

DIGITAL CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF BANGTAN SONYEONDAN (BTS) AS SOUTH KOREA'S SPECIAL ENVOY IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has undergone significant transformation alongside the growing role of digital platforms in international communication. This article examines how political narratives of identity are constructed through the practice of digital cultural diplomacy and how these constructions impact the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study employs a qualitative approach with a single instrumental case study design to analyze the digital discourse surrounding the involvement of the South Korean pop group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) as the Special Envoy of the President of the Republic of Korea for Future Generations and Culture at the 2021 United Nations General Assembly (UN) in 2021, encompassing official speeches, digital campaign materials, and accompanying official news coverage. Data in the form of publicly accessible documents were collected through documentary analysis and non-participant observation on digital platforms, then analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis model comprising textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions supplemented by netnographic principles to understand patterns of discourse circulation in digital spaces. The research findings indicate that South Korea's national identity narrative is constructed through strategies to engage the younger generation that integrate the country's diplomatic interests with the global agenda of sustainable development, particularly issues of education, equality, and global partnerships. This study also identifies a tension between the authenticity of cultural expression and political instrumentalization in celebrity-based cultural diplomacy practices. These findings contribute to the development of digital cultural diplomacy studies by offering an analytical framework that links the construction of identity discourse to global development agendas, while also providing insights for development communication practices rooted in popular culture.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Digital Diplomacy, Identity Politics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

The transformation of communication technology has fundamentally altered the landscape of international diplomacy. While conventional cultural diplomacy is typically conducted through relatively closed institutional channels such as artistic exchanges, exhibitions, or official visits the emergence of digital platforms has opened up a new arena that is open, fast-paced, and participatory. Castells (2013) asserts that power in the network era no longer rests solely on control over material resources but on the ability to shape human thought through the management of communication and the construction of meaning within digital networks. In this context, cultural diplomacy has transformed into a practice that is no longer the exclusive domain of state actors; rather, it involves the participation of corporate actors, communities, and even celebrity individuals as conveyors of the nation's own identity narrative.

This shift is in line with the concept of "*new public diplomacy*" proposed by Melissen (2005), namely a shift from a one-way, message-centric model of diplomacy toward a relational model that emphasizes dialogue, networking, and the involvement of various stakeholders. At the same time, soft power as defined by Nye (2004) as the ability to influence others through the appeal of values, culture,

rather than coercion has found its most effective new channel in the digital space, which reaches a global audience directly and personally.

The digital space, however, is not merely a neutral channel for conveying messages. The digital space is an arena of meaning production in which identities including national identities are actively constructed through practices of representation (Hall, 1997). When a state presents a popular cultural figure as an official representative in diplomatic forums, an intersection occurs between the interests of the state, the cultural industry, and the identity narratives consumed by the public across borders. It is this intersection that Castells (2003) categorizes as the interplay between “*legitimizing identity*” which legitimizes institutional power and “*project identity*,” which renegotiates the social position of specific groups, in this case the global youth generation.

A phenomenon particularly relevant to examining this intersection is the appointment of the South Korean pop group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) as Special Envoys of the President of the Republic of Korea for Future Generations and Culture, who performed at a high-level session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021, coinciding with the “SDG Moment” that marked the opening of the high-level week of the UN General Assembly (UN News, 2021). BTS’s presence at the forum accompanied by official cross-platform digital posts and extensive international media coverage transformed this event from a mere conventional diplomatic ceremony into a global-scale digital communication event that linked South Korea’s national identity narrative with the global sustainable development agenda.

A study on digital diplomacy in Indonesia, a research paper by Triwibowo (2023) titled “The Characteristics of Indonesian Digital Diplomacy” and published in the Journal of ASEAN Studies, has mapped out the characteristics of the digital diplomacy carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, namely open access to information, dialogic communication, and transparency. However, this study still focuses on the institutional practices of the state as a sole actor. On the other hand, research on the narratives of digital cultural diplomacy from the perspective of non-institutional actors such as the study by Mankhu, Yuliarti, and Rini (2026) titled “Dancing Diplomacy in the Digital Era: A Qualitative Content Analysis of @ktti.kbriseoul’s Cultural Narratives,” published in the journal Komunitas this study explains that cultural diplomacy narratives in the digital space are not always produced

directly by state institutions but also by non-institutional, or grassroots actors who negotiate cultural identity, gender, and diaspora positions within the content they produce. Specifically, the social media accounts of the Indonesian diaspora dance community in Seoul demonstrating that cultural narratives in the digital space are also produced from the grassroots level by non-state actors. These two lines of research reveal a gap in the literature: how identity narratives are constructed textually and discursively when popular cultural actors are granted an official state mandate, and how such constructions are explicitly linked to the global sustainable development agenda a connection that has not been widely highlighted in studies of digital cultural diplomacy, particularly from the perspective of communication studies in Indonesia.

Based on this overview, this study is designed to answer three research questions: First, how are political identity narratives constructed textually in the practice of digital cultural diplomacy, as exemplified by BTS’s participation in the 2021 UN SDG Moment forum? Second, how do discursive practices including the production, distribution, and consumption of texts unfold on digital platforms in this case? Third, how do the constructions of these identity narratives impact the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda? The objective of this study is to analyze the construction of political identity narratives in digital cultural diplomacy and to examine their implications for the sustainable development agenda, using critical discourse analysis as the primary analytical tool.

Compared to the two previous studies, this research offers novelty in three aspects: first, the unit of analysis consists of popular cultural figures who have received official state mandates (state-sanctioned celebrity diplomacy), differing from the institutional focus in Triwibowo’s (2023) study or the grassroots-diaspora focus in Mankhu et al. (2026); second, the use of Fairclough’s three-dimensional critical discourse analysis, which allows for a layered dissection of texts from the micro-textual to the macro-sociocultural levels; and third, the explicit linking of identity narrative constructions to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which constitutes this study’s distinctive contribution to the field of digital cultural diplomacy.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the field of digital cultural diplomacy by linking the critical discourse analysis framework and network identity theory to the issue of sustainable development an issue that has rarely been discussed together within a single analytical framework. In practical terms, the findings of this study are expected to provide insights for public diplomacy practitioners, development communication managers, and cultural stakeholders in designing effective digital narratives that reach the global youth without losing the dimension of cultural authenticity.

2. Literature Review And Theoretical Framework

2.1 Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power in the Digital Age

Cultural diplomacy can generally be understood as a country's effort to introduce and promote its values, arts, language, and cultural products to an international audience in order to build mutual understanding and strengthen the country's position in international interactions. This practice is one of the primary instruments of soft power that is, the ability of an actor to influence the preferences of other actors through appeal rather than coercion or material rewards (Nye, 2004). As digital channels have become mainstream in global communication, cultural diplomacy has undergone a digital transformation, making it faster to disseminate, more personalized, and more difficult for state actors to fully control. Melissen (2005) describes this shift as a hallmark of a new form of public diplomacy that is multi-actor, networked, and dialogue-oriented, rather than a one-way propaganda model.

In the Indonesian context, Triwibowo (2023) identifies three main characteristics of digital diplomacy practiced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the expansion of public access to information; the creation of spaces for dialogic communication between the ministry and citizens as well as with international audiences; and increased transparency in foreign policy. These characteristics underscore that digital diplomacy does not merely transfer old practices to new platforms but transforms the patterns of power relations between the state and the public within the diplomatic process itself.

2.2 Networked Communication, Power, and Identity

Castells (2013), in *Communication Power*, explains that power in networked societies is largely determined by an actor's ability to control and shape the flow of communication that influences public opinion. The concept of "*mass self-communication*" illustrates how messages can be produced individually yet distributed on a mass scale through digital platforms, resulting in a new form of communicative power that is not entirely under the control of state institutions or conventional mainstream media.

Furthermore, in *The Power of Identity*, Castells (2003) distinguishes three forms of identity construction: *legitimizing identity*, produced by dominant institutions to expand and rationalize their power; *resistance identity*, which is constructed by groups in subordinate positions as a form of resistance; and *project identity*, which emerges when social actors construct new identities to redefine their positions within the social structure. This framework is relevant for analyzing how narratives of national identity are constructed in the practice of digital cultural diplomacy, while also identifying which interests are more dominant behind them.

2.3 Identity Politics and Representation in Communication

Hall (1997) describes representation as a *signifying practice* that produces meaning through language, images, and discourse, rather than merely reflecting a pre-existing reality. In this constructivist approach, identity including national identity is not a *given* but is constantly reconstructed through representational practices that take place within specific institutions and social contexts. Identity politics, within this framework, is understood as the process of articulating narratives about "who we are," which invariably involve interests related to power, legitimacy, and specific positions within broader social and geopolitical relations.

2.4 Nation Branding and Its Connection to Sustainable Development

Recent studies indicate that soft power strategies and nation branding are increasingly and explicitly linked to the sustainable development agenda. El-Dabt, AlReshaidd, Park, AlBuloushi, and Al-Enzi (2025), for example, examine how Gulf states utilize the hosting of mega-sports events as a nation-branding instrument strategically linked to sustainability narratives to strengthen their legitimacy and international appeal. A similar strategic logic linking popular cultural assets to the global development agenda as a means to strengthen a nation's position and image can also be found in the practice of cultural diplomacy rooted in the entertainment industry, as evidenced by Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS)'s collaborations with UN agencies such as UNICEF and its participation in sustainable development forums (Chang, 2022).

3. Methodology

This study employs a constructivist-interpretive paradigm that views social reality including identity and diplomatic policy as the result of social constructions shaped through language and discourse. The approach used is a qualitative one with a single instrumental case study design, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018) that is, the use of a specific case as an instrument to understand a broader phenomenon or issue, in this case, the phenomenon of identity narrative construction in digital cultural diplomacy and its connection to the sustainable development agenda. Data analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), supplemented by the principles of

netnography (Kozinets, 2010), to understand the patterns of discourse circulation on digital platforms.

The object of this study is South Korea's practice of digital cultural diplomacy through the involvement of the music group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) as Special Envoys of the President of the Republic of Korea for Future Generations and Culture at the SDG Moment forum during the UN General Assembly, with the observation period spanning the appointment and the holding of the forum in 2021. The units of analysis in this study include three types of texts: (1) verbal texts in the form of official speech transcripts; (2) visual texts in the form of digital campaign materials and performance footage accompanying the forum; and (3) paralinguistic texts in the form of press releases and official news reports from the UN and the Office of the President of the Republic of Korea.

The data used in this study consists of secondary data in the form of publicly accessible documents, including official transcripts and recordings of speeches at the 2021 UN SDG Moment forum, UN press releases and official news reports (UN News and UN Web TV), official releases from the Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, and posts on official digital channels related to the event. This data is supplemented with supporting academic literature on cultural diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and Hallyu as instruments of South Korea's soft power to enrich the interpretive context.

Data collection was conducted using two main techniques. First, documentary research on the official texts mentioned above. Second, non-participant observation on public digital platforms, following Kozinets' (2010) netnography procedures, which include identifying relevant topics and digital communities, systematically downloading and archiving digital data, and contextualizing the data in accordance with the socio-digital context in which the data was produced and circulated. Text selection was conducted purposefully based on its relevance to the cultural diplomacy event that is the focus of this study, namely the 2021 SDG Moment forum.

The data were analyzed using the three-dimensional critical discourse analysis model developed by Fairclough (2001, 2010), which consists of three interrelated layers of analysis. First, the textual dimension (description), which involves a micro-analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and text structure in speeches and campaign materials to identify themes and word choices that shape identity narratives. Second, the discourse practice dimension (interpretation), which involves an analysis of the text production process (who produces the text and within what institutional context), text distribution (through which platforms and mechanisms the text is disseminated), and text consumption (how the public responds to and interacts with the text). Third, the sociocultural practice dimension (explanation), which involves linking the findings from the previous two dimensions to broader social, political, and cultural contexts, including South Korea's diplomatic interests, the dynamics of Hallyu as a soft power project, and its connection to the global Sustainable Development Agenda.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 Textual Dimension: Lexical Construction and Identity Themes

Analysis at the textual level reveals that the speeches and statements delivered at the 2021 SDG Moment forum consistently employ collective pronouns such as "we" and the phrase "our generation," which serve to establish a shared sense of identification between the speaker and the global youth audience, rather than the formal-hierarchical stance typically used in conventional state addresses. Recurring central themes in the texts include hope, post-pandemic recovery, and the empowerment of the younger generation, which are rhetorically constructed through narratives of personal experiences that are then generalized into the shared experience of a global generation. This pattern demonstrates a framing strategy that links individual experiences to collective issues on a global scale, in line with the rhetorical principle of identification in identity representation (Hall, 1997).

Another distinctive feature observed is the speaker's hybrid identity: on one hand, he appears as a holder of a formal state mandate with the official title "Presidential Special Envoy," yet on the other hand, he retains a popular cultural identity as an entertainer. This textual hybridity creates a dual appeal: formal state legitimacy combined with the relatability of popular culture, which is conceptually aligned with Nye's (2004) idea of cultural appeal as a source of soft power that operates through affect and identification, rather than structural authority alone.

4.2 Dimensions of Discourse Practice: Production, Distribution, and Consumption of Digital Texts

At the production level, the texts and campaign materials on the forum are the result of a co-production between South Korean state authorities, the entertainment agency managing the music group, and the UN Secretariat. This pattern of co-production demonstrates a form of cultural diplomacy that is no longer entirely top-down from the state but involves corporate actors in the creative industry as strategic partners. This finding expands upon the picture provided by Triwibowo (2023) regarding digital diplomacy that encourages the involvement of various parties, with the caveat that in this case, such

involvement occurs at the level of celebrities and corporations in the entertainment industry, rather than at the level of ordinary citizens as emphasized in the principle of two-way dialogue in conventional digital diplomacy.

At the distribution level, the text was disseminated through various channels, including official UN live streams, official video channels, and official social media accounts with large, organized global followings. The structure of this organized fan base accelerates the circulation of messages beyond the reach of conventional diplomatic channels a phenomenon relevant to Castells' (2013) concept of "mass self-communication," wherein messages are produced within a personal-affective context yet disseminated on a mass scale through digital network infrastructure managed not by the state, but by the fan community itself.

At the consumption level, the forum demonstrated a level of digital public attention that far exceeded that of conventional state-of-the-nation addresses at the same forum, as reflected in the volume of viewers and digital interactions. This high level of consumption indicates that diplomatic narrative authority has shifted from government officials to popular cultural figures, who have a younger audience. This pattern of shifting narrative authority aligns with the findings of Mankhu, Yuliarti, and Rini (2026), which show that non-institutional actors play an active role in producing cultural diplomacy narratives in the digital sphere though in their case this occurred at the grassroots-diaspora level, whereas in this instance it took place at the level of state-sponsored celebrities.

4.3 Sociocultural Dimensions: National Identity, Hallyu, and Diplomatic Interests

Viewed through Castells' (2003) framework on the three forms of identity construction, the narratives analyzed in this study predominantly function as *legitimizing identities* that is, narratives produced to expand and strengthen the legitimacy of South Korean state institutions on the international stage through recognition from the highest-level multilateral forums. However, the messages within these narratives empowerment of the younger generation, inclusivity, and collective hope also contain elements of "project identity," which seeks to redefine the position of the global younger generation as active subjects in the global development agenda, rather than merely as objects of policy.

This finding confirms that Hallyu, as a significant wave in South Korean popular culture, has evolved into a hybrid soft power project involving both the state and the entertainment industry simultaneously. The precedent of strategic partnerships between these popular culture figures and UN agencies, including UNICEF, in various previous campaigns (Chang, 2022) reinforces the pattern that popular culture figures have become permanent diplomatic assets, not merely incidental participants in international forums. This strategic pattern aligns logically with the findings of El-Dabt et al. (2025) regarding how states utilize non-traditional assets in their case, the hosting of mega-sports events to strengthen nation branding linked to narratives of sustainability, even though the mediums and sectors involved differ.

4.4 Implications for the Sustainable Development Agenda

The 2021 SDG Moment Forum was explicitly designed by the UN as a kickoff event for the high-level week of the General Assembly to drive accelerated progress toward achieving the SDGs in the post-pandemic era. The inclusion of popular cultural figures as speakers at the forum demonstrates a development communication strategy that deliberately links the appeal of popular culture with the legitimacy of participation in the multilateral agenda. The messages emphasized education, equality, and solidarity among the younger generation aligning with several Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to quality education, reducing inequalities, and strengthening global partnerships to achieve development goals.

This kind of integration demonstrates how cultural soft power is converted into capital for participation in the global development agenda (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005), while simultaneously broadening the base of public support for the sustainable development agenda through cultural figures who share an emotional connection with the younger generation. Within the framework of development communication, this strategy can be viewed as an innovation in efforts to reach a global youth audience that has long been difficult to engage through conventional development communication channels, which tend to be formal and distant.

4.5 Critical Discussion: Authenticity, Commodification, and the Limitations of Celebrity-Based Cultural Diplomacy

Behind the demonstrated effectiveness of its reach, there is also a fundamental tension between the authenticity of cultural expression and political instrumentalization in the practice of celebrity-based cultural diplomacy. Chang (2022), in his discussion of the partnership between Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) and UNICEF, notes criticism that the involvement of popular cultural figures in humanitarian and development agendas risks being merely symbolic and ceremonial, without deeper structural engagement

in the policymaking process itself. This risk is also relevant in the context of this study: participation in the SDG Moment forum has the potential to become a form of “SDG-washing” if it is not followed by substantive and sustainable commitments from the involved actors, whether governments or the entertainment industry.

The issue of the commodification of cultural identity also presents a visible tension. This occurs when expressions of popular culture which were originally organic and genuinely cherished by their fan base are now utilized for the state’s diplomatic interests. This situation places popular culture actors in an ambiguous position: on the one hand, they gain state-sanctioned legitimacy and formal recognition; on the other hand, they risk losing some of the narrative autonomy that constitutes their authentic appeal. These findings demonstrate that the model of digital cultural diplomacy based on state-sanctioned celebrities is a pattern that blurs the lines between state actors, corporations, and the grassroots public a complexity not fully anticipated within the new public diplomacy framework formulated by Melissen (2005), even though that framework had already anticipated a shift toward multi-actor diplomacy.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes with three main findings in line with the research questions posed. First, the narrative of identity politics in the practice of digital cultural diplomacy is constructed through textual strategies that combine collective pronouns, themes of youth empowerment, and the hybridity of formal and popular identities, which collectively create a sense of identification that transcends national borders. Second, discursive practices in this case reveal a pattern of co-production between the state and entertainment industry corporations, multi-platform distribution reinforced by organized fan bases, and public consumption on a scale that extends beyond conventional diplomatic forums all of which collectively signal a shift in diplomatic narrative authority toward popular cultural actors. Third, this narrative construction implies a strengthening of the legitimacy of participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda through a strategic linkage between the appeal of popular culture and development messages, although this is accompanied by tensions between cultural authenticity and the risks of political instrumentalization or symbolism without substantive engagement.

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the application of Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis to the realm of digital cultural diplomacy explicitly linked to the global development agenda, while also enriching the empirical application of Castells’ identity framework to the phenomenon of contemporary cultural diplomacy involving state-mandated popular culture actors. Practically, these findings provide insights for public diplomacy practitioners, development communication managers, and creative industry stakeholders in designing effective digital narrative strategies to reach the global youth, while maintaining a balance between the state’s strategic interests and the authenticity of cultural expression.

This study has limitations because it focuses on only one case and uses data based on public documents without conducting in-depth interviews with policymakers or direct studies of public reception. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across countries or among cultural actors to test the extent to which the identified patterns are specific to this case or more broadly applicable; to supplement textual data with in-depth interviews with digital cultural diplomacy policymakers; and to conduct audience reception studies to assess the effectiveness of these identity narratives in influencing public perceptions and support for the sustainable development agenda.

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