al., 2025). The importance of cultural diplomacy and international reputation aligns with the views of Saifullah and Qaisrani (2022), Syed et al. (2020) and Mbira (2024) that cultural resources play a significant role in international influence. In the same way, the significance of the nation branding identified in this study is similar to Kayani and Rehman (2022) and Biswas (2022), who pointed out that strategic branding would contribute towards the country's visibility and global competitiveness. Moreover, the comparative results validate the findings by Brand Finance (2025) and Jadoon et al. (2024) that India's soft

power scores better in the region whereas Pakistan has a lot of potential to capitalize on its soft power. Overall, the present study contributes to the literature by adding empirical evidence that cultural diplomacy, nation branding and international reputation jointly affect Pakistan's soft power competitiveness in the South Asian context.

Conclusion

This study focused on the role of cultural diplomacy in Pakistan's nation branding and evaluated its soft power competitiveness in the South Asian region. The study used mixed-methods approach to explore the relationship between cultural diplomacy, international reputation, nation branding and soft power competitiveness, based on Soft Power Theory and Nation Branding Theory. The results showed that cultural diplomacy can be a valuable instrument for Pakistan in enhancing its regional influence and reputation on the international arena. The quantitative findings showed that there were significant positive correlations among cultural diplomacy, nation branding, international reputation, and soft power competitiveness, whereas the qualitative results indicated that the cultural representation, promotion of cultural heritage, tourism development, and engagement with the diaspora are vital aspects for enhancing Pakistan's visibility in the world. While Pakistan has a strong cultural heritage and soft power potential, the overall competitiveness is limited due to challenges to the image, institutional challenges and lack of international outreach. Thus, cultural diplomacy and nation branding is a requirement to build Pakistan's international image and influence in the region.

Summary of Key Findings

The research revealed that cultural diplomacy plays a very important role in the nation branding and international reputation of Pakistan. The most powerful variables for soft power competitiveness were found to be nation branding, international reputation, and cultural diplomacy. Comparative analysis showed that India's regional soft power position is better but there are specific cultural strengths that Pakistan has such as its heritage places, Sufi culture, tourism industry, cultural diversity, and diaspora. The qualitative findings also highlighted that the institutional hurdles, resource limitations, media narratives, and world stereotypes are still a challenge for the effectiveness of Pakistan's cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, digital diplomacy, tourism branding, international partnerships and young people involvement were recognized as great opportunities for future expansion.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthening Cultural Diplomacy Institutions

The institutions of the government in charge of cultural promotion must be reinforced through better coordination and sufficient funding along with long term planning. The creation of a cultural diplomacy structure at a central level would improve the coherence and effectiveness of policies and their implementation.

Developing a Comprehensive Nation Branding Strategy

A multi-sector approach to developing a national image strategy is required for Pakistan, which would include tourism, culture, education, sports and public diplomacy. If you are consistent, you can make a huge difference in the perception of the world.

Promoting Cultural Heritage Globally

More attention needs to be paid to marketing the historical sites and archaeological heritage, traditional arts, literature and cultural festivals of Pakistan in international exhibitions, cultural exchanges and events related to UNESCO.

Enhance Tourism Diplomacy Projects

Tourism diplomacy should be a major part of Pakistan's soft power approach. Targeted branding, tourism development and marketing initiatives can boost the visibility of the destination and the marketing of international visitors.

Improving the Cultural Cooperation in the region

Pakistan must push for greater cultural exchanges with neighboring south Asian countries through joint cultural festivals, academic exchanges, heritage projects and people-to-people contacts programs.

Making use of Digital Platforms in Cultural Promotion

Digital tools and social media should be used innovatively to spread positive messages about the culture, tourism and heritage of Pakistan to the world.

Engaging the Pakistani Diaspora

The Pakistani diaspora needs to be actively engaged as cultural ambassadors and should be able to help promote the image of Pakistan and contribute to the country's engagement with the world through cultural diplomacy.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

The study validates the relationships proposed in soft power theory and nation branding theory, and contributes to the literature on cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft power. It shows the strategic use of cultural resources in changing to international influence by means of diplomatic and branding strategies.

Practical Implications

The results offer insights to the diplomats, cultural institutions, tourism boards and communication professionals who are looking to enhance Pakistan's image abroad through cultural diplomacy and strategic communications.

Policy Implications

The study presents the evidence based suggestions to the policy makers for cultural diplomacy planning, promotion of tourism, international outreach and national branding strategies for improving the global image and regional competitiveness of Pakistan.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative part was conducted with a sample of 250 respondents which might not be representative of all stakeholder groups. Secondly, the study was largely confined to selected South Asian countries, with fewer international comparisons. Thirdly, perceptions about soft power and nation branding can vary over time as a

result of political, economic and geopolitical events. Last but not least, the cross-sectional design of the study limited the investigation of the changes over time in terms of Pakistan's soft power performance.

Future Research Directions

This research could be expanded in several ways in the future. First, comparative studies on other nations, outside of South Asia, could give a wider picture of Pakistan's soft power scenario in the international arena. Second, more focus needs to be placed on the outcomes of digital cultural diplomacy and social media in relation to nation branding. Third, future investigations could be conducted on diaspora diplomacy and its role in soft power development with empirical analysis. Finally, longitudinal studies are recommended to assess changes in Pakistan's soft power competitiveness over time and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2020). Publication manual of the American psychological association 2020. *American Psychological Association*.
- Ayaz, A. (2025). New media and Digital Diplomacy: Analysing the influence of Chinese state media on Pakistan's national branding and soft power strategy. *Social Science Review Archives.*, 3(4), 1423–1434. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1239>
- Bano, D. S., & Khalid, I. (2025). Diaspora and cultural diplomacy: Pakistan's underused soft power potential. *Journal of Social & Organizational Matters*, 4(4), 324–339. <https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i4.346>
- Biswas, M. (2022). Public diplomacy, nation branding and soft power for global outreach: India in the 21st Century. In *Geo-Economic Perspectives in the Global Environment* (pp. 39-59). Routledge India.
- Bjola, C., & Kornprobst, M. (2025). *Understanding international diplomacy: Theory, practice and ethics*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003485407>
- Bolin, G., & Miazhevich, G. (2018). The soft power of commercialised nationalist symbols: Using media analysis to understand nation branding campaigns. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(5), 527–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417751153>
- Brand Finance. (2024, February 29). *Global Soft Power Index 2024: A world in flux*. Brand Finance. <https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2024-a-world-in-flux>
- Brand Finance. (2025). *Global Soft Power Index 2025*. Brand Finance. Retrieved from <https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2025-the-shifting-balance-of-global-soft-power>
- Brand Finance. (2025). *Global Soft Power Index 2025*. Brand Finance. Retrieved from https://www.ucg.ac.me/skladiste/blog_45671/objava_195259/fajlovi/Global%20Soft%20Power%20Index%202025.pdf
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis. In *American Psychological Association eBooks* (pp. 57–71). <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Chang, A. Y., & Chang, H. H. (2025). Food as soft power: Taiwanese gastrodiploamcy on social media and algorithmic suppression. *arXiv (Cornell University)*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2511.05729>
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage publications.
- Dikanbayeva, A., Sarybayev, & Utkelbay, R. (2025). French Soft power model and its adaptation in Central Asia: cultural diplomacy, tourism, and national branding. *International Relations and International Law Journal*, 110(2). <https://doi.org/10.26577/irilj202511023>
- El-Dabt, L., AlReshaid, F., Park, K., AlBuloushi, N., & Al-Enzi, A. (2025). Sustainable strategic nation branding through sports: leveraging soft power via mega-event hosting. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 10, 1521396. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1521396>
- Farooqi, M. A. (2022). Cultural Diplomacy: An analysis of national film and cultural policy of Pakistan. *The Journal of Cultural Perspectives*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.63672/n9sn1048>

- Jadoon, S., Naseem, I., Khan, M. B., Khan, G. F., & Zaman, K. (2024). Strategic management of diplomatic engagements, security policies, economic initiatives, and cultural influence: Analyzing Pakistan's leadership role in South Asia's geopolitical stability. *Journal of Management Info*, 11(3), 277–294. <https://doi.org/10.31580/jmi.v11i3.3124>
- Kayani, S. A., & Rehman, M. S. U. (2022). Employing Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy: Strategies for Pakistan. *Margalla Papers*, 26(I), 34–46. <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.i.96>
- Kelechi, W. (2024). Public diplomacy and nation branding. *Journal of Public Relations*, 3(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.47941/jpr.1774>
- Kousar, I., Tariq, R. Z., Rehman, A., & Noor, Z. (2026). China's soft power in South Asian governance. *Journal of Social & Organizational Matters*, 5(1), 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v5i1.379>
- Long, L., Ruiz-Mora, I., & Rodríguez, C. C. (2024). Approaching the concept of country branding through systematic review. *Revista Internacional De Relaciones Públicas*, 14(27), 201–222. <https://doi.org/10.5783/revrrpp.v14i27.862>
- Mbira, C. (2024). Role of cultural diplomacy in strengthening soft power among emerging economies. *American Journal of International Relations*, 9(6), 44–55.
- Nye, J. S. (2021). Soft power: the evolution of a concept. *Journal of Political Power*, 14(1), 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379x.2021.1879572>
- Rehman, W. U., & Hafeez, F. (2025). Cultural diplomacy as a tool for Pakistan's soft image. *Advance Social Science Archives Journal*, 3(1), 1094–1099. <https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/232>
- Saaida, M. B. E. (2023). The role of culture and identity in international relations. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2023v04i01.0255>
- Saifullah, K., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2021). Enumerating Cultural Resources of Pakistan's Soft Power: Potentials and Prospects. *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, 62(2).
- Saifullah, K., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2022). Soft power in the Foreign Policy of Pakistan: Prospects and potentials. *Strategic Studies*, 42(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.042.02.0013>
- Samantha, W., & Shehara, J. (2025). Exploring the potentials, issues, and challenges in developing Buddhist tourism in Sri Lanka. *International Research Journal of Scientific Studies*, 2(2), 8–30. <https://doi.org/10.64383/irjss.02250202>
- Sharma, K. P. (2025). Tourism and Tradition in the Himalayas: Divergent Narratives from Western and Nepalese Travelers. *Alphabet*, 8(1), 1–11.
- Syed, A., Ahmad, S., & Bhutta, M. M. (2020). Cultural diplomacy: a tool for Pakistan's positive image internationally. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 3(2), 85–95. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/3.2.11>
- Talukder, M. A. (2023). The Relationship between Political and Cultural Identity: A Case of Bengali Muslim of Bangladesh. *Sagepub*. <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.15043482.v2>

Warraich, S. K., Rehman, H. U., & Ahmed, U. (2023). Transitioning Pakistan's Hard Power Image: A Strategic Exploration of Shifting Paradigms towards Soft Power Diplomacy. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 7(3), 126-139. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023\(7-III\)11](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023(7-III)11)