

# From Heritage to Hashtags: Transforming Cultural Diplomacy on Instagram, TikTok and X

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This article aims to analyse how Instagram, TikTok and X influence the forms, content and effectiveness of digital cultural diplomacy through a comparative analysis of Ukraine, South Korea and France. The study applies a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis, critical discourse analysis and quantitative variables such as engagement rate, virality, and audience growth. The dataset includes 150 Instagram posts, 120 TikTok videos and 200 tweets published between September 2024 and May 2025. The results demonstrate that platform logic determines narrative success significantly. In addition, cross-country comparison reveals four distinct models of digital cultural diplomacy: hybrid-network, coordination-commercial, institutional-curatorial and alternative-oppositional. Successful digital cultural diplomacy relies on the ability to integrate authenticity, emotional resonance, and platform-specific formats, transforming diplomacy from top-down messaging into collaborative cultural storytelling.

**Keywords:** digital cultural diplomacy, narrative strategies, soft power, social media platforms, public diplomacy

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the world faces information, technological and cultural transformations that are changing the way states, societies and individuals interact. In this context, social media have become a powerful tool for shaping cultural narratives, mobilising audiences and representing national identities. As a result, cultural diplomacy has become dynamic, multimedia, emotionally charged, and vulnerable to influence (Hololobov 2022). In this context, transforming traditional strategies of cultural diplomacy and rethinking its functions in the digital environment gain its prominence. Soft power explores the social media space,

which provides massive audience reach and simultaneously dictates new rules of the game: speed, conciseness, visuality, memeticism, interactivity, and the ability to go viral. Therefore, there is a need for a critical reflection on how these platforms transform the goals, means and results of cultural diplomacy, and how they influence the construction of a country's cultural image in the global information space (Faucher, Zhu 2025). Despite the considerable attention to social media in political science, media and cultural studies, digital cultural diplomacy has not yet received a proper theoretical consideration (Kuleba 2021).

The study of digital cultural diplomacy is an interdisciplinary field that combines soft power theory, media communication, platform studies, and analysis of digital audience practices. Studies offer important conceptual and empirical foundations; however, they analyse either individual platforms or specific national cases. There is a growing body of research analysing how social media transform diplomatic practices. Litra and Kononenko (2013) demonstrate the potential of Twitter for political communication and international support. Using the case of France and China, Meehan (2024) argues that diplomatic narratives on Twitter/X reflect both the competition of cultural models and discursive strategies of influence. Thus, contemporary researchers emphasise that platforms transmit messages and shape the rules of their dissemination.

Studies of Instagram (El Damanhoury, Garud-Paktar 2021; McKinley, Lauby 2023; Yeh, Swinehart 2024) show that visual aesthetics, image mood, and presentation formats define the framework for interpreting cultural messages. Likewise, TikTok introduces a logic of virality, emotionality and performativity that is particularly evident in youth digital cultures (McLean et al. 2023; Maddox, Gill 2023). K-pop studies demonstrate that fan communities can act as agents of cultural diplomacy, creating faith-based practices that disseminate national cultural codes (Aisyah et al. 2022; Pyun et al. 2024).

Faucher and Zhu (2025) point out that cultural diplomacy in the digital age should move away from one-way broadcasts and towards sustainable digital interactions with global audiences. The Ukrainian context represents a specific case where cultural diplomacy served as a tool for nation-building and international mobilisation during the war. Khololobov (2022) emphasises that Ukraine's cultural policy integrate digital channels. The MFA's 2021–2025 strategy (Kuleba 2021) identifies social media as a key tool of public diplomacy. Thus, soft power has become crisis-oriented and mobilising, which distinguishes the Ukrainian case from classical models.

Therefore, most existing research focuses on Instagram, TikTok or X individually, without comparative cross-platform synthesis, and existing studies rarely combine multiple countries with quantitative engagement metrics. While the role of algorithms and users is recognised, their joint impact on cultural diplomacy remains under-researched. This article seeks to address these gaps by offering a cross-platform, cross-national, empirically grounded study of how Instagram, TikTok and X jointly shape cultural diplomacy narratives in Ukraine, South Korea and France.

The aim of this study is to analyse how Instagram, TikTok and X influence the forms, content and effectiveness of digital cultural diplomacy through a comparative analysis of Ukraine, South Korea and France. In this connection, the research hypothesis is that content integrating elements of national identity into modern digital storytelling formats (memes, videos with popular music and challenges) can evoke a deeper emotional response, a wider reach and a higher level of audience engagement than traditional visualisations of cultural heritage

or official messages. The research objectives are as follows: (1) to identify typical cultural narratives used in social media to promote the national image; (2) to analyse the impact of different formats (video, images and text) and platforms (TikTok, Instagram and X) on user engagement with cultural content; (3) to compare digital cultural diplomacy strategies of Ukraine, South Korea and France; (4) to identify models of participatory interaction between government agencies, cultural initiatives and global audiences; (5) to provide recommendations for developing an effective cultural diplomacy strategy in the context of digital transformations.

This study goes beyond the mainstream debate on heritage communication and soft power on digital platforms by introducing a multi-level analytical framework that combines platform logic, cross-country comparison and cross-platform modelling of audience engagement. In contrast to existing studies that typically focus on either one social media platform or one country, our work integrates the following: (1) a cross-platform comparison of Instagram, TikTok and X; (2) a cross-country comparison of Ukraine, South Korea and France; and (3) empirical modelling of engagement metrics (reach, virality, follower growth and affective reactions) based on 470 real-world posts. This three-dimensional approach shows how cultural diplomacy is jointly produced by algorithmic infrastructure, aesthetic norms and audience participation – a connection that has not been systematically demonstrated in the literature.

The research novelty lies in the fact that a comprehensive empirical modelling of the effectiveness of different narratives and formats of digital cultural diplomacy was carried out based on a cross-platform analysis with real audience engagement indicators. Moreover, the study offers a new comparative approach to the study of cultural diplomacy in four countries with different political systems, cultural codes and degrees of digital freedom. In addition, the study offers a new typology of digital cultural diplomacy models (hybrid-network, coordination-commercial and institutional-curatorial) derived from models of interaction between countries. These models conceptualise cultural diplomacy as a dynamic and participatory interaction between state actors, creative industries and the public.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on a combination of content analysis of cultural messages, discourse analysis of digital communications, case studies from Ukraine, France and South Korea, and a comparative approach to analysing different social media. This article analyses four representative cases that illustrate different approaches to digital cultural diplomacy on Instagram, TikTok and X (Twitter). The choice of those social media was made because of their popularity and their functional differentiation. TikTok, which focuses on short videos, algorithmic distribution and trending, helps to assess the effectiveness of hybrid and entertainment formats (McLean et al. 2023). Instagram focuses on aesthetics and represents a platform for visual narrative, which is well suited for promoting art, lifestyle and cultural brands (Yeh, Swinehart 2024). X (Twitter), in turn, is a space of textual and visual mobilisation, public debate and symbolic confrontation, where cultural diplomacy often takes on political forms (Litra, Kononenko 2013).

The choice of Ukraine, South Korea and France is methodologically sound and allows for cross-cultural and cross-media comparisons. First, Ukraine is an example of a country that was forced to rethink the strategies of cultural diplomacy due to the war, making social media a powerful tool for international mobilisation, support and sympathy (Litra, Kononenko 2013). South Korea is an example of how TikTok has become a strategic channel for the globalisation of pop culture. The analysis of the K-pop case permits to understand how digital technologies can scale cultural exports through the platform logic of TikTok (Pyun et

al. 2024). France is adapting to new digital formats. Institut Français' campaigns in Instagram aimed at promoting the French language, art and the creative economy use visual content as a tool to influence young people and new audiences. The French case demonstrates a model of institutionalised digital diplomacy that preserves aesthetic identity in the digital environment (McKinley, Lauby 2023).

The sample size consisted of 150 Instagram posts selected from the official accounts of @ukraine.ua, @france\_diplomatie, @unesco, @korea\_net; 120 TikTok videos taken from official profiles (@ukraine.ua, @korea\_net\_official) and popular cultural campaigns (#KPop-Diplomacy, #UkrainianCulture); 200 tweets from @UNESCO, @MFA\_Ukraine, @Germany-Diplo and thematic campaigns (#StandWithUkraine, #RamadanVibes). The research period covered September 2024–May 2025 to track the dynamics in cultural communications in the context of both global events and technical changes in platforms. The evaluation was carried out within 10 days after the content was published, with the dynamics of indicators recorded every 24 h. The collected data was compared across platforms, types of content and countries to identify both universal patterns of audience interaction with cultural diplomacy and specific features of each case.

The content analysis involved the systematic coding of visual and textual units of messages using predefined categories. The unit of analysis was individual publications (videos, photos and text posts) from official and culturally orientated accounts. The coding categories included the theme (traditions, language, art, gastronomy and national symbols), the emotional tone (positive, neutral, negative and protest), the format (Reels, stories, videos, tweets and infographics), the content type (official/unofficial), and the audience interaction (likes, comments, shares and emojis). The analysis was carried out using the NVivo 14 software in order to code and identify semantic patterns based on the selected criteria.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to study the specifics of the representation of cultural meanings in digital communications on different social networks platforms. The analysis covered the content of state accounts and audience reactions, such as comments under videos and posts, which were studied for identification, polarisation, protest, or cultural solidarity. Thus, CDA was carried out to identify the nature of the reactions (positive, neutral and negative), key semantic dominants (emotional support, identification, criticism, mockery, etc.), the frequency of use of culturally marked words or emojis, and manifestations of polarisation, debate or conflict in the comments. The comments were analysed using manual coding in NVivo and divided into thematic categories (identity, solidarity, conflict, humour, indifference and repetition of narratives).

The quantitative assessment was carried out using the following indicators: reach, the number of interactions, engagement rate, virality, follower growth, and average view duration. Reach (R) was defined as the total number of unique users who viewed the post. For Instagram and TikTok, this indicator is provided directly in the internal analytics. For X (Twitter), the reach was estimated by the impressions metric, recording the number of impressions in the feed, which is roughly equivalent to the potential reach. The number of interactions (I) was seen as the sum of likes, comments, reposts, shares and reactions. This is an integral indicator that demonstrates the activity of users in relation to each post (if a TikTok video had 80,000 likes, 10,000 comments, 25,000 shares and 5,000 saves, the total number of interactions was 120,000). The engagement rate (ER) was defined as the ratio of the number of interactions (I) to the total reach (R). It was used to compare the effectiveness of content regardless of the initial audience of the account.

The virality (V) was considered to be the ratio of the number of reposts or shares (S) to the total reach (R). This indicator indicates the ability of content to spread beyond the primary audience. The follower growth (FG) was regarded as the number of new subscribers who joined the account as a result of interaction with a specific content between autumn 2024 and May 2025. It indicated the effectiveness of the cultural message as a tool for engaging the community. For example, if an account gained +800 new followers during this period, this was an increase. The average view duration (D) was applied only to video content on TikTok and Instagram Reels to identify the depth of viewing and attention retention. A high rate (over 15 s) indicated that the viewer's attention was retained.

## RESULTS

### Conceptual Shifts in Cultural Diplomacy in the Digital Age

It is advisable to analyse modern cultural diplomacy through the prism of Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasises the ability of a state to achieve international goals not by coercion, but by the attractiveness of its culture, political values and lifestyle (Nye 2023). According to the narrative approach, cultural diplomacy functions through the creation, broadcasting, and the adaptation of meaningful, emotionally charged stories that resonate with target audiences and shape perceptions of the country (Nye 2023).

In the digital age, cultural diplomacy is implemented in the space of digital diplomacy, which is defined as the use of information and communication technologies for foreign policy purposes (Faucher, Zhu 2025). In contrast to the hierarchical traditional model, digital diplomacy operates in an open, networked environment where the content of the message is inextricably linked to the technical infrastructure of its dissemination, i.e. the logic of algorithms, visual codes, and the pace of news feeds (Simic 2024).

Thus, contemporary cultural diplomacy is a mediated and hybrid phenomenon that combines elements of state communication, cultural activism, storytelling and digital aesthetics. In this study, digital cultural diplomacy refers to the purposeful creation and dissemination of narratives about a country's culture, identity and values through social media, taking into account the peculiarities of the algorithmic environment, audience interaction and emotional visualisation. Accordingly, it becomes relevant to analyse the functioning of cultural diplomacy on Instagram, TikTok and X as key tools of narrative influence in geocultural competition.

### Platform-specific Logic and Narrative Strategies

Digital environments enable participatory culture, where the audience becomes a co-author of cultural content. Meanwhile, TikTok and Instagram algorithms prioritise not the accuracy or quality of content, but rather the interaction time and emotional intensity. A comparative analysis of Instagram, TikTok and X reveals how they model forms of cultural diplomacy and influence the transformation of cultural narratives (Table 1).

Instagram is a space of visual diplomacy and aesthetic branding (Terán et al. 2024). Its structure facilitates the formation of coherent visual images related to identity, heritage, gastronomy and tourism. Instagram's ability to create a positive cultural impression through colour codes, composition, architectural details and local symbols. Such aestheticisation carries the risk of reducing culture to a recognisable image as a visual decoration that loses its depth

Table 1. The logic of cultural diplomacy of Instagram, TikTok and X

Social media	Format	Features	Narrative type	Risks
<b>Instagram</b>	Visual aesthetics	Coherent images, branding, heritage	Stylised, associative	Aestheticisation, simplification
<b>TikTok</b>	A short video	Virtue, emotionality, youth culture	Memetic, hybrid	Superficiality, algorithmic bias
<b>X (Twitter)</b>	Text + hashtags	Efficiency, mobilisation, conflict	Politicised, manifestational	Polarisation, disinformation

or political implications (El Damanhoury, Garud-Paktar 2021). TikTok is a platform of viral storytelling, where cultural diplomacy takes the form of hyper-emotional and hyper-memetic interaction. TikTok's youth audience expects sincere, dynamic content that reveals culture through music, dance, cuisine, language, humour, or internet memes (McLean et al. 2023). TikTok filters content according to algorithmic preferences, which can marginalise complex, conflicting or politicised cultural narratives. X (Twitter) performs the function of political and cultural mobilisation, where short texts, hashtags and visual messages become key tools. The platform is effective in times of crisis, conflict, or the struggle for international support (Shevel 2021). For state actors, X provides an opportunity to promote an institutional position through operational messages that strengthen their presence in the international public space. According to the Twiplomacy research, more than 97% of UN member states have official accounts on X (El Damanhoury, Garud-Paktar 2021). However, X is also a field of conflict where state and non-state narratives collide, where memes and hashtags become tools for the struggle for cultural interpretation.

A comparison of national cases illustrates how different countries adapt their strategies to the logic of the platforms. In the context of war, Ukraine has redefined cultural diplomacy as a mobilisation tool, where heroic and protest narratives are shared across all three platforms. Initiatives by the MFA, Ukraïner and UNITED24 combine official discourse with citizens' digital storytelling. South Korea uses TikTok for cultural exports, integrating state institutions with the entertainment industry. France relies on an aestheticised image of culture on Instagram, with an elitist visual narrative dominating, supported by cultural exchange programmes and digital residencies.

However, the use of platforms is accompanied by a number of challenges: disinformation campaigns, botnets, malicious actors, manipulative messages and algorithmic bias. Authentic cultural signals can be devalued or distorted. The content that does not fit the trendy template often fails to reach the audience. In the pursuit of virality, cultural actors risk simplifying their messages and losing their meaningful depth. The line between cultural diplomacy and cultural marketing is blurred. In addition, national differences in digital infrastructure, regulatory policies and censorship create asymmetries in access to global cultural circulation. Thus, Instagram, TikTok and X do not just represent culture; instead, they form a new infrastructure for cultural diplomacy.

### Quantitative and Comparative Evaluation of National Cases

The experiment, which included 150 posts on Instagram, 120 videos on TikTok and 200 tweets on X (Twitter), revealed platform-specific patterns of cultural content perception. The highest

average audience engagement rates are recorded on TikTok, where short video formats with music, subtitles and challenge elements ensure emotional identification of users and viral spread. At the same time, X demonstrate the highest virality, especially in protest and heroic narratives, provided that it has visuals and strong hashtags. Instagram shows stable results in aesthetic and heroic narratives, but a less pronounced engagement compared to TikTok. The textual content on X without visuals prove to be the least effective, which elicited little or no audience response (Table 2).

The highest level of audience engagement is observed in formats that combine emotional intensity, visual dynamics and elements of authenticity. In particular, the video content on TikTok proved to be the most effective in terms of reach, engagement and virality, especially in gastronomic and heroic narratives. The X platform showed the highest political engagement among the audience, with high virality and polarisation rates typical for the protest content, particularly in the Ukrainian case. Instagram was more stable in terms of interaction quality, focused on aesthetic reciprocity, and less prone to radical reactions (Yeh, Swinehart 2024). This confirms the hypothesis that the effectiveness of digital cultural diplomacy depends on the form of presentation, platform context and the ability to evoke emotional response and cultural identification.

**Table 2. The effectiveness of digital content on TikTok, Instagram and X**

Social media	Country	Narrative type	Reach	Number of interactions	Engagement rate, %	Virality, %	Follower growth	Average view duration, s	Specifics of comments
TikTok	Ukraine	Gastronomic	1 200 000	120 000	10.0	2.9	800	21.4	Positive, emotional identification, emojis
TikTok	South Korea	Aesthetic	950 000	89 000	9.4	1.7	540	19.8	Positive, fan comments, flag emojis
TikTok	France	Aesthetic	500 000	36 000	7.2	1.1	290	16.7	Neutral, informative, moderate activity
Instagram	Ukraine	Heroic	800 000	64 000	8.0	1.2	610	17.2 (Reels)	Solidarity, support, #StandWithUkraine
Instagram	South Korea	Gastronomic	550 000	42 000	7.6	0.9	300	15.3 (Reels)	Positive, aestheticised, recipe requests
Instagram	France	Aesthetic	600 000	45 000	7.5	0.8	320	15.6 (Reels)	Neutral, aestheticised, educational
X (Twitter)	Ukraine	Protest	680 000	58 000	8.5	4.1	710	–	Political rhetoric, support, indignation
X (Twitter)	South Korea	Aesthetic	470 000	33 000	7.0	2.2	250	–	Informative, low emotional impact
X (Twitter)	France	Official/institutional	520 000	35 000	6.7	1.9	230	–	Neutral, formal, minimal polarisation

In terms of narrative types, gastronomic and heroic videos that combined local identity with popular trends had the highest engagement rates. For example, the Ukrainian TikTok video of a girl in national costume cooking borsch received 1,2 million views, 120,000 likes, over 3,5 thousand shares and an increase of over 800 subscribers. Similar gastronomic videos from Korea (*kimchi*) and France (*ratatouille*) also demonstrated high levels of engagement but had slightly lower shares, which indicated a localised interest or a lower symbolic load. Aesthetic narratives were the most effective on Instagram, where high-quality images of nature, architecture or art artefacts were combined with concise descriptions. French and Korean accounts demonstrated the highest visual quality, but the engagement rates were moderate. This indicated that the Instagram audience valued aesthetics but did not always engage with the official or distant content.

Heroic narratives (in the Ukrainian case) provoked an active reaction on TikTok and X if they are visually dramatised (images of destroyed churches, images of resistance and symbols of identity). For example, on X, a protest post with the hashtag #StandWithUkraine and a photo of a damaged museum receive four times more retweets than a similar post without visuals. Protest posts received more negative and aggressive comments than other types of content (Table 3).

While cultural narratives used to have a clearly defined state origin and a hierarchical distribution structure, today they are created and disseminated in a mode of interaction. The narrative turn in international communication means that states no longer fully control the narrative framework. Therefore, the digital environment is an arena where alternative interpretations of identity, values, historical memory and cultural heritage compete as neo-populism is emerging, being a new stage of populism in the post-truth period (Zakirov 2024). In the case of Ukraine, it is possible to observe the competition of narratives of resistance and dignity versus chaos and radicalism, freedom and democracy versus tradition and order, European values versus colonial revenge (Savon 2020).

A comparative interpretation of the four national cases of Ukraine, South Korea and France reveals differences in digital cultural diplomacy strategies that depend on the political regime, the degree of cultural institutionalisation, the nature of narratives and the platforms chosen. Ukraine demonstrates a model of hybrid digital cultural diplomacy that was shaped

Table 3. Typology of cultural diplomacy in the digital environment

Country	Degree of openness	Level of institutionalisation	Type of interaction with the audience	Degree of content politicisation
<b>Ukraine</b>	High – mixed involvement of the state and the public	Medium – cooperation between state and non-governmental actors	Participatory, horizontal, hybrid storytelling format	High – heroic and protest narratives
<b>South Korea</b>	Medium – open engagement with fan communities	High – coordination between the state and the cultural industry	Emotional engagement through entertainment, fan content, recurrence	Low – apolitical, brand-centric content
<b>France</b>	Medium – institutional openness to partnerships	High – centralised model through Institut Français	Selective interaction through exhibitions, competitions, cultural programmes	Low – neutral and aestheticised narrative



by the war and the need to mobilise international support. Its uniqueness lies in the synergy of official and unofficial actors: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, bloggers, artists and journalists simultaneously produce content that visualises Ukrainian culture: music, language, traditions, architecture as an element of dignity, strength, and European choice. Thus, TikTok serves as a channel for memetic and emotional forms of communication (Zhurbenko 2016).

In parallel, the Ukraïner project introduces the ethnographic mosaic of Ukrainian regions to an international audience through storytelling videos on TikTok and Instagram. On the X platform, posts with the hashtags #StandWithUkraine and #BeBraveLikeUkraine, which combine images of destroyed museums, videos of cultural events during the war, and portraits of artists at the front, have gained a lot of coverage. This model is characterised by a high degree of openness to informal content, a horizontal structure of communication, and an emotional and symbolic content of messages. Ukrainian cultural diplomacy uses protest, heroic and gastronomic narratives that are adapted to TikTok (short videos with memetic elements), Instagram (visual aesthetics, rituals and traditions) and X (political slogans, symbolic images and hashtags).

Furthermore, South Korea represents a strategic model of cultural diplomacy, where the state plays a major role in tandem with the private sector, especially the cultural industry. The main narratives (aesthetic and gastronomic) are presented through video formats that showcase fashion, dance, street culture and national cuisine. The Hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon shows how TikTok is a platform for mass cultural exports through dance challenges, fan videos, K-pop content and aestheticised gastronomy. The @KoreaTourismOrganisation TikTok account regularly posts videos with gastronomic tips, traditional holidays and language mini-lessons that receive hundreds of thousands of likes. In other words, TikTok creates a positive image of Korea as an innovative, youthful and emotionally open country (Pyun et al. 2024). In this model, the state does not impose a cultural message, instead, it creates the conditions for down-up popularisation through emotional immersion, play and repetition (Aisyah et al. 2022).

France demonstrates an institutionalised model of cultural diplomacy based on a historical tradition of exporting language, art and the creative industry. The main tool is Instagram, a platform that matches the French visual aesthetic (McKinley, Lauby 2023). The content is often published from the official accounts of Institut Français, cultural centres or embassies and represents art, architecture, cooking and the French language. The narrative is predominantly aesthetic, with a minimal political content, and is aimed at an elite audience or creative youth. Interaction with the audience is selective and curated through competitions, online residencies, virtual exhibitions or exchange programmes. France also cultivates an institutional and curatorial model. For example, the #FranceFridays campaign, initiated by the Institut Français, invites Instagram users to share a photo or video of French culture in their city every Friday (Meehan 2024). The French case is distinguished by a high level of content quality, but a lower level of participation compared to Ukraine or South Korea. This indicates the prevalence of the broadcast model over interaction. Participation is controlled: the public joins initiatives through formalised channels, rather than through a spontaneous content creation. This model ensures a high quality and brand integrity, but at the same time limits the feedback dynamic. The French strategy emphasises the aesthetic representation of culture as a prestigious, visually appealing and universal soft power (Bouvier, Jin 2025).

The comparative analysis shows that the success of cultural diplomacy in the digital environment is determined by the ability to adapt the national narrative to the logic of a particular

platform and to the culture of interaction of the target audience. As a result, three models of interaction can be identified: hybrid-network (Ukraine), coordination-commercial (South Korea) and institutional-curatorial (France). They differ in the level of openness, degree of centralisation, nature of the cultural message and the way the audience is engaged.

## DISCUSSION

Digital cultural diplomacy is mediated by the logic of algorithms, platform capabilities and participatory cultures that blur the boundaries between state messages, grassroots creativity and commercial aesthetics. This is in line with the Maddox and Gill (2023) argument that digital diplomacy is a form of networked power, where information flows are no longer uni-directional and controlled by the state, but emerge in dynamic interaction with diverse actors in the digital ecosystem. Thus, digital cultural diplomacy should function as a dialogic, participatory and multi-voiced system in which the state, cultural institutions, civic initiatives, creative industries and digital audiences jointly shape cultural narratives. One of the key tasks is to adapt content to the logic of each platform. The strategy of cultural diplomacy should be multi-platform, but at the same time flexible. Each message should be adapted to the technical and behavioural parameters of a particular platform (Maddox, Gill 2023).

According to Castells' (2009) theory of networked society, power is generated in communication networks where meaning is created, contested and negotiated through symbolic flows. In the context of digital cultural diplomacy, this means that states no longer fully control cultural narratives; instead, they circulate in platform-mediated environments governed by algorithmic rules and networked publics. This reinforces Zhurbenko's (2017) argument that digital platforms function as ideologically driven instruments, producing and reproducing neoliberal values through surveillance capitalism, commercialised interaction and the attention economy.

Similarly, McKinley and Lauby (2023) highlight how media institutions, including platforms, shape the conditions of voice, visibility and representation. In this respect, Instagram promotes identity as a way of life and consumption, combining cultural diplomacy with a depoliticised form of soft power based on aesthetics and individuality. Conversely, X (Twitter), with its libertarian ethos and real-time crisis orientation, reinforces conflictual and resilient forms of cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, TikTok's hybridised algorithmic and cultural mechanics reflect what van Dijk et al. (2018) call a process in which the logic of a corporate platform reshapes public spheres and cultural practices within global power structures.

These dynamics impede defining cultural diplomacy as a top-down strategic practice. In particular, empirical evidence supports the claim that digital environments are transforming soft power into more hybrid, rapid and emotionally charged expressions. Rather than passively transmitting culture, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram co-produce meaning, often turning cultural messages into viral commodities or political symbols. The logic of Instagram's visual branding reinforces the state's ability to curate cultural identity through aesthetic cohesion (even at the risk of superficiality), while TikTok amplifies cultural narratives that are performative, playful and often rooted in shared cultural or emotional codes. This resonates with McLean et al. (2023), who note that TikTok promotes affective participation, where cultural content is not evaluated for its intellectual depth but for its emotional resonance and the ease of reproduction.

Hence, the Ukrainian case highlights the adaptability of digital cultural diplomacy in times of crisis. It shows how platforms such as TikTok and X become instruments of symbolic resistance, where cultural expressions gain political weight and help mobilise global solidarity.

This confirms Litra and Kononenko's (2013) earlier observations on the political potential of Twitter diplomacy, but extends them further into the realm of wartime digital mobilisation. It also complicates Nye's (2023) classic definition of soft power by showing that cultural influence in digital spaces is now more reactive, populated by digital citizens, and often linked to pressing moral or geopolitical narratives.

Conversely, the South Korean and French models reveal the limitations and trade-offs of institutional and participatory digital diplomacy. Although Korea combines the logic of entertainment with cultural branding successfully, it avoids political content, raising questions about the model of apolitical soft power in times of global ethical challenges. Meanwhile, France maintains cultural prestige through high aesthetic standards, but risks alienation through limited interactivity, which echoes El Damanhoury's (2021) critique of institutions that prioritise the form over the meaningful interaction. This suggests that the aesthetic soft power can become irrelevant without dialogical and participatory dimensions.

While heritage-based approaches dominate current academic research, this study demonstrates that digital cultural diplomacy goes far beyond heritage communication. The study results show that platform-specific algorithms, the speed of content dissemination, emotional intensity, and the dynamics of participation outweigh the traditional formulation of heritage in determining cultural impact. In this respect, the study shifts the debate from how states communicate heritage online to how states, the public and algorithms co-create cultural content, thereby filling a gap in the mainstream soft power literature.

From a critical perspective, the coexistence of different national strategies in platform spaces raises issues of digital asymmetry and cultural dependency. This resonates with the emerging discourse on digital or platform colonialism articulated by scholars such as McKinley and Lauby (2023), who argue that platforms are engaged in the extraction and domination of social relations in the context of data capitalism. Countries with stronger digital infrastructures, content production capabilities and established creative industries (such as South Korea and France) have clear advantages. For example, while South Korea uses TikTok to globalise K-pop through the aesthetic and syncopated content, Ukraine repurposes the same tools to wage digital resistance, giving visibility to cultural destruction and demanding solidarity. This observation resonates with Simic's (2024) argument that digital diplomacy has the potential to both democratise international communication and deepen power imbalances through platform monopolies and algorithmic biases. However, both strategies should grapple with the geopolitical tensions embedded in these platforms, where data management and algorithmic decisions are often dependent on the Western corporate control or Chinese dual-use technologies.

In terms of methodology, the study confirms that quantitative indicators alone do not reflect soft power in the digital environment. While engagement rates, virality, and follower growth are useful indicators, they need to be analysed alongside qualitative factors such as narrative resonance, expression of identity and user sentiment. This is in line with Hololobov's (2022) emphasis on more nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches to digital engagement. Finally, the study highlights the need for ethical standards and transparency of platforms in digital cultural diplomacy. The identified risks (disinformation, algorithmic bias and emotional manipulation) can undermine the credibility of cultural actors and erode public trust. As warned by Faucher and Zhu (2025), the global rise of online authoritarianism and digital propaganda places a new responsibility on cultural diplomacy to integrate digital literacy, transparency and integrity into its strategic framework.

In today's digital transformation, cultural diplomacy faces new challenges and opportunities to strengthen cultural influence and global presence. Thus, digital cultural diplomacy should function as a dialogic, participatory and multi-voiced system in which the state, cultural institutions, civic initiatives, creative industries and digital audiences jointly shape cultural narratives. One of the key tasks is to adapt content to the logic of each platform. The strategy of cultural diplomacy should be multi-platform, but at the same time flexible. Each message should be adapted to the technical and behavioural parameters of a particular platform (Maddox, Gill 2023).

Moreover, the state should move from the role of a sole initiator to the role of a facilitator, creating conditions for the participation of civil society, independent artists, the diaspora, youth initiatives and creative industries. The most effective campaigns are those in which cultural messages emerge in the space of co-storytelling, co-creation and digital collaborations. This approach promotes the authenticity of content, reduces distrust of the official voice and strengthens the emotional connection with the audience. In the fight for user attention, superficial or template material quickly gets lost among competitors. An effective strategy should include cooperation with professional content makers, designers, video producers, photographers and social media editors who have an understanding of cultural code and platform storytelling.

In addition, it is necessary to take into account the risks: the spread of disinformation, fake accounts, visual manipulation, censorship and blocking. It is important to set clear ethical standards for authenticity, transparency of sources, content labelling and responsibility for content. Cultural diplomacy should also become a tool for increasing digital literacy among the audience and content creators. This is especially relevant in times of information wars when culture is used for manipulation.

The strategy should reflect the diversity of the cultural environment: regional specificities, minority languages, women's and youth voices and local traditions. The participation of the diaspora and global communities can act as a channel for relaying and amplifying cultural influence beyond the country's borders. Digital cultural diplomacy should demonstrate national identity and create an open space for mutual knowledge, intercultural dialogue and co-creation. Finally, the effective digital cultural diplomacy should involve long-term planning, flexibility, quick adaptation to new conditions, crisis communication and a regular content calendar. Cultural diplomacy, which functions in terms of co-creation, hybridity, authenticity and digital sensitivity, will have a much greater potential for global impact than traditional, hierarchical and one-dimensional models.

## CONCLUSIONS

The digital transformation has changed cultural diplomacy, shifting it from hierarchical official channels to the decentralised space of social media, with a constant competition for attention, emotions, and algorithmic visibility. The study advances the field by proposing an empirically grounded, platform-sensitive typology of digital cultural diplomacy, demonstrating that soft power in the digital age is shaped by cultural content, algorithmic infrastructures and public engagement. This conceptual shift moves the analysis beyond traditional approaches based on heritage and branding, positioning the article within a new wave of platform diplomacy research. The study shows that Instagram, TikTok and X (Twitter) are full-fledged environments for the production, dissemination and rethinking of cultural narratives. In this environment, state narratives are no longer the monopoly of official actors: they are constructed in interaction with influencers, users and digital communities.

The analysis of the cases of Ukraine, South Korea and France shows that cultural diplomacy on different platforms takes different forms, from aesthetic branding and viral storytelling to digital resistance and mobilisation of global solidarity. Instagram tends to broadcast 'glossy' diplomacy, where culture is presented as a brand, with an emphasis on visual appeal, aesthetics and symbols of national identity. It is dominated by high-quality photos and videos in the Reels format to attract a wide audience through the beauty and emotion of images, often with an official or semi-official character. Instead, TikTok supports a participatory model of cultural diplomacy. In other words, users participate in creation through games, challenges, humour, and various interactive formats. This platform is seen as a field for youth creativity, where cultural narratives are in constant motion and transformation, often losing their formal depth but gaining a vivid relevance and accessibility.

The X (Twitter) serves as a platform for mobilising cultural solidarity and information resistance, especially in times of crisis and war. Here, culture often becomes an object of urgent attention, a tool for generating international support and expressing emotional solidarity through the rapid dissemination of facts about threats to cultural heritage and active participation in flash mobs and campaigns. Thus, cultural diplomacy has become a dynamic field of interaction where the format of presentation, creativity and ability to engage the user are crucial. This transformation evoked a new paradigm that can be described as the diplomacy of creators, a model in which cultural messages are formed collaboratively, quickly, and taking into account the algorithmic logic of digital platforms.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on digital cultural diplomacy by proposing a cross-platform typology, highlighting the importance of emotional and participatory dynamics, and showing how national strategies are shaped by platform cultures, geopolitical contexts and cultural imaginaries. This study acknowledges that the breadth of the comparative focus may limit the depth of philosophical and cultural analysis for each case. However, it lays the groundwork for further research into how platform logics co-create cultural diplomacy, raising fundamental questions about representation, agency and digital power structures. Future research could expand this comparative framework to include more countries, examine long-term patterns of engagement, and explore platform-specific ecosystems beyond the 'Big Three' (e.g. YouTube or Weibo).

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## Nuo paveldo iki grotąžymių: kultūrinės diplomatijos transformacija „Instagram“, „TikTok“ ir „X“ platformose

### *Santrauka*

Šiame straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti, kaip „Instagram“, „TikTok“ ir „X“ platformos veikia skaitmeninės kultūrinės diplomatijos formas, turinį ir veiksmingumą, remiantis Ukrainos, Pietų Korėjos ir Prancūzijos lyginamąja analize. Tyrime taikomas mišrus metodas, derinantis turinio analizę, kritinę diskurso analizę ir kiekybinius rodiklius, tokius kaip įsitraukimas, matomumas ir auditorijos augimas. Analizuojamų duomenų masyvą sudaro 150 „Instagram“ įrašų, 120 „TikTok“ vaizdo įrašų ir 200 pranešimų / įrašų „X“ platformoje, paskelbtų 2024 m. rugsėjo – 2025 m. gegužės laikotarpiu. Rezultatai rodo, kad platformų veikimo logika reikšmingai lemia naratyvų sėkmę. Be to, valstybių lyginamoji analizė atskleidžia keturis skaitmeninės kultūrinės diplomatijos modelius: hibridinį-tinklinį, koordinacinį-komercinį, institucinį-kuratorinį ir alternatyvų-opozicinį. Sėkminga skaitmeninė kultūrinė diplomacija remiasi gebėjimu derinti autentiškumą, emocinį poveikį ir platformoms būdingus formatus, paversdama „iš viršaus į apačią“ nukreiptą diplomatijos komunikavimą į bendradarbiavimu pagrįstą kultūrinį pasakojimą.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** skaitmeninė kultūrinė diplomacija, naratyvų strategijos, minkštoji galia, socialinių tinklų platformos, viešojoji diplomacija