CPD Perspectives

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a theoretical framework for predicting South Korea's national reputation by examining key variables. These factors include Americans' macro-level interactions (e.g., political and economic) and micro-level interactions (e.g., interpersonal and cultural exchanges) related to South Korea and the Relationship Assessment of Diplomatic Interaction Outcome (RADIO) scale, which evaluates the relationship between a country and its foreign publics as an outcome of public diplomacy. Drawing on data from a nationally representative sample of 505 U.S. citizens recruited through an online panel, the study empirically tests the proposed framework. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that both micro-level and macro-level interactions significantly and positively predicted favorable perceptions of South Korea's national reputation. Furthermore, among the RADIO scale components, trust emerged as a significant and positive predictor.

Introduction

Soft power, as conceptualized by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to "shape the preferences of others" without resorting to force or coercion. It relies on attraction and influence, often derived from cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy. South Korea's soft power in the United States, its most strategic foreign audience, is particularly critical as it has the potential to shape decisions made by individuals, businesses, and policymakers. If reputation were a railroad, soft power would focus mainly on the attractiveness of the train and its contents (Cull, 2024). In this sense, a country's soft power tools can play an important role in shaping its national brand and broader international reputation. By enhancing its soft power, South Korea can strengthen bilateral relations and elevate its international standing. While the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has been a cornerstone of South Korea's soft power, the broader factors influencing its national reputation in the U.S. remain underexplored.

Hallyu has achieved remarkable global success through cultural exports such as K-pop groups like BTS and Blackpink, along with internationally acclaimed films like *Parasite*. Most recently, in 2025, Netflix's animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* became a global cultural phenomenon, further underscoring the expanding influence of Korean popular culture. Recognized as a key pillar of South Korea's influence, Hallyu has been extensively discussed in academic literature, embraced by government initiatives, and celebrated as a global cultural phenomenon (Kim, 2022; Woo, 2024). Despite its prominence, there is limited empirical research examining how Hallyu interacts with other drivers of soft power to shape South Korea's national reputation in strategic markets like the United States. This gap highlights the need for

a more comprehensive framework to understand and predict South Korea's influence.

To explore the role of soft power and propose theoretical frameworks for predicting South Korea's national reputation, this study examines several key factors. It evaluates Americans' interactions with South Korea: macro-level interactions such as political and economic interactions and micro-level interactions such as people-to-people interaction, and cultural interaction, and the Relationship Assessment of Diplomatic Interaction Outcome (RADIO) scale. Thus, this study seeks to develop and examine a theoretical framework that incorporates Hallyu as a key factor in predicting national reputation, an essential outcome of strategic communication in the public sector. By situating Hallyu within the broader context of reputation management, the study not only advances theoretical discussions in public diplomacy research but also provides practical implications. The findings will offer actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners, particularly in enhancing South Korea's strategic communication strategies and strengthening its global reputation.

Literature Review

National Reputation

National reputation can be defined as the collective and subjective perception of a nation, reflecting how foreign publics evaluate its competence and likability, which in turn influences both economic and social outcomes (Hitz, 2024). National reputation is also described as the collective judgment held by foreign publics regarding a country's image, character, and behavior—judgments that are often used to predict or explain a nation's future actions (Mercer, 2018; Wang, 2006). It serves as a

summary construct of how others perceive a country's culture, governance, and international conduct, ultimately shaping its global standing and influence.

Cull (2024) introduces the concept of reputational security, which treats national reputation as a strategic resource that can contribute to a nation's security. From this perspective, a favorable reputation depends on communication and cultural appeal, as well as credible national behavior, institutional performance, and constructive international engagement. Reputational security broadens public diplomacy beyond the promotion of an attractive national image by emphasizing credibility, trust, and relationships that can sustain international understanding and support, particularly during periods of uncertainty or crisis (Cull, 2024).

A key distinction in this framework is that image and reputation are not equivalent. Whereas an image may be formed relatively quickly, reputation develops through the accumulation of impressions over time and is therefore grounded more deeply in perceptions of a nation's past behavior and performance (Cull, 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant to South Korea, whose international visibility has grown considerably through the global diffusion of Hallyu and other forms of cultural appeal. However, greater visibility or attractiveness does not necessarily translate automatically into a durable national reputation. From a reputational security perspective, favorable perceptions should be reinforced over time by credible domestic policies, effective institutions, and international behavior that is consistent with the values a nation communicates abroad. Accordingly, South Korea's national reputation can be understood as the cumulative evaluation formed through repeated exposure to its cultural appeal, public diplomacy, domestic performance, and international conduct.

Because national reputation ultimately reflects accumulated evaluations of a country, foreign public opinion provides an important means of understanding how such reputations are formed and maintained among international publics (Garud-Patkar, 2021). National reputation is generally understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing both cognitive evaluations, such as perceptions of a country's competence, and affective evaluations, such as its emotional appeal (Kang & Yang, 2010). These evaluations can develop through both direct experiences, including tourism, business interactions, study abroad, and interpersonal contact, and indirect experiences, such as media exposure and word of mouth communication. Thus, examining foreign publics' evaluations provides a way to understand how diverse experiences and information accumulate into broader judgments of a nation's reputation.

Previous research has also highlighted the distinction between the terms "nation" and "country" in discussions on reputation and branding. Hao et al. (2021) explained that the complexity of the concept and its overlap with related terms such as destination brand, place brand, and country brand have led to the absence of a universally accepted definition of nation branding. As a result, "nation" and "country" are often used interchangeably in literature, despite their distinct meanings. Jain et al. (2013) described national reputation as a crucial asset that contributes to a country's competitive advantage. Managing a country's reputation has become increasingly important for successful participation in the global economy (Kilduff & Tabales, 2017). Public perceptions of a nation significantly impact decisions related to travel, investment, and purchasing behavior. While a country's reputation reflects how it is perceived, regardless of deliberate efforts to shape its image, the

concept of a nation brand arises from the strategic application of branding principles to influence public perception (Fan, 2010).

According to Brand Finance's *Global Power Index*, nation branding has become increasingly important in today's globalized environment (Brand Finance, 2026). As countries compete for the attention, trust, and respect of investors, tourists, consumers, donors, immigrants, the media, and foreign governments, maintaining a strong and positive nation brand becomes a key competitive advantage. It is crucial for nations to understand how they are perceived globally and how their successes, failures, strengths, weaknesses, people, and products contribute to their brand image.

Juhaidi et al. (2024) asserted that while branding is commonly associated with corporations, nation branding plays an equally vital role in shaping global perceptions. A strong national reputation attracts tourists and foreign investments, both of which significantly impact a country's economy. Nations should actively manage their images for several reasons: first, to enhance their overall reputation and foster a positive perception; second, to attract tourists; third, to increase the perceived value of domestically produced goods; fourth, to encourage foreign investment; and fifth, to draw skilled individuals to live and work in the country (Hakala et al., 2013).

Enhancing National Reputation via South Korean Corporate Activities

Corporations headquartered in South Korea have emerged as powerful drivers of the nation's international reputation, serving not only as engines of economic growth but also as symbolic representatives of national identity abroad. Companies such as

Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and Kia have moved far beyond the role of mere producers of consumer goods to become cultural and economic ambassadors of South Korea on the global stage. Their success in the United States, one of the most competitive consumers markets, demonstrates how corporate performance can reinforce and extend national image.

Samsung and LG, for instance, command considerable brand influence in the United States, particularly across electronics such as smartphones, televisions, and household appliances. Both firms remain dominant players in the home appliance sector, consistently ranking among the top brands in American households (Keys, 2025; OpenBrand, 2025). In addition, Samsung has recently regained momentum in the United States smartphone market, increasing its market share from twenty-three percent to thirty-one percent in the second quarter of 2025. This surge reflects not only strong consumer demand for large screen and foldable innovations but also heightened engagement with Samsung's premium models on social media platforms (Leswing, 2025). These developments illustrate how product quality and consumer enthusiasm surrounding globally recognized Korean-origin companies can generate positive effects on national reputation that extend beyond the corporate brand and potentially influence perceptions of the country of origin.

Similarly, the automotive industry provides another strong example of South Korea's growing economic and reputational footprint. In 2024, the Hyundai Motor Group, which includes Hyundai, Kia, and Genesis, recorded almost 1.7 million vehicle sales in the United States, a two-point seven percent year over year increase, securing about ten-point five percent of the American market (Kim & Chang, 2025). This growth highlights the group's capacity to

compete in one of the world's most saturated markets, while also demonstrating South Korea's leadership in key areas such as sport utility vehicles and electric vehicles. As Hyundai and Kia continue to expand their United States market presence, their achievements contribute to South Korea's image as a nation capable of producing reliable, innovative, and environmentally sustainable automobiles.

When consumers experience satisfaction with products, they are more likely to develop trust in the companies that produce them (Sahin et al., 2011). Importantly, this trust extends beyond individual firms and contributes to shaping favorable perceptions of the home country, particularly when those corporations are recognized as global leaders in their industries (Qu & Dillman Carpentier, 2021). In this way, consumer enjoyment and loyalty create a reputational spillover effect, where positive evaluations of corporate performance enhance the nation's reputation. The global success of South Korean firms illustrates this process clearly: their consistent delivery of innovation and reliability not only strengthens brand equity but also functions as an instrument of nation branding. By continuously meeting or exceeding consumer expectations, Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and Kia amplify South Korea's national branding efforts and cultivate reputational capital that endures across markets, thereby reinforcing the country's position as a trusted and innovative global actor.

Soft Power and Americans' Interactions with South Korea

According to Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or material inducement. Whereas hard power relies on coercive means such as military action or economic sanctions, soft power

shapes behavior by appealing to others through cultural appeal, ideological alignment, and institutional credibility. Nye (2021) further explains that "hard power is like wielding rewards or punishments, whereas soft power functions like a magnet" (p. 6), drawing others in through shared values and mutual understanding.

Despite its widespread use, the concept of soft power has been critiqued for lacking conceptual and empirical precision. Hayden (2015), for instance, raises three main concerns. First, the definition of soft power is not consistently articulated at a theoretical level. Second, its sources remain ambiguous, as Nye suggests that virtually anything capable of attracting a target state could qualify as a source. Third, it remains difficult to empirically demonstrate how soft power operates unequivocally in international relations.

Nonetheless, Nye (2008) identifies three primary sources of soft power: a nation's culture, which is influential when perceived as attractive; its political values, which are effective when upheld both domestically and internationally; and its foreign policies, which generate soft power when regarded as legitimate and morally authoritative. Extending this perspective, Kim and Ni (2011) highlight political and economic interactions, interpersonal exchanges, and cultural interactions as additional key dimensions of soft power.

In South Korea's case, collective perceptions are shaped not only by official policies but also by everyday encounters. Direct, people-to-people interactions—such as working with Koreans, traveling to Korea, or engaging through digital platforms—have become increasingly salient. These experiences are complemented by exposure to Korean products and services, including restaurants, electronics (e.g.,

Samsung and LG), and automobiles (e.g., Hyundai and Kia).

South Korea has also actively employed public diplomacy to amplify its cultural appeal. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has emerged as a central component of the country's soft power, influencing Americas. Particularly, K-pop artists such as BTS, NewJeans, and BLACKPINK have spearheaded Hallyu's global expansion (The Korea Times, 2024). Internationally acclaimed films and series, including *Parasite* and *Squid Game*, have further enhanced Korea's cultural visibility, while Korean cuisine and beauty products continue to grow in global popularity (Kessler, 2025; Kim, 2021). More recently, Netflix's animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* became a global cultural phenomenon, breaking records in both viewership and music charts (Time, 2025). Such developments illustrate how the global diffusion of Korean culture has broadened foreign publics' access to and familiarity with Korea. Alongside this cultural diffusion, Korea's nation-branding efforts have also sought to improve foreigners' experiences with and perceptions of the country.

While Nye's original formulation of soft power primarily emphasizes government-led and nation-state (macro-level) dynamics, micro-level interactions highlight the importance of interpersonal and cultural exchanges. Kim and Ni (2011) stress that these interpersonal encounters are integral to the effectiveness of soft power. Similarly, strategic communication scholars argue that cultural and interpersonal connections enrich macro-level political and economic relations (Vibber & Kim, 2021). Building on this, the present study examines both macro factors—such as perceived political and economic interactions between South Korea and the United States—and micro factors, including perceived

interpersonal and cultural exchanges between the two nations. Recent evidence highlights the growing strength of South Korea's international image. According to the 2025 Survey on Korea's National Image, 82.3% of respondents across 26 countries reported a favorable perception of South Korea, the highest level recorded since the survey began in 2018. Cultural content was identified as the most influential factor shaping favorable perceptions of Korea, followed by modern lifestyle, Korean products and brands, and economic development. (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026)

Despite the growing body of literature on soft power, few studies have simultaneously considered the interplay of macro-level dynamics (e.g., state-led political and economic relations) and micro-level dynamics (e.g., interpersonal and cultural interactions) in shaping a country's national reputation. This gap is particularly salient in the South Korea–U.S. context, where both governmental policies and cultural exchanges play central roles in influencing perceptions. Addressing this gap, the current study develops research questions that examine how these two levels of interaction contribute to South Korea's national reputation. Building on the preceding discussion, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1-1. How do macro-level factors, such as perceived political and economic interactions between South Korea and the U.S., influence South Korea's national reputation?

RQ1-2. How do micro-level factors, such as perceived interpersonal and cultural exchanges between the two nations influence South Korea's national reputation?

Measuring Relationships between South Korea and the U.S. via RADIO Scale

Scholars have examined relationships as a core concept in public relations and a valuable intangible asset that helps reduce costs, mitigate risks, and enhance revenue (Ki et al., 2015). Public relations is commonly defined as management of communication between an organization and its publics to build mutually beneficial relationships (e.g., Kelleher, 2021; PRSA,2025). Scholars in strategic communication research have applied the relationship management function to a global context, particularly in areas such as international public relations and public diplomacy. International public relations typically focus on fostering mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and foreign publics to promote long-term consumer engagement, whereas public diplomacy seeks to secure international support for a nation's foreign policy (Golan & Yang, 2015). Although the two approaches have different ultimate goals, effectively managing relationships with foreign publics through strategic communication is crucial.

Tam and Kim (2017) suggested the Relationship Assessment of Diplomatic Interaction Outcome (RADIO) scale to measure the quality of relationships between a country and its foreign publics. Traditional public diplomacy research has largely focused on outputs such as media coverage, but there has been a lack of robust measurement tools for evaluating outcomes—specifically, how diplomatic efforts influence public attitudes and relationships over time. The authors argue that relationship-building, rather than mere image management, is central to public diplomacy.

The RADIO scale categorizes relationships into two types: experiential relationships, which develop through direct personal experiences with a country (e.g., visits, cultural exchanges, or economic interactions), and reputational relationships, formed through indirect sources such as media and public discourse (Tam & Kim, 2017). The scale incorporates macro-dimensions, including interactional bilateralism (the frequency and benefits of diplomatic interactions) and power mutuality (the perceived fairness and balance of influence in a relationship). Moreover, micro-dimensions capture relationship quality indicators such as trust, empathy, relational satisfaction, relational continuance, relational attentiveness, and relational curiosity. By distinguishing between these relationship types and their dimensions, Tam and Kim (2017) highlight how public diplomacy efforts should move beyond symbolic messaging to actively foster substantive, long-term engagement. By assessing relationship quality rather than just public perceptions, policymakers can better understand how diplomatic initiatives influence foreign publics and adjust strategies accordingly. Thus, nations should prioritize fostering deeper, behavior-based interactions over merely shaping external perceptions by assessing the quality of relationships between countries.

In the RADIO framework, Tam and Kim (2017) distinguish experiential relationships, which arise from direct experiences with a country, from reputational relationships, which develop without such direct experiences. Building on this distinction, the present study examines proxy relationships as a means of linking the RADIO framework to national reputation. Specifically, the study adopts four dimensions of reputational relationships: interactional bilateralism, power mutuality, trust, and empathy, to assess how

indirect relational perceptions of a country may contribute to its national reputation.

RQ2. How do dimensions of RADIO scale influence South Korea's national reputation?

Method

Sample and participants

An online survey was conducted in March 2024 through the professional research firm Centiment, targeting 505 individuals residing in the United States. Of the participants, 45.7% identified as male (n = 231) and 53.5% as female (n = 270), with the average age being 50.15 years. Regarding educational attainment, 35.5% (n = 179) had completed a high school education or less, 55.8% (n = 282) had earned a bachelor's degree or completed some college education, and 8.7% (n = 44) reported having postgraduate education or some graduate-level coursework. In terms of racial and ethnic composition, the sample consisted of 71.1% White (n = 359), 15% Black or African American (n = 76), 4.3% Asian or Asian American (n = 17), 8.3% Hispanic (n = 42), and 2.2% identifying as other racial groups (n = 11). The study's procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at a major southeastern university in the United States.

Table 1. Measurement items

Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Country Reputation	I like South Korea.	3.47	1.161
	South Korea has a good infrastructure	3.45	1.038
	South Korea maintains a stable economic environment	3.54	1.021
	South Korea communicates an appealing vision of a country	3.47	1.05
	South Korea has a rich historical past	3.78	1.058
	South Korea has an appealing culture	3.68	1.066
	South Korea is a responsible member of the global community	3.57	1.042
	South Korea supports responsible environmental policies	3.41	1.01
	South Korea maintains good international relationships	3.59	1.051
	South Korea maintains a stable political environment	3.57	1.041
Political Interaction	South Korea and the U.S are usually allies on political issues	3.74	1.024
	South Korea and the U.S. have cooperated to address major international issues.	3.76	0.981
	South Korea and the U.S. maintain good diplomatic relations.	3.82	1.022
	South Korea stands against the adversaries of the U.S.	3.61	0.99
Economic Interaction	The economics of the U.S. and South Korea are closely tried.	3.5	0.988
	I believe products made in South Korea are of high quality.	3.96	1.022
	I have had positive experiences using products made in South Korea.	3.92	1.036
	I speak positively to friends and family about the good qualities of products made in South Korea.	3.46	1.149
Personal Interaction	I've ever purchased products made by South Korea.	2.97	1.286
	I have been to Korean restaurants.	3.07	1.142
	I've seen news related to South Korea via mass media (e.g., television, radio, & newspapers etc.)	3.34	1.11
	I've seen news related to South Korea via social media platforms.	3.25	1.139

Continued

Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Culture Interaction	I'm frequently exposed to and enjoy Korea culture, including music, food, and drama.	2.97	1.286
	It is common to come across news related to Korean culture.	3.07	1.142
	I have had positive experiences with Korean culture.	3.34	1.11
	I speak positively to friends and family members about my good experiences with Korean culture.	3.25	1.139
Interactional bilateralism	The interactions that my home country has with South Korea have been mutually beneficial.	3.51	1.139
	South Korea maintains political interactions with my home country for mutually beneficial purposes.	3.55	1.131
	South Korea maintains economic interactions with my home country for mutually beneficial purposes.	3.59	1.111
	South Korea maintains frequent cultural interactions with my home country for mutually beneficial purposes.	3.49	1.073
Power mutuality	South Korea and my home country are attentive to what each other say.	3.55	1.101
	South Korea thinks that the opinions of my country and its citizens are legitimate.	3.5	1.086
	South Korea listens to what my country and its citizens have to say.	3.44	1.129
	When the government of South Korea makes decisions which may affect my country, they take into consideration the opinions of my country and its citizens.	3.38	1.105
Trust	South Korea treats foreigners like me fairly and justly.	3.44	1.104
	Whenever South Korea makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about foreigners like me.	3.2	1.104
	South Korea can be relied on to keep its promises.	3.47	1.091
	I trust South Korea.	3.41	1.185
Empathy	When South Korea faces a problem, I have feelings about it.	3.17	1.191
	When South Korea is in trouble, I care much about it.	3.22	1.201
	I generally support South Korea's stance on international issues.	3.37	1.125
	When South Korea is condemned by another country, I tend to be on its side.	3.36	1.14

Measures

A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" or "strongly disagree" to 5 = "very much" or "strongly agree" was used to measure all items of this study (see Table 1 for the measurement items). According to previous research (Passow et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2008), this study measured national reputation. Following Yang et al (2008) study, this study measured national reputation on South Korea including emotional appeal, physical appeal, financial

appeal, leadership appeal, cultural appeal, global appeal, and political appeal (See Table 1). 10 items were used to measure South Koea's reputation for this study (α = 959, M = 3.553).

Adapting items from previous research (Vibber & Kim, 2021; Yang et al., 2008), this study measures Americans' perception of both macro factors – such as perceived political and economic interactions between South Korea and the U.S. – and micro factors such as perceived interpersonal and interaction. Four times were used to measure political interaction (α = .913, M = 3.734), economic interaction (α = .844, M = 3.709), personal interaction (α = .724, M = 3.052), and cultural interaction (α = .880, M = 3.157).

This study assessed the quality of the relationship between South Korea and Americans using the RADIO scale (Tam & Kim, 2017). Four dimensions were employed: interactional bilateralism, power mutuality, trust, and empathy, to evaluate perceptions of the relationship between South Korea and Americans. Four items were used to measure them. Interactional bilateralism reflects the perceived frequency and mutual benefit of exchanges between one's home country and a foreign nation (α = .921, M = 3.535), while power mutuality (α = .909, M = 3.437) captures the perceived balance of influence between the two countries. Trust (α = .903, M = 3.380) refers to the belief that a foreign country acts with fairness, reliability, and competence, and empathy (α = .908, M = 3.283) denotes the extent to which individuals understand and share a foreign country's positions, interests, and perspectives. In the OPRA framework, interactional bilateralism and power mutuality are classified as macro-level dimensions, whereas trust and empathy represent micro-level dimensions (Tam & Kim, 2017).

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis to predict the positive country reputation of South Korea. (N = 505)

	Positive National Reputation of South Korea		
Variables	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
Demographics			
Gener [a]	.208***	.079**	.067*
Age	-.085	-.021	-.056
Race [b]	-.074	-.023	-.01
Education	.108*	.044	.031
Income	.106*	-.012	-.005
Interactions			
Political Context		.347***	.223***
Economic Context		.235***	.167***
Personal Context		.084*	.04
Cultural Context		.246***	.177***
RADIO (Relationship)			
Interactional Bilateralism			.024
Trust			.285***
Empathy			.026
R^2	.102	.635	.674
ΔR^2		.533	.039
F	11.371	95.641	84.830

Notes: Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. Variables recoded as follows: a. Gender (male=1, female=0); b, Race (White =1, others =0).

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Results

A hierarchical regression analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 was conducted to predict South Korea's national reputation based on macro and micro level interactions and the RADIO scales, which assess the quality of relationships between a country and its foreign publics. Control variables, including gender, age, race, education, and income, were entered in Block 1. Macro- and micro-level interaction variables were entered in Block 2, followed by the RADIO variables in Block 3. Table 2 presents the hierarchical regression results, showing the predictive power of interaction factors and RADIO dimensions on the perceived national reputation of South Korea.

RQ1-1 examined how perceived political and economic interactions between South Korea and the

United States influence South Korea's national reputation. After accounting for demographic variables, both political interaction (β = .223, p < .001) and economic interaction (β = .167, p < .001) emerged as significant and positive predictors of South Korea's national reputation.

RQ1-2 assessed the effects of perceived interpersonal and cultural interactions on South Korea's national reputation. Results showed that cultural interaction was a significant and positive predictor (β = .167, p < .001), whereas interpersonal interaction was not statistically significant.

RQ2 explored the influence of RADIO variables—interactional bilateralism, power mutuality, trust, and empathy—on South Korea's national reputation. Due to multicollinearity with interactional bilateralism, power mutuality was excluded from the final model. Multicollinearity refers to a condition in which two or more independent variables in a linear regression model are highly correlated, potentially distorting the estimation of regression coefficients. After controlling demographic and interaction variables, trust was found to be a significant and positive predictor of national reputation (β = .285, p < .001). However, interactional bilateralism and empathy were not statistically significant.

Discussion

Although the Korean Wave is widely recognized as a manifestation of South Korea's cultural power, less is known about how cultural factors interact with other variables to create a more comprehensive framework for understanding and predicting national reputation. To address this gap, the purpose of this study was to investigate a theoretical framework for predicting South Korea's national reputation by testing

macro- and micro-level variables in conjunction with the RADIO relationship dimensions. By integrating cultural power with relational and structural factors, this study advances public diplomacy scholarship and offers practical insights for strengthening South Korea's strategic communication.

The results revealed that at the micro level, cultural interaction was a significant predictor of South Korea's national reputation, whereas interpersonal interaction was not. This may be because shared cultural experiences, such as K-pop, K-dramas, and other aspects of Hallyu, reach large audiences simultaneously and create collective emotional resonance, making them more influential in shaping perceptions than one-to-one contacts. At the macro level, both political and economic interactions significantly and positively predicted South Korea's national reputation, likely reflecting the importance of visible diplomatic relations, trade partnerships, and policy alignment in establishing trust and credibility on the global stage. Thus, these findings suggest that South Korea's national reputation cannot be sustained by cultural power alone; rather, political, economic, and cultural interactions must be pursued in tandem. This highlights the need for policymakers and public diplomacy practitioners to adopt a more integrated strategy—leveraging cultural exports to generate affinity, while simultaneously strengthening diplomatic partnerships and economic cooperation to ensure credibility and long-term reputation gains.

Moreover, this study examined how the quality of relationships between South Korea and Americans predicts South Korea's national reputation by employing the RADIO scale. Among the RADIO dimensions, trust emerged as the most robust predictor of national reputation. Trust, in this context, refers to the perception that South Korea is reliable,

consistent, and acts in good faith toward Americans. When Americans believe that South Korea can be depended upon to keep its commitments, honor international norms, and engage transparently, they are more likely to evaluate the country positively, thereby enhancing its overall reputation. Importantly, trust was more significant and powerful than other factors, including cultural interactions, underscoring its central role in shaping and sustaining national reputation. Therefore, South Korea should prioritize cultivating trust through transparent diplomacy, consistent communication, and credible cultural engagement as a strategic priority in strengthening its reputation in the United States.

By contrast, interactional bilateralism and empathy did not demonstrate significant predictive power in the final model. Furthermore, power mutuality was excluded due to multicollinearity with interactional bilateralism, highlighting the need for refinement and clearer differentiation of these closely related constructs in future applications of the RADIO model. Given that RADIO is a relatively new approach to measuring national relationships, these findings are particularly meaningful for advancing public diplomacy research. Overall, the study contributes both theoretical insights by clarifying which relationship dimensions most strongly influence national reputation and practical implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance international reputation management.

Theoretical Implications

Theory building is essential to the advancement of the social sciences because it provides conceptual clarity and a basis for cumulative knowledge. Public diplomacy scholarship has developed a substantial body of work on soft power, relationship management, national branding, and strategic

communication. However, the field remains theoretically diverse and fragmented with many studies emphasizing descriptive accounts, country cases, policy analysis rather than testing integrated explanations of how public diplomacy produces attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. As a result, scholars have continued to call for stronger theoretical development that can connect public diplomacy activities with the psychological and relational mechanisms through which foreign publics interpret and evaluate nations. Greater theoretical integration is therefore important for moving beyond description toward explaining when, why, and through what processes public diplomacy influences national reputation.

This study addresses this gap by proposing and testing a theoretical framework to explain how South Korea's national reputation is perceived. The framework emphasizes the role of micro- and macro-level factors, together with relationship quality, as key explanatory dimensions. By linking individual-level perceptions and interpersonal experiences with broader cultural, political, and economic evaluations, the model provides a more integrated account of how foreign publics form and evaluate national reputation.

This emphasis on relationship quality is consistent with a broader body of public diplomacy scholarship that views reputation as shaped not simply by exposure to cultural products or one-way communication, but through relational processes involving trust, mutual respect, empathy, and sustained engagement with foreign publics.

The relevance of this framework becomes particularly clear in the case of South Korea's cultural power in the United States. The global popularity of Korean cultural products—such as K-pop, dramas, and

cuisine—has extended far beyond entertainment, shaping perceptions of South Korea's identity, credibility, and attractiveness. However, without theoretical grounding, such cultural influence has often been treated as anecdotal. This study moves beyond description by situating South Korea's cultural power within a theoretical model of micro–macro interactions and relational dynamics, thereby offering a more systematic way to explain and predict how cultural exports enhance national reputation.

K-pop functions as both a visible example and an important source of South Korea's soft power, contributing to the country's international attractiveness and broader cultural influence. Groups such as BTS have achieved unprecedented global success, with economic analyses estimating their contribution to South Korea's economy at over $3.5–4 billion annually through music sales, merchandise, tourism, and related consumer exports (Shafie, 2025; Young, 2022). Similarly, K-dramas like *Crash Landing on You*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, and *Squid Game* have attracted global audiences, reshaped foreign perceptions of Korean society and fueled interest in broader cultural products (Choe, 2024). These developments highlight the increasing cultural influence of South Korea, but the mechanisms through which they translate into enhanced national reputation remain under-theorized. Popular culture is no longer merely a commercial export; it has become a critical instrument of soft power that requires analytical and theoretical explanation.

Thus, the theoretical framework advanced in this study represents a meaningful step toward strengthening the foundation of public diplomacy scholarship. It underscores the importance of incorporating interpersonal and relational factors into models of national reputation while also capturing the

dynamic interplay between micro- and macro-level interactions. As South Korea's cultural power continues to expand in the United States and globally, the urgency of building theoretically grounded approaches becomes even more evident. Such frameworks not only advance academic understanding but also provide practitioners with tools to design more effective, relationship-centered strategies in the evolving landscape of global communication.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several important practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and corporate leaders engaged in public diplomacy and strategic communication. Overall, the results offer evidence-based guidance for designing strategies that build trust, foster mutual understanding, and enhance national reputation in sustainable ways.

Although prior studies have not fully illuminated the role of Korean corporations in enhancing South Korea's national reputation, this study demonstrates that economic engagement is pivotal. Korean companies have expanded their presence in the United States through investments, job creation, and the provision of high-quality products and services. For example, Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama and the Kia Assembly Plant in Georgia have contributed not only to economic growth but also to goodwill and stronger local ties (Chon, 2025). These cases suggest that corporations are not only economic actors but also cultural and reputational ambassadors. Policymakers and business leaders should therefore integrate corporate engagement into broader public diplomacy strategies, recognizing that

economic initiatives can facilitate cross-national understanding and strengthen bilateral relations.

At the macro level, this study finds that political interaction exerts the most powerful influence on South Korea's reputation in the United States, surpassing cultural and economic engagement. This underscores the strategic importance of maintaining robust diplomatic ties and political collaboration. For South Korea, prioritizing a strong alliance with the U.S. should remain central to its foreign policy agenda. At the same time, cultural exchanges and economic partnerships should be positioned to complement and amplify the effects of political cooperation. For practitioners, this means aligning cultural diplomacy campaigns and corporate initiatives with broader diplomatic narratives to maximize reputational benefits.

Another implication lies in understanding how South Korea's political and cultural interactions are framed and perceived in U.S. media. Because mass media and social media play central roles in shaping public opinion, the South Korean government and its partners must monitor and strategically influence media narratives. Future campaigns should emphasize proactive storytelling, framing South Korea as a trusted political and cultural partner. Digital diplomacy, particularly through social media platforms, offers opportunities to reach key Americans directly, build resonance with younger audiences, and counter negative or one-dimensional portrayals.

Among all variables examined, trust emerged as the most significant predictor of South Korea's national reputation. This finding reinforces that trust—long recognized as central in corporate reputation and organizational–public relationships—must also be treated as a vital diplomatic asset. In the context of

public diplomacy, trust operates at the national level, shaping how publics in other countries perceive a nation's credibility, reliability, and intentions. South Korea should prioritize trust-building in its strategic communication with U.S. publics, not only through government-to-government relations but also through cultural exchanges, business practices, and civil society partnerships. Sustained transparency, consistency in messaging, and demonstrated reliability are key pathways for cultivating this trust.

The reconceptualization of trust within this study—from an organizational to a national framework—carries practical implications for both research and policy. For researchers, this calls for further empirical validation of trust measures such as the RADIO scale, ensuring their reliability when applied to the international domain. For practitioners, the evidence suggests that embedding trust-building into every layer of public diplomacy—whether through political negotiations, cultural promotion, or corporate engagement—can yield significant reputational dividends.

The practical insights of this study highlight that South Korea's reputation in the U.S. cannot be enhanced through cultural products alone. Instead, sustainable reputation-building requires an integrated approach that combines economic engagement, political collaboration, media strategy, and above all, trust. By strategically leveraging these dimensions, South Korea can foster deeper mutual understanding and secure long-term reputational benefits in the evolving global communication environment.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the survey sample

was limited to 505 American respondents. Although the United States is a critical context for South Korea's public diplomacy, relying solely on one country limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions and cultural contexts. Future studies should broaden the sample to include comparative analyses across multiple countries to capture more diverse perspectives.

Second, this study focused on micro and macro level interactions in conjunction with the RADIO scale to predict South Korea's national reputation. While this framework provides important insights, there may be additional factors—such as media framing, historical context, or geopolitical conflicts—that could further enrich the model. Expanding the framework to include these elements would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of national reputation.

Third, the dependent variable in this study was national reputation. Although reputation is a critical outcome, future research could examine alternative or complementary outcomes, such as behavioral intentions to visit South Korea, intentions to consume Korean products and cultural content, or willingness to support South Korea's national policies. Exploring such outcomes would extend the practical relevance of the framework.

Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional survey to test causal relationships, which limits the ability to capture dynamic changes over time. Future research should adopt more advanced methodological approaches, such as longitudinal designs or structural equation modeling, to examine the mediating role of soft power in shaping reputation. Particularly, testing theoretical models that assess how cultural, political, and economic factors operate

through soft power mechanisms would deepen scholarly understanding of the processes underlying national reputation. Despite these limitations, this study provides an important foundation for integrating cultural, economic, political, and relational factors into a theoretical framework for understanding and predicting national reputation.

Author's Biography

Myoung-Gi Chon is an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Officer (GPO) at the School of Communication and Journalism, Auburn University. As an associate editor for Asian Journal of Public Relations (AJPR) and Director of the SoliU research lab, he brings extensive expertise to his roles. Additionally, Chon is an active board member of Korea Corner, an organization committed to fostering understanding and bridging cultural gaps between the Korean community and non-Korean communities. Specializing in risk-crisis management, employee communication, health communication, and public diplomacy, Chon's research has been widely published in esteemed academic journals such as Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, International Journal of Communication, Health Communication, and Public Relations Review. Notably, he has made significant contributions to the field through the development of various measurements, including social media activism, issues-crisis principles (RAPIDS), and allegiant communication behavior (ACB) of employees. Continually expanding his horizons, Chon is at the forefront of research, recently exploring the application of public relations theories in the dynamic realm of public diplomacy.

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