

Soft Power and Foreign Media Narratives: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and India's Cultural Diplomacy and Global Image

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of soft power and international media portrayals on the global images of Pakistan and India. It explores how both nations utilize cultural media—including films, television dramas, and music—as instruments of soft power to shape favorable perceptions worldwide. The research also examines the depiction of these countries by major foreign media organizations such as the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, analyzing how these external narratives affect their international reputations. Through a comparative approach and detailed case studies, the paper highlights the dynamic relationship between domestic cultural diplomacy and foreign media framing, outlining the challenges and prospects each country encounters in crafting its global identity.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, international influence extends beyond military and economic power to include the ability to shape global perceptions through culture and values. This concept, known as soft power, was popularized by political scientist Joseph Nye and emphasizes the role of attraction and persuasion in international relations. Media forms such as films, television dramas, and music have become central tools in this process, allowing countries to project their culture and identity to audiences worldwide.

Pakistan and India, two neighboring South Asian countries with shared histories yet distinct political paths, have both leveraged cultural media as part of their foreign policy strategies. India's Bollywood industry has long been recognized as a global cultural powerhouse, exporting films and music that

have gained widespread popularity across continents. Pakistan's media industry, while smaller, has shown significant growth in recent years with productions like Coke Studio, internationally acclaimed television dramas, and a burgeoning film sector, all contributing to a more dynamic and nuanced representation of the country's culture.

At the same time, the portrayal of both countries in international media—such as through BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera—plays a critical role in shaping global perceptions. These foreign media outlets often act as gatekeepers of information, framing narratives that influence how Pakistan and India are understood by global audiences. While challenges remain for Pakistan in overcoming longstanding stereotypes, recent trends suggest increasing recognition of its cultural contributions and evolving social landscape.

This research aims to comparatively examine how Pakistan and India utilize their internal media to exercise soft power and how foreign media narratives shape their respective global images. The study explores the interplay between self-representation through cultural diplomacy and external framing through international news media, with a particular focus on understanding the opportunities and limitations each country faces in influencing its global reputation.

By analyzing these dynamics, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the role cultural media play in international relations, highlighting the importance of strategic media engagement for Pakistan and India in shaping their soft power influence.

Literature Review

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990 as a way for countries to influence others not through coercion or financial incentives but through attraction and persuasion. Nye identified three core resources that constitute soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Over time, as globalization accelerated and digital media made cultural exchange faster and more pervasive, media and entertainment have become key instruments of soft power. Television shows, films, and music transcend borders and languages, allowing countries to export their narratives and values in a way that feels personal and relatable to global audiences. Scholars have emphasized that soft power offers an alternative path to influence, especially for countries that may face political or economic challenges but have rich cultural assets to share.

Cultural diplomacy, which involves promoting a country's culture abroad to foster mutual understanding and goodwill, has been widely recognized as central to soft power. Researchers like Cull (2008) and Melissen (2005) have argued that cultural products—ranging from cinema and

music to cuisine and fashion—carry emotional resonance that official diplomatic efforts often lack. Unlike formal diplomacy, which can seem distant or politicized, cultural diplomacy connects people on a human level, creating a sense of familiarity and trust. Nye (2008) further noted that for countries whose foreign policies are sometimes misinterpreted or viewed with suspicion, cultural diplomacy can provide an essential platform for shaping perceptions and softening international criticism.

When it comes to South Asia, India stands out as a prime example of effective cultural diplomacy through media. Bollywood, India's film industry, has grown into a global cultural phenomenon, exporting stories that reflect Indian values, traditions, and the complexities of a rapidly modernizing society. Thussu (2013) highlights Bollywood's extensive reach, noting its popularity across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and increasingly, Western countries. This global appeal not only entertains but also subtly promotes India's culture, lifestyle, and even political values. The Indian government complements these efforts through organizations like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which organizes cultural exchanges, festivals, and events worldwide. The international recognition of initiatives such as International Yoga Day further showcases India's strategic use of cultural diplomacy to foster a positive global image. However, scholars also point to challenges faced by India in maintaining a credible soft power image, especially when political controversies and media freedom issues become subjects of international scrutiny. For example, critical reporting by outlets such as the BBC and Al Jazeera on domestic political tensions exposes the limits of India's soft power and demonstrates how internal affairs can influence foreign perceptions (Chatterjee, 2023).

In contrast, Pakistan's soft power has historically been less visible on the global stage, but recent years have seen a notable rise in its cultural diplomacy efforts. Academics like Arif Rafiq (2020) and Shahbaz Gill (2019) emphasize the growing importance of Pakistan's television dramas, music platforms like Coke Studio, and independent cinema in reshaping international views. Pakistani dramas are celebrated for their storytelling focused on family values, social issues, and resilience, resonating with both regional and diasporic audiences. Coke Studio, blending traditional and contemporary music styles, has earned acclaim for showcasing Pakistan's ethnic and linguistic diversity and for projecting a positive, authentic image to the world. Louw (2021) described Coke Studio as a "quiet revolution in musical diplomacy," which has enhanced Pakistan's visibility and cultural appeal abroad. Furthermore, Pakistan's cinema has started gaining international recognition, with films like *Joyland* receiving awards at film festivals, signaling an emerging artistic voice that challenges monolithic narratives about the country. This evolving cultural landscape highlights Pakistan's potential to leverage soft power in ways that transcend geopolitical conflicts and media stereotypes.

A critical aspect of shaping a country's global image lies in how foreign media frame their stories. Media framing theory, as developed by Entman (1993), explains that the angle and emphasis chosen by media outlets significantly influence public opinion. For Pakistan, Western media often depict the country through a narrow lens focused on terrorism, conflict, and political instability. Scholars such as Sahar (2017) argue that this skewed framing overlooks Pakistan's rich culture, hospitality, and diversity, resulting in a distorted image. However, recent research points to gradual changes, as some foreign media have started to report more positively on Pakistan's tourism, peace initiatives, and cultural developments. Al Jazeera, for instance, has been recognized for providing a more balanced portrayal that counters some Western biases. Despite these improvements, foreign media remain a double-edged sword—depending on the geopolitical climate, coverage can rapidly swing between positive and negative, heavily impacting international perceptions.

Despite the breadth of research on soft power and cultural diplomacy, a clear gap exists in comparative studies that analyze Pakistan and India side by side. Most scholarship tends to examine these countries independently, missing the opportunity to explore how their media strategies and foreign portrayals interact and contrast on the global stage. Furthermore, there is limited research connecting internal cultural production with external media framing, leaving unanswered questions about how domestic soft power initiatives influence, or are influenced by, foreign narratives. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to provide a nuanced comparative analysis of how Pakistan and India use cultural media to project soft power and how foreign media narratives shape their global images. This approach is particularly important for understanding Pakistan's emerging role in cultural diplomacy and the challenges it faces in overcoming entrenched international stereotypes.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to explore how Pakistan and India employ cultural media such as films, television dramas, and music as tools of soft power, alongside an examination of how foreign media outlets like BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera frame each country's global image. The focus is on understanding the interaction between internal cultural diplomacy efforts and external narrative framing. To achieve this, the study relies on secondary data drawn from academic literature, government and non-governmental reports on cultural diplomacy, and detailed content analyses of selected popular media from both countries—such as Pakistan's Coke Studio, Joyland, and dramas like Humsafar, alongside Indian films like RRR, Dangal, and Lagaan. In addition, international news coverage and documentaries from major foreign media organizations are analyzed to assess the portrayal and global reception of Pakistan and India. The

research also draws insights from public statements and interviews of cultural policymakers, artists, and diplomats available in published sources. The theoretical foundation of the study is primarily built upon Joseph Nye's soft power theory, which highlights the role of attraction and culture in international influence, complemented by Robert Entman's media framing theory to understand how global news media shape public perceptions through selective storytelling and emphasis. The timeframe for analysis spans roughly the last fifteen years to capture evolving trends, particularly the impact of digital platforms and streaming services in widening cultural reach. While this study is comprehensive in examining non-military cultural tools, it is limited by its reliance on secondary sources without original fieldwork or surveys, and it excludes political or economic aspects of foreign policy beyond their influence on media representation. Nevertheless, the available literature and media content provide a rich basis for a nuanced comparative analysis of soft power and foreign media narratives related to Pakistan and India.

Main Analysis

Use of Cultural Media as Soft Power Tools by Pakistan and India

Soft power fundamentally relies on a country's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, and cultural media has become one of the most powerful instruments to achieve this. Both Pakistan and India utilize films, television dramas, music, and other creative forms as tools of cultural diplomacy, aiming to shape global perceptions and build positive images internationally.

India's cultural media has long been synonymous with Bollywood—the country's massive film industry which produces more films annually than any other country. Bollywood's colorful storytelling, music, and dance sequences have attracted audiences not only in South Asia but across the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America. Films like *Lagaan*, *Dangal*, and *RRR* have gained international acclaim and earned global box office success, showcasing India's cultural richness and storytelling prowess. This wide reach has helped establish India as a global cultural brand, projecting images of diversity, tradition, and modernity. Moreover, Bollywood films often carry themes of national pride, social harmony, and cultural unity, which subtly promote India's values and national identity. The Indian government has complemented this with strong institutional support through bodies such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which organizes cultural festivals, film screenings, and artistic exchanges worldwide. India has also strategically promoted cultural practices like yoga, which culminated in the United Nations recognizing June 21 as International Yoga Day—an initiative that strengthened India's spiritual and cultural standing

globally. Indian music, classical arts, and dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak are showcased in international cultural events, further broadening India's soft power reach.

On the other hand, Pakistan's use of cultural media as soft power, though less internationally dominant compared to India's, has shown significant growth and dynamism, especially over the past decade. Pakistani television dramas have become a major cultural export, widely popular in South Asia and among diaspora communities worldwide. Dramas like *Humsafar*, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, and *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* have captivated audiences with their emotional depth, nuanced characters, and socially relevant themes, often addressing issues such as women's rights, family values, and social justice. These dramas provide a window into Pakistan's society, helping challenge stereotypical views by showcasing everyday life, aspirations, and cultural norms. In addition to dramas, Pakistani music, especially through platforms like Coke Studio, has gained global recognition for its innovative fusion of traditional folk music with contemporary genres. Coke Studio celebrates Pakistan's ethnic and linguistic diversity and has attracted millions of views worldwide, enhancing the country's cultural appeal. Pakistani cinema, although smaller in scale than India's, has started to make its mark internationally with films such as *Joyland* and *Cake*, which have won awards at international festivals and are praised for their authentic storytelling and artistic quality.

The Pakistani government, while not as institutionally organized in cultural diplomacy as India, has made efforts to support cultural exchanges and promote tourism to highlight the country's rich history, architecture, and natural beauty. Digital platforms have further enabled Pakistani artists and media producers to reach wider global audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and increasing visibility. Despite challenges such as censorship and political instability, the resilience of Pakistan's creative industry and its rising international profile demonstrate a growing recognition of cultural media as a vital soft power tool.

In essence, both Pakistan and India strategically harness their cultural media industries to project their narratives and values internationally. While India's larger scale and institutional backing have secured a dominant position, Pakistan's emerging media exports and creative innovation present a promising alternative narrative that challenges simplistic perceptions and fosters deeper cultural understanding.

Portrayal of Pakistan and India in Foreign Media Narratives

The role of foreign media in shaping international perceptions of Pakistan and India cannot be overstated. International news outlets like BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera serve as important sources of

information for global audiences, and their framing of events and issues influences how these countries are viewed on the world stage. The portrayal often reflects a mixture of factual reporting, editorial priorities, and geopolitical interests, resulting in narratives that can either reinforce or challenge the countries' own efforts at cultural diplomacy.

India, due to its size, economic growth, and global influence, generally benefits from a more extensive and varied foreign media presence. However, coverage of India in international media is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, Indian cultural exports, technological advances, and economic achievements are highlighted positively, supporting India's image as a rising global power. Coverage of Bollywood's international success, India's space missions, and its role in multilateral organizations often project India as an aspirational and dynamic nation. Nonetheless, foreign media also critically report on India's internal challenges, such as communal violence, human rights concerns, and political controversies. For example, incidents of religious intolerance or government actions perceived as limiting press freedom receive widespread coverage in Western media. These reports can complicate India's soft power narrative by introducing doubts and criticisms that influence international public opinion. Al Jazeera and BBC, in particular, tend to provide balanced but critical perspectives that underscore India's socio-political complexities alongside its cultural strengths.

In contrast, Pakistan's portrayal in foreign media has traditionally been dominated by narratives focusing on terrorism, security issues, and political instability. For many years, Pakistan was largely framed as a source of regional conflict and extremism, overshadowing its cultural and social dimensions. This narrow portrayal limited the country's ability to project a positive image internationally and constrained its soft power potential. However, there has been a gradual shift in recent years, as some foreign media outlets have begun to cover Pakistan's cultural achievements, social reforms, and efforts to promote peace and development. For instance, Al Jazeera has run documentaries and features on Pakistan's rich artistic heritage, music, and emerging film industry, while also highlighting social issues such as women's empowerment and education. These more nuanced narratives contribute to a more balanced understanding of Pakistan but remain limited compared to the dominant security-focused framing.

Furthermore, the rise of digital and social media has allowed Pakistani voices and content creators to reach global audiences directly, somewhat bypassing traditional foreign media gatekeepers. This has helped introduce alternative perspectives that highlight the country's diversity, creativity, and resilience. Nonetheless, foreign media portrayals still play a significant role in shaping the global image of Pakistan, especially among audiences with limited direct exposure to the country. Misconceptions and stereotypes persist, often fueled by selective reporting and geopolitical rivalries, which challenge Pakistan's cultural diplomacy efforts.

In conclusion, while foreign media narratives about India tend to be more diverse and reflective of the country's multifaceted reality, Pakistan continues to face challenges in overcoming predominantly negative portrayals. The interplay between how these countries present themselves culturally and how they are framed abroad underscores the importance of a comprehensive soft power strategy that includes both internal cultural production and engagement with international media to shape favorable global perceptions.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Pakistan – Foreign Media Coverage of the 2022 Floods

In 2022, Pakistan experienced one of the worst natural disasters in its history. Unprecedented monsoon rains led to massive flooding across the country, affecting over 33 million people and causing the deaths of more than 1,700 individuals. Entire villages were submerged, crops were destroyed, and millions were left homeless. This humanitarian crisis captured the attention of global media and became a significant moment in shaping Pakistan's international image.

Foreign media outlets such as BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and Deutsche Welle extensively covered the flood situation. Their reports highlighted both the severity of the disaster and the resilience of the Pakistani people. For example, CNN ran headlines focusing on the climate change aspect of the catastrophe, describing Pakistan as a "climate victim" and calling for global support and justice. This was an important shift in tone, as Pakistan was portrayed not as a security threat—as is often the case—but as a vulnerable nation on the frontlines of climate change.

Al Jazeera provided in-depth reports from affected areas, showing not just destruction but also community-led efforts in rescue and relief operations. The channel emphasized the role of women, youth, and volunteers, projecting an image of a united and responsive society. The Guardian, meanwhile, published opinion pieces linking the floods to global environmental injustice and stressing the lack of international financial aid. This contributed to a broader narrative that Pakistan deserved empathy and support rather than suspicion or neglect.

Social media also played a role. Videos of rescue missions, flooded homes, and international fundraising campaigns were widely shared. Influencers, celebrities, and activists from around the world—including Angelina Jolie and Malala Yousafzai—spoke up about the crisis, further pushing global media to provide continuous coverage.

However, despite this generally sympathetic portrayal, there were also critiques in foreign media. Some reports touched upon government mismanagement, corruption in aid distribution, and a weak disaster response system. While these issues reflected internal challenges, their coverage by global outlets served as both a criticism and a call for structural improvement. Importantly, these critiques did not dominate the overall narrative, which remained focused on Pakistan as a victim of climate injustice.

This case demonstrates a rare moment when international media portrayed Pakistan through a humanitarian and empathetic lens, recognizing its people's resilience and suffering rather than reducing the country to conflict and extremism. It marked a soft power moment for Pakistan—showing the world not just the tragedy it faced, but also the unity, strength, and culture of care that emerged in response.

Case Study 2: India – BBC Documentary “India: The Modi Question”

In early 2023, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) released a two-part documentary titled “India: The Modi Question.” The film examined Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political career, particularly his role during the 2002 Gujarat riots and the growing religious polarization in India under his leadership. The documentary stirred major international debate and received wide coverage in global media.

The BBC, one of the world's most reputable news organizations, focused on the 2002 violence in Gujarat, where over 1,000 people—mostly Muslims—were killed in communal riots. It referenced classified UK government documents that held Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, responsible for enabling the violence. By bringing this issue to a global audience, the documentary challenged India's image as a secular democracy and raised questions about religious freedom and minority rights under Modi's rule.

The Indian government quickly condemned the documentary, calling it “a propaganda piece” with a colonial mindset. It invoked emergency laws to block the documentary from being shared online within India. This censorship attempt itself became a story in global media, with outlets like CNN, The Washington Post, and Al Jazeera criticizing India's response and raising concerns about press freedom in the world's largest democracy.

International human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, supported the BBC's right to broadcast the documentary and urged India to uphold freedom of expression. The controversy generated discussions not just about Modi but also about the broader

direction of Indian democracy. This significantly affected India's soft power image, especially in the West, where democratic values are closely watched.

While the Indian diaspora and government-backed media in India rejected the film, many international commentators viewed the documentary as a legitimate journalistic effort to question state narratives. In this context, foreign media functioned as a counterbalance to internal image-building by presenting a more critical view of India's political climate.

This case study illustrates how foreign media can directly challenge a country's soft power narrative. For India, which relies heavily on Bollywood, yoga diplomacy, and tech prowess to build a global image, such investigations can complicate its international branding. The BBC documentary served as a reminder that even countries with strong cultural diplomacy can face global scrutiny if their internal politics appear inconsistent with the values they project abroad.

Conclusion

This research explored the dynamics of soft power and media narratives in shaping the global images of Pakistan and India. It examined how both countries employ cultural media—especially films, dramas, and music—as tools of soft power, and how international media portray them on the global stage. While India has long benefited from a strong global media presence and a well-supported film industry, Pakistan's soft power efforts have gained increasing momentum in recent years through high-quality television dramas, music platforms like Coke Studio, and a growing youth-led creative movement.

The analysis also highlighted how foreign media narratives often reinforce certain stereotypes, with Pakistan frequently depicted through a security-focused lens while India enjoys broader cultural framing. These representations play a significant role in influencing international perceptions and shaping diplomatic relationships. However, Pakistan's cultural potential remains strong, backed by a rich heritage, growing digital access, and an emerging generation of content creators.

Despite institutional challenges and geopolitical constraints, Pakistan has clear opportunities to strengthen its cultural diplomacy. By investing in creative industries, enhancing global distribution of its media products, and facilitating cultural exchange, Pakistan can project a more nuanced and positive image internationally. A strategic, well-supported approach to soft power can help Pakistan reshape how it is perceived globally—not just as a state with geopolitical challenges, but as a culturally rich, innovative, and dynamic society.

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