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Building Digital Reputation: Nation Branding and Soft Power in the Platform Age

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Abstract

This article analyzes the strategic transformation of nation branding and soft power in an era where digital platforms have become the primary arena for international communication. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in public diplomacy, platform studies, and strategic communication, I examine how states are adapting their reputational strategies to algorithmic, decentralized environments increasingly shaped by social media platforms, content creators, and user driven narratives. I argue that the emerging model of digital nation branding—what I term Nation Branding 2.0—is characterized by the diminishing control of state actors over their reputational messaging, the rise of non state actors as influential brand intermediaries, and the central role of platform architectures in mediating visibility and engagement. The article proceeds in three parts. First, it reviews the conceptual foundations of soft power, nation branding, and digital public diplomacy as interlocking but analytically distinct frameworks. Second, it examines three contemporary strategic modalities through which states project digital soft power: influencer mediated diplomacy, cultural content strategies across platforms, and the integration of emerging digital entertainment sectors such as esports into branding efforts. Third, it identifies four emerging challenges for nation branding in the digital era: algorithmic intermediation and the fragmentation of narrative control, reputational vulnerability arising from political polarization and automated distortion, the modest but growing role of AI in reputation management, and persistent digital divides that shape uneven capacities for countries to compete for global attention. The article concludes by outlining an agenda for future research.

Keywords: *Nation Branding, Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Platform Governance, Influencer Diplomacy, Reputation Management, Algorithmic Intermediation.*

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Introduction

In the spring of 2026, a spontaneous trend swept across Western social media: "Chinamaxxing." Across TikTok and Instagram, everyday users uploaded content celebrating aspects of Chinese culture, infrastructure, and daily life, not as state-directed propaganda but as organic, user-generated enthusiasm. A commentator observed that digital platforms have created alternative diplomatic spaces beyond conventional statecraft, where narrative authority shifts from official actors to everyday users (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026). Within months, the trend had been extensively covered by mainstream news outlets, invited commentary from Chinese cultural institutions, and generated millions of views. The episode illustrates a profound transformation in how nations build their reputations in an era where attention, visibility, and storytelling are increasingly mediated by algorithms rather than ambassadors.

The traditional conceptual framework for understanding how states attract international goodwill has centered on Joseph Nye's notion of soft power—the capacity to achieve foreign policy objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). For decades, this paradigm guided national reputational strategies: invest in cultural institutes, international broadcasting, educational exchanges, and high-visibility diplomatic events. These instruments presumed a world in which information flowed through relatively stable, state-influenced channels—television networks, newspapers, government-funded cultural centers—and in which states could exercise significant control over their own narrative.

That world no longer exists. The rise of global social media platforms—TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter)—has decentralized the production and distribution of international images. Today, a travel vlogger with millions of subscribers can shape a foreign public's perception of a distant country more

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powerfully than an embassy press release. An algorithmic recommender system determines which posts about a nation become visible to which audiences. A viral meme can accomplish in days what years of cultural diplomacy once sought to achieve (Wu, 2016).

This article explores the implications of this shift for how states build and manage their digital reputations. I offer three central claims. First, the traditional nation-branding literature, focused on top-down marketing campaigns and unified national identity, is insufficient for understanding contemporary dynamics. The emerging model—Nation Branding 2.0—is characterized by the displacement of narrative control from state actors to a heterogeneous field of platform companies, content creators, and user communities (Dinnie, 2022). Second, successful digital nation branding increasingly operates at the intersection of entertainment, cultural appeal, and algorithmic literacy, with states such as South Korea, China, and Ukraine demonstrating innovative strategies that integrate influencer networks, platform-specific content formats, and real-time crisis communication (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025). Third, these developments generate significant new reputational vulnerabilities: political polarization and algorithmic distortion can fragment national image; generative AI systems are emerging as novel intermediaries that shape how audiences encounter information about states; and persistent digital divides unequally distribute the capacity to compete for global attention (Cull, 2025; Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026).

The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the conceptual foundations, clarifying the relationship between soft power, nation branding, and digital public diplomacy. Section 3 analyzes three strategic modalities of digital nation branding, drawing on recent case studies and empirical research. Section 4 examines four emerging challenges that will shape the future of national reputational competition. Section 5 concludes with implications for research and policy.

Conceptual Foundations: Soft Power, Nation Branding, and the Platform Turn

Soft Power and Its Limits in the Digital Era

Joseph Nye's formulation of soft power emerged in the late 1980s as an analytic response to the declining utility of military force in an increasingly interdependent world. For Nye, soft power rests on three primary resources: a country's culture (when it is attractive to others), its political values (when they are practiced consistently at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are perceived as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2004). The central mechanism is attraction: if a country can persuade others to want what it wants, it can achieve its objectives without coercion.

Critics have long noted that soft power is difficult to measure, culturally specific in its effects, and often derivative of economic and military strength rather than independent of them. But the digital era poses a more fundamental challenge: if soft power operates through attraction to a country's culture, values, and policies, what happens when the images of that culture, values, and policies are increasingly produced not by the country itself but by independent content creators, algorithmic systems, and foreign audiences?

The problem is not merely that states have lost control over their reputations. It is that the very mechanisms of attraction have been transformed. In a recent analysis, Sánchez Chumpitaz and Gutiérrez Rebora (2026) argue that soft power in algorithmic contexts is being "reconfigured within a digital ecosystem governed by algorithms and private platforms." Their findings reveal a structural transformation in cultural diplomacy, where symbolic visibility is mediated by technological infrastructures that prioritize discourse based on commercial or ideological criteria. The implication is that states can no longer assume that investing in traditional cultural resources will yield predictable soft power returns. Instead, they must design digital diplomacy strategies aligned with algorithmic governance frameworks in order to preserve narrative autonomy and compete effectively for influence in a globalized digital environment (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026).

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Nation Branding: From Identity Marketing to Reputational Fragmentation

Nation branding emerged in the 1990s as an applied offshoot of soft power theory, drawing on marketing principles to propose that countries could be managed like commercial brands (Dinnie, 2022). The core idea was straightforward: just as companies associate their products with distinctive attributes to build consumer loyalty, countries could similarly manage associations in the minds of foreign publics, attracting tourism, investment, and diplomatic goodwill. The leading paradigm of this approach, associated with Simon Anholt's "competitive identity" framework, held that effective nation branding required aligning a country's identity, image, and reputation across tourism, export, foreign policy, and cultural domains (Dinnie, 2022).

Recent scholarship has grown more skeptical of the branding framework's assumptions. A major critique is that nation branding presupposes a degree of internal coherence and state agency that rarely exists. This problem is exacerbated rather than alleviated by digital environments. In a 2025 chapter, Cull introduces the concept of "reputational security"—a country's capacity to protect its reputation not only from external attacks but also from internal divisions and inconsistencies that become visible online (Cull, 2025). Building on this insight, Cull (2025) proposes a qualitative risk assessment model for tracking soft power loss generated by schisms arising from political polarization. The model conceptualizes a spectrum connecting soft power to what is called reputational vulnerability, modeled across stages of schism formation: identity fissures, image fractures, and reputational fragmentation. Cull (2025) notes that "in a digitally saturated world rife with political polarisation, with emergent AI interventions, algorithmically facilitated representational schisms are inevitable."

This framework captures an essential feature of digital nation branding: reputation is no longer a unified asset that can be centrally managed. It is a fragmented, contested, and often contradictory set of associations that different audiences encounter through different algorithmic pathways (Cull, 2025). A country may project a coherent official narrative while simultaneously being represented in entirely different terms by independent content creators, diaspora communities, or political opponents. These competing representations coexist in audiences' feeds, often without clear hierarchies of authority or authenticity.

Digital Public Diplomacy: From Broadcasting to Platformized Interaction

Public diplomacy—the set of activities through which states engage directly with foreign publics—was initially understood as a state-centric, top-down enterprise: international broadcasting, cultural exchanges, and educational programs designed to build favorable long-term dispositions toward a country (Nye, 2004). The advent of social media gave rise to the notion of "public diplomacy 2.0," a term coined by Nicholas Cull and others to describe the opportunities for two-way, interactive engagement across digital platforms. In this model, diplomats would no longer simply broadcast messages but would listen, respond, and build relationships with foreign publics through social media channels.

A 2025 analysis of digital public diplomacy as practiced by Ukraine, South Korea, and France on Instagram, TikTok, and X found that platforms have not simply added new communication channels but have fundamentally reshaped the forms and effectiveness of diplomatic outreach (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025). The study, applying a mixed-methods approach, identified four distinct models of digital cultural diplomacy that emerged: hybrid-network, coordination-commercial, institutional-curatorial, and alternative-oppositional. The central finding is that platform logic determines narrative success significantly. Successful digital cultural diplomacy, Liubinienė and Zutkytė (2025) conclude, relies on the ability to integrate authenticity, emotional resonance, and platform-specific formats, transforming diplomacy from top-down messaging into collaborative cultural storytelling.

This transformation has produced a particularly notable development: the rise of non-state, grassroots actors as effective diplomatic agents. Observers have noted that content creators have emerged as new symbols of "organic public diplomacy"—non-state, grassroots actors who shape the pictures in our heads through visual framing and everyday storytelling. These creators, operating outside formal diplomatic structures, often command larger and more engaged audiences than official government accounts. Their

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credibility flows not from institutional authority but from perceived authenticity, visual persuasiveness, and alignment with platform norms of personal storytelling (Wu, 2016).

Strategic Modalities of Digital Nation Branding

How are states actually adapting to these transformed conditions? A growing body of empirical research documents the emergence of several distinct strategic modalities. The analysis that follows is based on three types of sources: (1) recent empirical studies employing systematic content analysis, machine learning, or comparative case-study designs; (2) publicly documented national branding strategies and campaigns; and (3) theoretical and conceptual work in digital diplomacy and platform studies.

Influencer-Mediated Diplomacy

Perhaps the most visible innovation in digital nation branding is the strategic engagement with social media influencers as intermediaries for national messaging. Rather than relying solely on official government accounts, states increasingly collaborate with travel vloggers, lifestyle content creators, and cultural commentators who can embed national storytelling within their existing, audience-trusted formats.

The travel vlogger phenomenon on YouTube provides a striking illustration. In an analysis of how YouTube content shapes perceptions of post-conflict Afghanistan, researchers found that travel vloggers with millions of subscribers offer sharply divergent portrayals of the nation that diverge sharply not only from each other but also from traditional media narratives. A 55-minute travel vlog viewed tens of thousands of times presents Afghanistan not as a war zone but as a haven of hospitality and calm; another vlogger centers his lens on scenery, hospitality, and the rhythms of everyday life in a tone that remains adventure-driven and apolitical. Neither depiction is produced in collaboration with the Afghan government, yet both shape international perceptions far more directly than official communications (Wu, 2016).

Other countries have moved from passive reception to active cultivation of influencer networks. A multi-country comparative analysis of digital public diplomacy documents how Ukraine, South Korea, and France have developed distinct strategies for engaging influencers within their broader diplomatic frameworks (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025). One of the four models identified—the hybrid-network model—centrally involves state coordination with non-state content creators, leveraging their authenticity and audience reach to supplement official messaging (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025).

China's approach to influencer engagement is arguably the most extensive. In a study of China's digital public diplomacy on X, Qaisar and colleagues (2025) examined a dataset of over 28,000 tweets from official government, media, and embassy accounts in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The study found that China's messaging strategies are "nation-specific," tailored to the distinct geopolitical environments of different audiences, and that the influence of influencers on discourse is a significant factor in shaping engagement patterns (Qaisar et al., 2025). This suggests that China has developed a sophisticated, differentiated strategy for engaging local influencers within target countries, embedding its messaging within regional communication networks rather than broadcasting a single global narrative.

Cultural Content as Soft Power Strategy

A second strategic modality focuses on producing and distributing cultural content designed to generate positive associations with a country across global audiences. This approach—sometimes called cultural diplomacy or, in its more contemporary form, digital cultural diplomacy—has been historically associated with countries such as France and the United Kingdom, which have long operated global cultural networks. However, digital platforms have both intensified competition in this domain and lowered the barriers to entry for new players.

South Korea's cultural strategy is the most frequently cited success story. The Korean Wave (Hallyu)—encompassing K-pop, K-dramas, film, and beauty products—has generated substantial cultural visibility

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and positive affect toward South Korea across global markets, particularly among youth (Sharma et al., 2026). Digital platforms have been central to the diffusion of these cultural products, with YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify serving as key distribution channels that bypass traditional gatekeepers (Sharma et al., 2026).

China has pursued a parallel but distinct cultural content strategy. Rather than relying on organic cultural diffusion alone, China has invested heavily in platform-based distribution mechanisms. Observers note that digital ecosystems like YouTube, TikTok, and Weibo are at the core of China's contemporary soft power projects (Qaisar et al., 2025). Chinese strategy interweaves entertainment, touching storytelling, and carefully curated influencer marketing campaigns to craft a new international image without relying on crass political propaganda (Qaisar et al., 2025). This reflects a sophisticated understanding that in the attention economy, persuasion operates through entertainment and narrative resonance rather than declarative messaging (Wu, 2016).

Ukraine offers a third model, distinct from both the South Korean cultural diffusion approach and the Chinese strategic investment approach. In the context of the 2022-present war with Russia, Ukraine has used digital platforms not primarily for cultural promotion but for crisis communication and international solidarity-building. The comparative study of digital cultural diplomacy found that Ukraine's model—classified as "alternative-oppositional"—is characterized by authenticity, emotional resonance, and platform-specific formats adapted to the urgency of wartime communication (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025). President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's direct, informal video addresses on social media, filmed on smartphones and distributed without professional editing, exemplify a strategy that turns platform informality into rhetorical strength.

Esports and Emerging Digital Entertainment Sectors

A third strategic modality, still emerging but increasingly significant, involves the integration of digital entertainment sectors—particularly esports—into nation-branding strategies. Esports have grown from a niche subculture into a global industry with massive youth audiences, professionalized structures, and international governance frameworks. This growth has increasingly positioned esports as a site of cultural production and political significance, prompting scholars and policymakers to view it as an emerging arena of soft power and public diplomacy (Sharma et al., 2026).

A comparative analysis of how South Korea, China, the United States, and India utilize esports as a tool of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding reveals significant strategic variation (Sharma et al., 2026). In South Korea, esports is integrated into the Hallyu cultural wave, reinforcing the same national brand associated with K-pop and K-dramas. China uses a state-led model tied to digital nationalism and platform sovereignty, viewing esports as an arena for both domestic cultural affirmation and international visibility. The United States, by contrast, projects corporate soft power through global publishers and streaming platforms, with limited direct government involvement. India leverages esports within its Digital India modernization framework, emphasizing the sector's role in techno-national development rather than international branding per se (Sharma et al., 2026).

A particularly important finding of this comparative analysis is that control over global distribution platforms is becoming as important as game development itself (Sharma et al., 2026). This underscores a central theme of the digital era: visibility on major platforms—YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, and the app stores that host esports games—is at least as important as the quality of the cultural product being distributed (Wu, 2016). Countries without platform infrastructure or algorithmic literacy are at a systematic disadvantage in this competition for attention.

Emerging Challenges for Digital Nation Branding

The strategic innovations examined above are complemented by a set of emerging challenges that will shape the future of national reputational competition.

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Algorithmic Intermediation and the Fragmentation of Narrative Control

The most fundamental challenge is that narratives about a country are no longer controlled by the country itself. The same algorithmic and platform systems that enable new forms of engagement also fragment control over how a country is represented across different audiences. Sánchez Chumpitaz and Gutiérrez Rebora (2026) conclude that states must design digital diplomacy strategies aligned with algorithmic governance frameworks in order to preserve narrative autonomy. But what this means in practice remains deeply uncertain. Algorithmic governance is opaque, platform-specific, and subject to continuous change. No strategy can guarantee narrative control in an environment where a single algorithm adjustment can drastically alter which content about a country becomes visible to which audiences.

The problem is compounded by the emergence of generative AI systems, which are increasingly shaping how audiences first encounter information about unfamiliar topics. As integrated into consumer discovery environments, these systems evaluate content based on a mix of training data, user engagement signals, and proprietary criteria. Countries whose association patterns in these systems align with positive training data will benefit; those whose associations are more ambiguous may find their visibility systematically depressed, without appeal or transparency (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026).

Reputational Vulnerability and Automated Distortion

Beyond loss of narrative control, digital environments generate new forms of reputational risk. The phenomenon of reputational vulnerability is central to recent analytic frameworks (Cull, 2025). The risk assessment model proposed by Cull (2025) models this vulnerability across a continuum: identity fissures arise from internal political disagreements that become visible in social media discourse; image fractures occur when competing representations of a country circulate widely; reputational fragmentation refers to the condition in which no coherent national image persists across different audience segments.

Political polarization accelerates this fragmentation. Cull (2025) notes that algorithmically facilitated representational schisms are inevitable in a saturated digital environment. This suggests that reputational vulnerability is not a management failure but a structural condition of the platform era. Even well-resourced countries with sophisticated digital strategies will find their images contested and fragmented.

Automated distortion adds another layer of vulnerability. The growing sophistication of AI-generated content—deepfakes, automated disinformation campaigns, synthetic influencers—means that representations of a country can be generated, amplified, and targeted in ways that are increasingly difficult to detect and attribute. This phenomenon underscores the challenge for reputation monitoring and crisis response (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026).

The Role of AI in Reputation Management

At the same time, AI systems are also becoming essential tools for reputation management. Forecasting suggests that a majority of communications leaders will use AI-driven tools to detect and respond to reputation-damaging content before it reaches a mainstream audience. Predictive models integrating artificial intelligence, community analysis techniques, and natural language processing have been developed to redefine how brands can anticipate and manage the ideological impact of their strategies in an increasingly polarized world (Sharma et al., 2026).

These tools offer the possibility of real-time alerting, sentiment tracking, and automated response recommendations. However, they also raise significant concerns. If reputation management becomes an automated contest of AI against AI, the competitive advantage will accrue to countries with the most sophisticated AI infrastructure and data access—reinforcing rather than reducing existing inequalities in digital capabilities (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026).

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The final challenge is the most straightforward but also the most consequential: the uneven distribution of digital capacities across countries shapes highly unequal reputational competition. A country such as Vietnam, which recently launched a comprehensive global image promotion strategy, explicitly acknowledges this challenge. The strategy includes the development of a national digital communication ecosystem, including the application of big data and artificial intelligence to improve outreach effectiveness. Cross-border digital platforms and global social networks are expected to enable faster communication, but only if the country develops the institutional and technical capacity to use them effectively (Dinnie, 2022).

By contrast, many lower-income countries lack the infrastructure, expertise, and resources to mount systematic digital nation-branding campaigns. They may find themselves systematically underrepresented in global attention flows—visible only in crisis contexts or through representations generated by external media, over which they have minimal control (Cull, 2025). This structural inequality in the capacity to project digital soft power is likely to become a persistent feature of international relations, with profound implications for global influence and perception.

Conclusion

This article has argued that nation branding in the digital era—a phenomenon I have termed Nation Branding 2.0—is undergoing a fundamental transformation, with three key dimensions (Dinnie, 2022). First, effective digital nation branding requires operating across decentralized networks rather than through centralized control, engaging with influencers, content creators, and platform-specific formats (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025; Qaisar et al., 2025). Second, algorithmic intermediation shapes visibility in ways that states cannot fully control, making narrative consistency more difficult to achieve (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026). Third, emerging risks—reputational vulnerability, automated distortion, and new AI-driven governance mechanisms—create challenges that existing diplomatic frameworks are ill-equipped to address (Cull, 2025; Wu, 2016).

Several directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, more systematic empirical work is needed on how different platform architectures shape the reception of nation-branding content. Comparative studies such as the one examining Ukraine, South Korea, and France provide a model for this work, but the evidence base remains limited (Liubinienė & Zutkytė, 2025). Second, the implications of generative AI for reputation formation in international perception merit urgent investigation. As AI systems become primary interfaces for information discovery, the training data, design choices, and governance frameworks shaping these systems will have profound consequences for global reputational competition (Sánchez Chumpitaz & Gutiérrez Rebora, 2026). Third, the normative dimensions of digital nation branding deserve more attention. Are there ethical constraints on how states should engage with influencers, leverage cultural content, or manage algorithmic visibility? Should international norms emerge to govern these practices?

For practitioners, the implications are sobering. Digital nation branding is not a one-time campaign but an ongoing process of engagement across multiple, shifting, algorithmically mediated channels. It requires not only content production skills but also platform literacy, data analysis capabilities, and organizational agility (Sharma et al., 2026). And it operates in an environment where control is always partial, visibility is never guaranteed, and reputational vulnerability is a structural condition rather than a fixable problem (Cull, 2025).

In this transformed environment, perhaps the most important capacity is not the ability to control a narrative but the ability to navigate a contested, fragmented, and constantly shifting reputational landscape—responding to schisms, adapting to algorithmic changes, and finding opportunities for authentic engagement within constraints that no state can fully transcend (Cull, 2025; Wu, 2016).

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