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The Role of Culture and Diplomacy in Enhancing Vietnam's Soft Power

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of culture and diplomacy in enhancing Vietnam's soft power on the global stage. While Vietnam has made significant progress in cultural diplomacy through the promotion of its cultural heritage, arts, cuisine, and international cooperation, there remain challenges in optimizing its full potential due to institutional fragmentation, lack of cohesive cultural branding, and underutilization of digital diplomacy. This study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for strengthening Vietnam's soft power by integrating cultural diplomacy with strategic diplomatic goals, leveraging digital innovation, and engaging the diaspora. By proposing key institutional reforms, cohesive branding strategies, and expanded international participation, the paper offers actionable recommendations for enhancing Vietnam's global influence, cultural visibility, and diplomatic relations. The findings emphasize the need for long-term commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and international partnerships to effectively project Vietnam's cultural richness and strengthen its soft power in the 21st century.

Keywords: Traditional Arts, Cuisine, Cultural Heritage, Diplomatic Strategy, International Political Position, Worldwide Impact.

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, soft power has emerged as a critical tool for nations seeking to extend their influence beyond military and economic means. First conceptualized by Nye (Nye, 2004), soft power is defined as a country's ability to attract and persuade others through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy. Unlike hard power, which relies on coercion, soft power fosters long-term influence through voluntary admiration and alignment. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy—a subset of public diplomacy—plays a crucial role in enhancing a nation's global standing (Cull, 2009). Cultural diplomacy leverages cultural exchanges, educational cooperation, and international collaborations to promote mutual understanding and national prestige.

Vietnam, with its rich cultural heritage, historical resilience, and proactive diplomatic strategies, has increasingly turned to soft power as a means of strengthening its position in the global arena (Giang, 2021). The country's traditional arts, cuisine, and historical sites, alongside diplomatic initiatives within ASEAN, the United Nations, and bilateral partnerships, have shaped its evolving influence. However, while Vietnam's cultural and diplomatic efforts have yielded

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significant achievements, challenges remain in maximizing their potential to create a cohesive and strategic soft power policy.

Despite growing scholarly attention to Vietnam's soft power, existing research tends to be primarily descriptive, outlining key cultural and diplomatic efforts without critically evaluating their effectiveness or situating them within broader theoretical frameworks. A gap persists in systematically analyzing how Vietnam can integrate culture and diplomacy more effectively to enhance its global influence.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the following research questions: How do cultural and diplomatic initiatives contribute to Vietnam's soft power development? What are the most effective cultural elements and diplomatic mechanisms influencing Vietnam's soft power? How can Vietnam enhance the integration of cultural and diplomatic strategies to maximize its global influence?

To answer these questions, this research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of secondary data with quantitative assessments of Vietnam's cultural impact and diplomatic reach. By critically examining Vietnam's soft power strategies and comparing them with successful models such as Japan's Cool Japan initiative and South Korea's Korean Wave (Hallyu), this study aims to provide practical policy recommendations for strengthening Vietnam's global influence.

Through this approach, the research contributes to the academic discourse on soft power by moving beyond mere description to an analytical and evaluative framework. In doing so, it provides a clearer roadmap for Vietnam's cultural and diplomatic strategies, ensuring that they not only enhance national identity but also position the country as a significant actor in global affairs.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004). Nye (Nye Jr, 2011) later refined this framework by introducing the notion of smart power, which integrates both soft and hard power to maximize strategic advantages. Within this context, cultural diplomacy has emerged as a key mechanism for projecting soft power, allowing states to foster goodwill and cooperation through cultural exchanges, education, and global media engagement (Cull, 2009).

Vietnam's approach to soft power has been shaped by its unique historical, political, and cultural context. However, despite Vietnam's rich cultural traditions and active participation in international organizations, its soft power strategy remains fragmented and lacks a comprehensive framework compared to successful models in Japan and South Korea (Rawnsley & Ngac, 2016).

Existing research on Vietnam's soft power primarily focuses on traditional arts, cuisine, and heritage sites in shaping the country's international identity (Pham, 2020a). However, these studies tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, lacking a critical evaluation of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy and its measurable impact on global perceptions and international relations. Moreover, there is a lack of comparative analysis assessing Vietnam's soft power against other successful cultural diplomacy models in Asia, such as Hallyu in South Korea (Shim, 2008) and Cool Japan (Otmazgin, 2008).

Nicholas Cull (2009) defines cultural diplomacy as an essential component of a nation's soft power strategy, encompassing initiatives such as academic exchanges, international

broadcasting, and artistic collaborations. Research indicates that for cultural diplomacy to be effective, it must be institutionalized, well-funded, and strategically aligned with broader foreign policy objectives (Nye Jr, 2011). In the era of globalization, the rise of digital diplomacy has also become crucial in expanding a nation's cultural influence, as digital platforms enable rapid and widespread dissemination of cultural values.

Comparative case studies of South Korea and Japan highlight the importance of government-backed cultural branding initiatives (Hà, 2023). South Korea's Hallyu wave, for example, has been propelled by state investments, public-private partnerships, and an extensive media strategy (Vân, 2023). Similarly, Japan's Cool Japan initiative strategically promotes anime, fashion, and cuisine as cultural exports to strengthen the country's global reputation (Otmazgin, 2008).

In contrast, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy efforts remain less structured and lack sustained governmental backing (Giang, 2021). While initiatives such as UNESCO heritage recognition and traditional arts promotion have increased Vietnam's cultural visibility (UNESCO, 2024), these efforts often appear sporadic and disconnected from broader diplomatic strategies (Nghĩa, 2024). Furthermore, Vietnam has yet to fully leverage digital diplomacy, which has limited its ability to reach global audiences compared to its regional counterparts (Hùng, 2023).

Despite its potential, Vietnam's current soft power strategy faces several key challenges. Firstly, a lack of strategic coordination among governmental agencies has led to inefficiencies in cultural diplomacy efforts (Hà, 2012). Unlike South Korea and Japan, which have centralized organizations dedicated to promoting soft power—such as the Korea Foundation and Japan Foundation—Vietnam has yet to establish a specialized institution to oversee its cultural diplomacy strategy. Secondly, Vietnam's digital and global media presence remains underdeveloped, despite the increasing importance of streaming platforms, social media, and international broadcasting in shaping a country's global image (Lâm, 2018). Lastly, Vietnam's public diplomacy initiatives are limited, with relatively few scholarship programs, student exchange agreements, and cultural cooperation initiatives compared to other nations (Cục Hợp tác Quốc tế, 2022).

To enhance Vietnam's soft power, a structured, well-funded, and strategically integrated approach is needed.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research techniques to systematically analyze Vietnam's soft power strategy and address the gaps identified in the literature. By combining document analysis, statistical assessment, and comparative case studies, this research ensures a comprehensive and empirically substantiated evaluation of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy.

The qualitative component involves a systematic document analysis of key sources, including government white papers, policy reports, and UNESCO assessments of Vietnam's cultural heritage initiatives (UNESCO, 2024). Additionally, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and media representations of Vietnam's soft power are examined to identify prevailing trends, strategic limitations, and potential areas for improvement (Giang, 2021; Rawnsley & Ngac, 2016). The qualitative analysis follows a thematic coding approach, cross-referencing insights from multiple sources to enhance reliability and validity.

To complement qualitative findings, the study incorporates quantitative methods to measure Vietnam's soft power performance. Data is drawn from global soft power indices, UNESCO cultural impact metrics, trade and tourism statistics, and social media analytics to assess the international reach of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy. Indicators such as Vietnam's ranking in the Soft Power 30 Index (<https://portland-communications.com/>), the number of recognized UNESCO heritage sites (<https://whc.unesco.org/>), the export value of cultural products (<https://unctad.org/>), and digital engagement metrics on platforms like YouTube and TikTok are analyzed to provide empirical benchmarks for evaluating soft power effectiveness (<https://www.hootsuite.com/>). This statistical assessment not only quantifies Vietnam's global influence but also allows for cross-national comparisons.

A comparative case study approach is employed to contextualize Vietnam's soft power strategies within the broader landscape of cultural diplomacy, drawing lessons from South Korea's Hallyu wave and Japan's Cool Japan initiative (Otmazgin, 2008; Vân, 2023). These cases provide valuable insights into how government-backed cultural branding, digital diplomacy, and institutionalized public diplomacy initiatives contribute to global influence. Key comparative dimensions include the role of state agencies, the effectiveness of media-driven cultural promotion, and the strategic alignment of cultural and diplomatic efforts. By benchmarking Vietnam's approach against these established models, the study identifies best practices and policy recommendations for enhancing Vietnam's soft power.

Findings and Discussion

The Role of Culture in Building Vietnam's Soft Power

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping a nation's soft power, serving as a vehicle for projecting identity, values, and influence on the global stage (Nye, 2004). For Vietnam, a country with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, cultural diplomacy has become a strategic instrument for enhancing its international standing. From traditional arts, literature, and cuisine to heritage preservation, contemporary media, and international cultural exchanges, Vietnam's cultural assets have the potential to strengthen its global influence. However, despite notable achievements, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy remains fragmented, and its impact is not fully optimized in comparison to successful soft power models in the region (Rawnsley & Ngac, 2016).

Vietnam's intangible and tangible cultural heritage serves as a cornerstone of its soft power projection. With numerous UNESCO-recognized heritage sites, including Hạ Long Bay, Hội An Ancient Town, and Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary, and elements of intangible heritage such as *nón lá*, *áo dài*, water puppetry, and folk music traditions like *quan họ* and *ca trù*, Vietnam has a culturally rich foundation for soft power expansion (UNESCO, 2024). These cultural assets not only preserve national identity but also attract international interest, fostering cultural admiration and enhancing Vietnam's global reputation. However, while cultural heritage remains a key pillar of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy, its promotion on international platforms remains inconsistent, and there is a lack of systematic marketing strategies to integrate these cultural elements into global narratives effectively (Giang, 2021).

Vietnamese cuisine has also emerged as an important soft power tool, gaining international recognition through iconic dishes such as *phở*, *bánh mì*, and *cà phê sữa đá*. The global popularity of Vietnamese food reflects both traditional authenticity and modern adaptability, making it a powerful means of cultural diplomacy. However, unlike Thailand, which has systematically

promoted Thai cuisine as a national branding tool, Vietnam’s efforts to position its gastronomy as a core element of soft power remain sporadic and underdeveloped (My et al., 2017; Prucpairojkul & Triamsiriworakul, 2008; Tien et al., 2019). A more coordinated strategy—including culinary diplomacy initiatives, international food festivals, and strategic partnerships with global media platforms—would allow Vietnam to maximize the potential of its cuisine as a distinctive cultural export.

Vietnam’s traditional and contemporary arts—including lacquer painting, calligraphy, contemporary cinema, and literature—also play a significant role in cultural diplomacy. However, while Vietnamese art forms have received critical acclaim in niche markets, they lack global visibility and accessibility compared to South Korea’s Hallyu or Japan’s Cool Japan strategy (Otmazgin, 2008; Shim, 2008). The success of Korean pop culture and Japanese anime demonstrates that state-supported cultural industries, combined with strong international media distribution channels, are essential for cultural expansion. Vietnam’s film and music industries, though rich in creative potential, have not yet achieved similar global penetration due to limited state investment, weak international marketing, and an absence of transnational collaborations (Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021; Ó Briain).

In evaluating Vietnam's soft power potential, it is useful to compare its cultural diplomacy strategies with those of other countries that have successfully harnessed soft power to enhance their global standing. South Korea’s Hallyu (Korean Wave) and Japan’s Cool Japan initiatives have demonstrated the profound impact of strategically promoting national culture through coordinated government support, media strategies, and international collaborations. The table 1 below outlines key aspects of these soft power strategies, highlighting both the strengths and areas where Vietnam could further develop its own cultural diplomacy efforts.

Soft Power Comparison Table

	Criteria	South Korea (Hallyu)	Japan (Cool Japan)	Vietnam
1	Main Cultural Elements	K-pop, TV Dramas, Fashion	Anime, Manga, Cuisine	Traditional Arts, Cuisine, Heritage
2	Governing Body	Korea Foundation	Japan Foundation	No centralized body
3	Media Strategy	Digital marketing, YouTube, Netflix	International partnerships in publishing and film	Limited digital engagement
4	Effectiveness	Global influence, strong cultural export	Strong but more regional impact	Fragmented approach, lacks cohesive branding

Table 1

Another crucial aspect of Vietnam's soft power is cultural exchange programs, including educational partnerships, international student mobility, and diaspora engagement. While Vietnam has actively engaged in cultural exchange initiatives through ASEAN and UNESCO frameworks, its outreach remains relatively modest compared to regional counterparts. South Korea's Korean Wave strategy successfully leveraged scholarship programs, language institutes, and cultural centers abroad to expand its cultural influence. Vietnam, despite having Vietnamese language programs and academic collaborations, lacks a coherent global outreach strategy to enhance its soft power through education (Hà, 2023).

Furthermore, Vietnam's digital and media presence remains underutilized in global cultural diplomacy. With the rise of social media and digital storytelling, countries have leveraged Netflix, YouTube, and global streaming services to promote their culture internationally. However, Vietnam's representation on these platforms is limited, reducing its ability to reach and engage international audiences effectively (Lâm, 2018). Expanding digital diplomacy efforts—through government-backed content creation, international collaborations in media production, and increased participation in global film festivals—would significantly enhance Vietnam's cultural visibility.

Despite these strengths, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy faces several key challenges. Firstly, a lack of cohesive branding prevents the country from establishing a recognizable cultural identity in global discourse (Giang, 2021). Secondly, insufficient government investment and institutional support hinder the international promotion of Vietnamese cultural industries. Unlike Japan and South Korea, which have state-funded organizations dedicated to cultural diplomacy, Vietnam lacks a centralized entity responsible for coordinating its soft power efforts. Lastly, a limited focus on cultural adaptation and localization has restricted Vietnam's ability to make its cultural products more globally accessible. Successful cultural diplomacy strategies require not only cultural authenticity but also adaptation to foreign audiences, ensuring that local traditions resonate with international consumers (Hùng, 2023).

To maximize its soft power potential, Vietnam must adopt a more strategic, institutionalized, and globally integrated approach to cultural diplomacy. Key recommendations include:

1. Developing a national cultural diplomacy strategy that aligns with Vietnam's broader foreign policy goals, ensuring sustained investment in cultural branding and global promotion initiatives.
2. Expanding digital cultural diplomacy efforts, leveraging social media, streaming platforms, and digital storytelling to reach wider international audiences.
3. Strengthening cultural industries through state-backed funding, international co-productions, and cross-border collaborations in film, music, and publishing.
4. Enhancing international visibility by actively participating in global cultural festivals, book fairs, and culinary diplomacy initiatives.
5. Establishing cultural institutions abroad, similar to Korea Foundation or Japan Foundation, to systematically promote Vietnamese culture in key international markets.

By implementing these measures, Vietnam can transition from a fragmented cultural diplomacy approach to a well-structured, globally competitive soft power strategy. While the country's rich cultural heritage provides a strong foundation, only through institutional coordination, digital

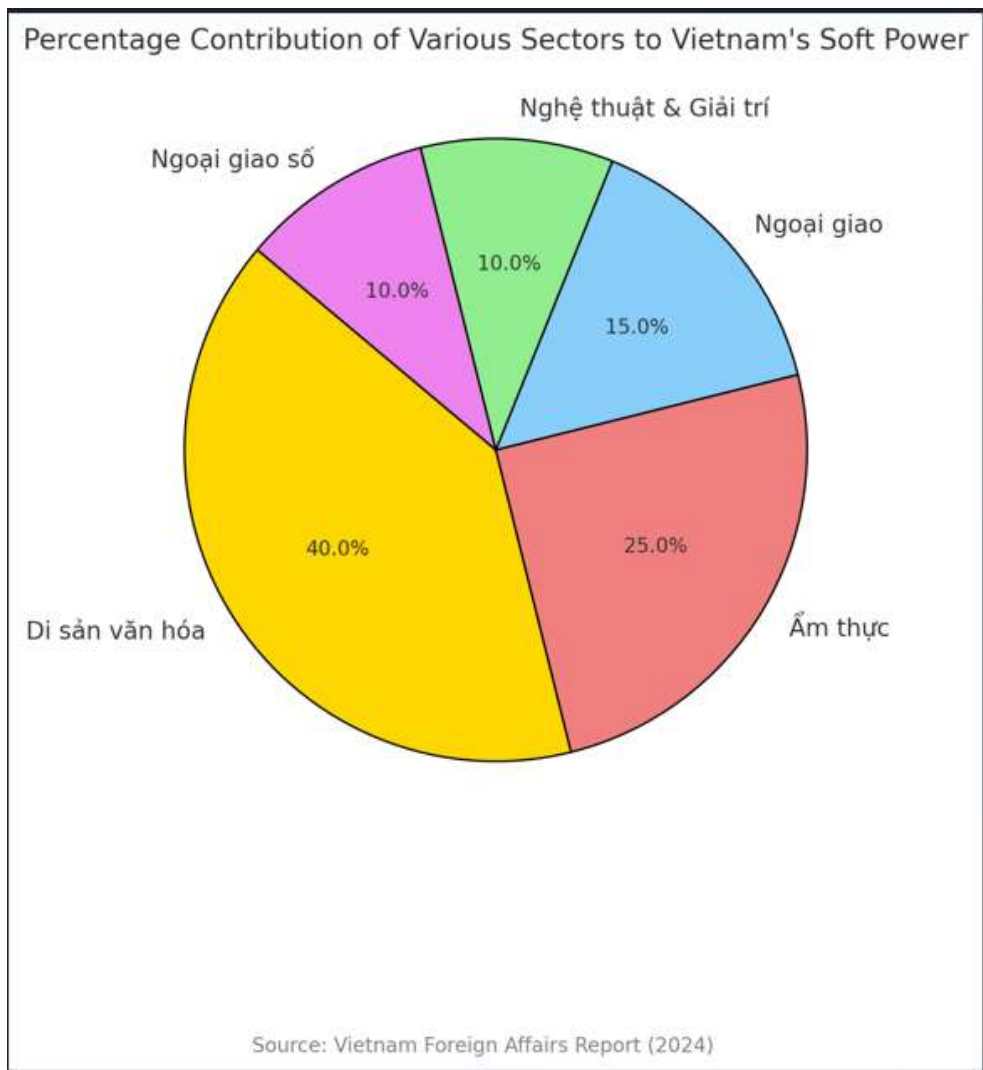
innovation, and targeted global outreach can Vietnam fully harness the power of culture to elevate its international standing.

The various sectors contributing to Vietnam's soft power can be seen in the chart 1 below, which outlines the relative importance of cultural heritage, cuisine, diplomacy, arts, and entertainment. This breakdown provides valuable insight into the current focus of Vietnam's soft power strategy and highlights areas of strength as well as opportunities for future growth.

Chart 1

Percentage Contribution of Various Sectors to Vietnam's Soft Power

Source: Vietnam Foreign Affairs Report (2024)



- **40%: Cultural Heritage**
- **25%: Cuisine**

- **15%: Diplomacy**
- **10%: Arts & Entertainment**
- **10%: Digital Diplomacy**

As shown in the chart, cultural heritage (di sản văn hóa) contributes the most at 40%, followed by cuisine (ẩm thực) at 25%. Arts and entertainment (nghệ thuật & giải trí) and digital diplomacy (ngoại giao số) each account for 10%, while diplomacy (ngoại giao) contributes 15%. This distribution suggests that Vietnam is already capitalizing on its rich cultural and culinary heritage, yet there is significant potential to enhance the impact of arts, entertainment, and digital diplomacy. A more coordinated effort to strengthen these sectors could further amplify Vietnam's soft power on the global stage.

The Role of Diplomacy in Strengthening Vietnam's Soft Power

Diplomacy plays a pivotal role in enhancing a nation's soft power, providing a structured mechanism for international engagement and influence (Nye, 2004). In the case of Vietnam, diplomacy serves as both a vehicle for cultural promotion and a strategic instrument for fostering global partnerships, consolidating its image as a responsible and proactive member of the international community. Over the past decades, Vietnam has actively pursued bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, regional integration, and global governance participation, demonstrating a commitment to peaceful cooperation, economic development, and cultural exchange (Giang, 2021). However, while Vietnam has made significant diplomatic strides, there remains a lack of strategic coordination in linking its diplomatic efforts with a cohesive soft power framework, hindering its ability to fully capitalize on its growing international influence (Rawnsley & Ngac, 2016).

Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy has been central to its soft power expansion. As a member of ASEAN, the United Nations, APEC, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Vietnam has actively shaped regional and global agendas, reinforcing its reputation as a constructive and responsible actor in international affairs (Do, 2022b). Particularly, Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanships in 1998, 2010, and 2020, along with its non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council (2008–2009, 2020–2021), have enhanced its diplomatic credibility and global recognition (Do, 2022a). These leadership roles provided Vietnam with opportunities to advocate for regional stability, sustainable development, and cultural cooperation, strengthening its position as a bridge between developed and developing economies. However, compared to nations like South Korea or Japan, which have seamlessly integrated public diplomacy into their multilateral engagements, Vietnam's approach remains more traditional and state-centered, lacking a dynamic, public-driven diplomacy strategy that actively engages global audiences (Hà, 2023).

Bilateral diplomacy has also been a key pillar of Vietnam's soft power strategy. Vietnam has established comprehensive and strategic partnerships with more than 30 countries, including major powers such as the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union (Cường, 2022; Ha, 2022; VietnamPlus, 2025). These diplomatic ties have facilitated cultural exchanges, educational cooperation, and economic partnerships, strengthening Vietnam's global presence and credibility (Cường, 2024; Mai et al., 2024). Notably, Vietnam's educational diplomacy—through government-backed scholarships, student exchange programs, and collaboration with foreign universities—has played an essential role in shaping global perceptions of Vietnam as an open and knowledge-driven nation (milena, 2024). Nevertheless,

despite these achievements, Vietnam's bilateral cultural agreements often lack depth and sustainability, as many initiatives are short-term and event-driven rather than part of a long-term national strategy (Lâm, 2018).

One of the most underutilized aspects of Vietnam's diplomacy in soft power development is public diplomacy. While traditional diplomacy focuses on government-to-government interactions, public diplomacy emphasizes people-to-people engagement, cultural outreach, and global perception management (Cull, 2009). Leading soft power nations have effectively used public diplomacy strategies—such as South Korea's Korean Cultural Centers and Japan's Japan Foundation—to institutionalize their cultural influence (Otmazgin, 2008). In contrast, Vietnam lacks a systematic public diplomacy infrastructure, with limited Vietnamese cultural centers abroad and insufficient digital outreach initiatives targeting foreign audiences (Anh, 2024). Expanding cultural institutions, language programs, and digital storytelling platforms could significantly enhance Vietnam's global soft power presence.

Vietnam's economic diplomacy has also contributed to its soft power appeal, positioning the country as a dynamic and rapidly growing economy. Trade agreements such as EVFTA (EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement) and RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) have not only strengthened economic ties but also reinforced Vietnam's image as a reliable and forward-thinking trade partner (Quân, 2023). However, unlike China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) diplomacy, Vietnam has yet to fully leverage its economic engagements as a soft power tool. A more strategic approach—such as branding Vietnam as a hub for sustainable investment, green technology, and innovation—would enhance its global appeal beyond economic competitiveness (Lenain et al., 2023).

Another critical yet underdeveloped dimension of Vietnam's diplomatic soft power is digital diplomacy. In an era where global narratives are shaped by digital platforms, Vietnam's digital diplomatic engagement remains limited and reactive compared to more media-savvy nations (Hùng, 2023). Countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Korea have actively used Twitter diplomacy (Twiplomacy), YouTube content creation, and virtual embassies to foster global engagement and enhance their soft power appeal (BCW, 2018). In contrast, Vietnam's official digital presence lacks interactivity, storytelling depth, and engagement with global audiences, creating missed opportunities for cultural branding and international outreach (Lâm, 2018). Strengthening Vietnam's digital public diplomacy through multi-platform engagement, global influencer collaborations, and interactive digital content would significantly broaden its global influence and connect with younger generations worldwide.

Despite these strengths, Vietnam's diplomatic soft power strategy faces several challenges. The fragmentation of diplomatic efforts, with multiple ministries and agencies operating independently, has led to inconsistent branding and messaging (Giang, 2021). Unlike countries with dedicated cultural diplomacy agencies, Vietnam's approach remains decentralized, lacking a unified institution responsible for coordinating its soft power policies (Pham, 2020b; Vu, 2024). Moreover, insufficient investment in long-term diplomatic initiatives has resulted in episodic rather than sustained global engagement, weakening Vietnam's ability to cultivate lasting international influence (Hà, 2023).

To enhance its diplomatic soft power, Vietnam must adopt a more integrated, strategic, and globally interactive approach. Key policy recommendations include:

1. Institutionalizing public diplomacy through the establishment of Vietnamese Cultural Centers worldwide, following models like Korea Foundation or Japan Foundation.
2. Expanding digital diplomacy efforts, leveraging social media storytelling, online public engagement, and interactive diplomatic platforms to reach broader international audiences.
3. Strengthening economic diplomacy as a soft power tool, branding Vietnam as a leader in sustainability, technological innovation, and global trade partnerships.
4. Developing a long-term, sustainable strategy for bilateral cultural agreements, ensuring deep, institutionalized collaborations rather than short-term initiatives.
5. Enhancing multilateral leadership, positioning Vietnam as a thought leader in ASEAN, UN, and other global forums on issues such as cultural diversity, peacebuilding, and sustainable development.

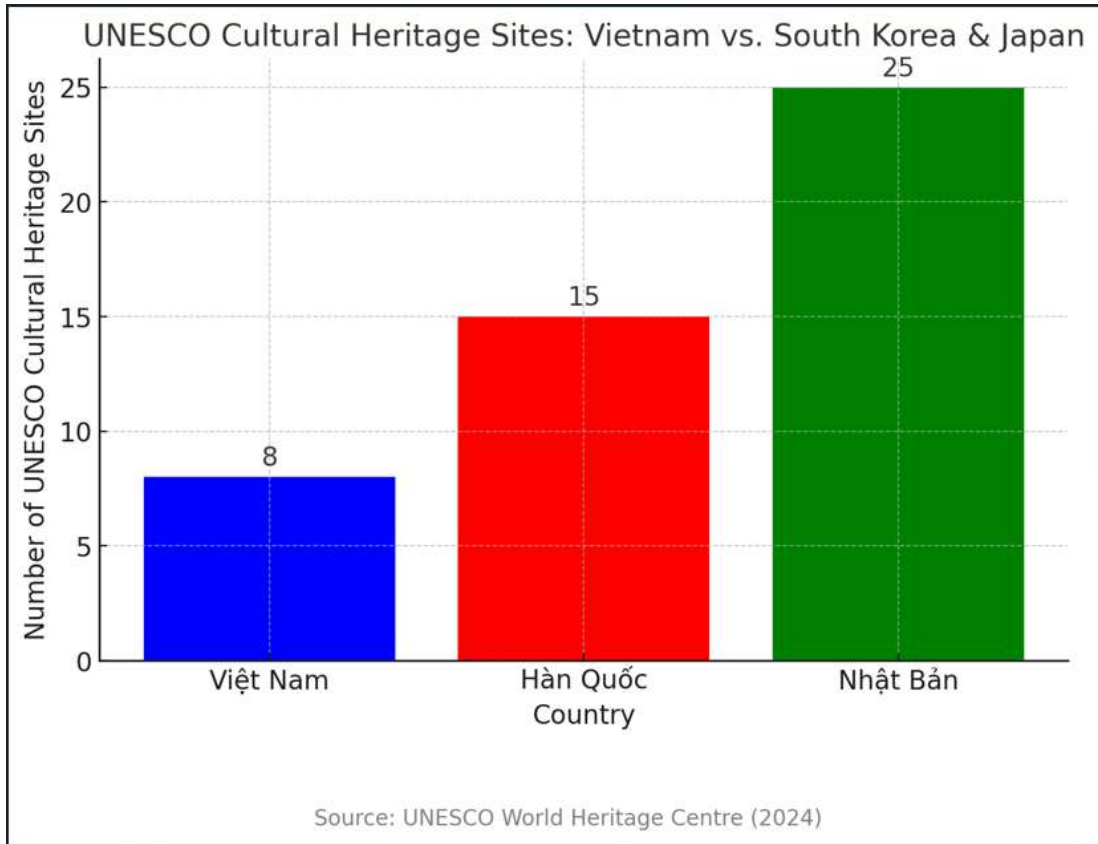
By adopting these measures, Vietnam can transition from a reactive to a proactive soft power strategy, ensuring that its diplomatic influence is not only regionally significant but also globally impactful. Diplomacy, when strategically aligned with cultural and public diplomacy efforts, has the potential to transform Vietnam's international standing, reinforcing its image as a culturally vibrant, diplomatically agile, and globally respected nation.

Vietnam, with its numerous UNESCO-recognized heritage sites, has significant cultural resources to leverage for soft power. However, when compared to its regional counterparts, such as South Korea and Japan, Vietnam's global visibility in cultural heritage promotion remains limited. The chart 2 below highlights the number of UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sites in Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, underscoring the disparity in the recognition and promotion of cultural heritage across these nations.

Chart 2

UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sites Comparison (Vietnam vs. South Korea & Japan)

source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2024)



8 – Vietnam

15 – South Korea

25 – Japan

As shown in the chart, Vietnam currently has 8 UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sites, significantly fewer than South Korea's 15 and Japan's 25. This gap emphasizes the potential for Vietnam to further enhance its cultural diplomacy by increasing the visibility and promotion of its heritage sites globally. By expanding its international presence and marketing efforts, Vietnam can further harness this valuable asset to elevate its soft power.

Enhancing the Integration of Culture and Diplomacy

The strategic integration of culture and diplomacy is a critical factor in enhancing Vietnam's soft power, enabling the country to project a compelling national identity while strengthening international partnerships. While Vietnam possesses a rich cultural heritage and has achieved notable diplomatic successes, its current approach remains fragmented, lacking a systematic framework that aligns cultural diplomacy initiatives with broader foreign policy objectives (Giang, 2021). To maximize the synergistic potential of culture and diplomacy, Vietnam must adopt a comprehensive, well-coordinated, and forward-looking strategy that enhances global engagement, cultural branding, and institutional capacity.

One of the key limitations in Vietnam's current strategy is the lack of institutional coordination between governmental bodies responsible for cultural and diplomatic initiatives. Unlike South Korea's Korea Foundation or Japan's Japan Foundation, which function as centralized institutions dedicated to soft power promotion, Vietnam's cultural diplomacy efforts are dispersed among various ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) (Pham, 2020b; Vu, 2024). The absence of a unified governing body has led to inconsistent messaging, limited cross-sector collaboration, and inefficiencies in resource allocation. Establishing a National Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, modeled after successful international counterparts, could provide a coherent institutional structure to design, implement, and evaluate Vietnam's cultural diplomacy initiatives systematically.

Furthermore, Vietnam must strengthen its global cultural branding by crafting a distinct and recognizable cultural identity. Countries with strong soft power leverage cultural narratives that resonate globally, such as Japan's Cool Japan campaign promoting anime, fashion, and cuisine, or South Korea's Hallyu wave, which integrates K-pop, drama, and beauty industries into a globally appealing brand (Otmazgin, 2008; Shim, 2008). Vietnam, despite its abundant cultural resources, lacks a cohesive national branding strategy that unifies its cultural assets under a singular, compelling narrative (Rawnsley & Ngac, 2016). A successful branding approach should emphasize Vietnam's authenticity, heritage, and innovation, integrating traditional elements such as *ao dai*, water puppetry, and Vietnamese cuisine with modern cultural expressions in cinema, music, and digital media. Developing targeted global campaigns—through international festivals, exhibitions, and digital storytelling—would help amplify Vietnam's cultural influence on the world stage.

A key enabler in integrating culture and diplomacy effectively is leveraging digital diplomacy, which has become a powerful soft power tool in the digital era (Hùng, 2023). While nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom actively utilize Twiplomacy (Twitter diplomacy) and digital storytelling platforms to shape global perceptions, Vietnam's online cultural diplomacy presence remains underdeveloped (Lâm, 2018). Expanding Vietnamese digital diplomacy efforts through social media engagement, virtual cultural exhibitions, interactive storytelling, and influencer collaborations could significantly increase the country's global cultural reach. For example, establishing official YouTube channels featuring Vietnamese arts, history, and contemporary culture, as well as collaborating with international influencers and media networks, would facilitate greater cultural exposure and engagement.

Another essential component of effective cultural-diplomatic integration is expanding Vietnam's international cultural institutions and educational exchanges. While Vietnam has engaged in bilateral cultural agreements and ASEAN cultural cooperation, its presence in global academic and cultural institutions remains modest. South Korea's King Sejong Institute and China's Confucius Institutes have successfully institutionalized cultural education worldwide, strengthening their countries' soft power influence (Chaziza, 2023; Sridhar, 2021). In contrast, Vietnamese language and cultural programs are limited, reducing the country's educational footprint in key global regions. Establishing Vietnamese Cultural Centers in major global cities—offering language programs, cultural exhibitions, and artistic showcases—would enhance people-to-people diplomacy and increase cultural affinity among foreign audiences.

Moreover, diaspora engagement remains an untapped soft power asset for Vietnam. With a global Vietnamese diaspora of over 5 million people, particularly concentrated in the United

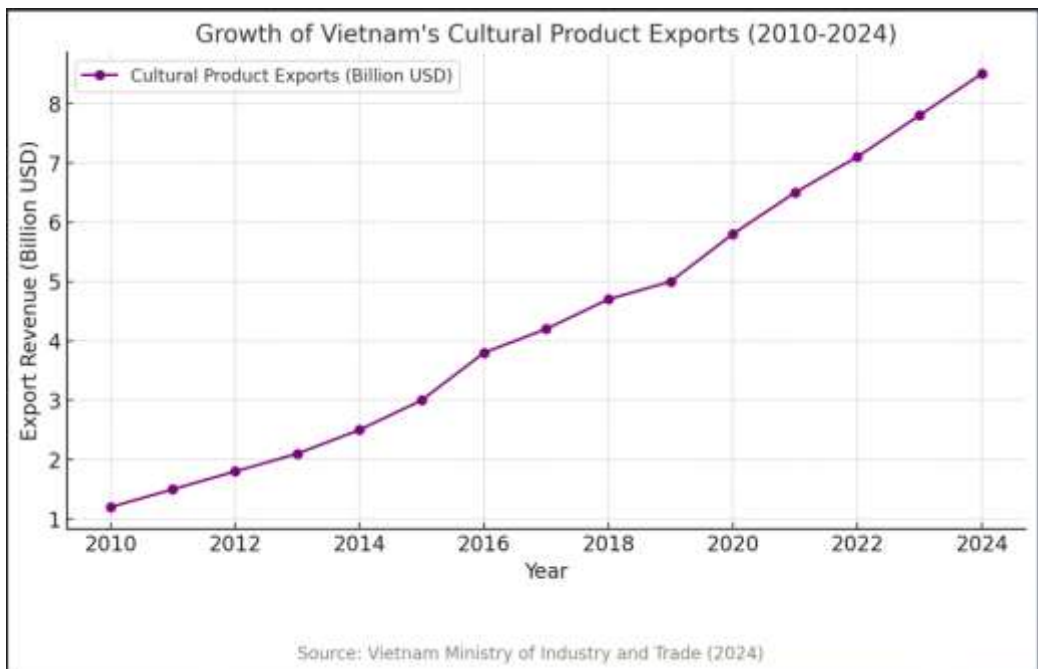
States, France, Canada, and Australia, there exists a valuable network of cultural ambassadors who can enhance Vietnam's cultural visibility and diplomatic influence (Nguyen, 2022; VNS, 2023). However, unlike India's soft power engagement through the Indian diaspora or Ireland's Global Irish strategy, Vietnam has not fully leveraged its overseas communities as cultural-diplomatic assets (Aikins et al., 2009; Landrin, 2023). Creating structured diaspora engagement programs, including Vietnamese heritage festivals, diaspora cultural forums, and media collaborations, could strengthen Vietnam's global cultural imprint while fostering deeper connections between overseas Vietnamese communities and their home country.

Lastly, Vietnam must increase its participation in high-profile international cultural events to solidify its cultural-diplomatic presence. Countries with strong cultural diplomacy actively showcase their heritage and contemporary arts at global platforms such as the Venice Biennale, Cannes Film Festival, and Frankfurt Book Fair (Le, 2024). While Vietnam has participated in some of these events, its representation remains sporadic and lacks strategic planning (Phuong, 2024; Son, 2024). Establishing a permanent presence at major global cultural events, backed by government funding and strategic industry collaborations, would position Vietnam as a serious cultural contender on the international stage.

The export revenue from cultural products is an important indicator of the growing global demand for Vietnam's culture and creativity. The graph below illustrates the significant growth of Vietnam's cultural product exports over the last decade, highlighting how cultural goods contribute to the nation's soft power.

Growth of Vietnam's Cultural Product Exports (2010-2024)

Source: Vietnam Ministry of Industry and Trade (2024)



As the graph demonstrates, there has been a consistent increase in cultural product exports, with a notable acceleration in recent years. From just over \$1 billion in 2010, cultural exports have

more than quadrupled by 2024, reaching approximately \$8 billion. This growth underscores the increasing international appeal of Vietnam's cultural offerings, including its arts, heritage, and entertainment. These trends reflect a broader success in leveraging cultural diplomacy to enhance Vietnam's position in the global market, but also highlight the potential for further growth as Vietnam continues to strengthen its global cultural presence.

Strategic Recommendations for Effective Integration

To optimize the integration of culture and diplomacy, Vietnam must transition from a fragmented, short-term approach to a systematic, long-term strategy that ensures coherence, sustainability, and global impact. This requires a multi-dimensional framework that incorporates institutional reforms, digital innovation, diaspora engagement, and enhanced international participation. A well-coordinated and structured approach will not only allow Vietnam to fully harness its cultural potential but also strengthen its global soft power influence and diplomatic standing.

One of the most pressing limitations in Vietnam's current strategy is the lack of institutional coordination among governmental bodies responsible for cultural and diplomatic affairs. Unlike South Korea's Korea Foundation or Japan's Japan Foundation, Vietnam lacks a dedicated agency to oversee cultural diplomacy, leading to dispersed resources and inefficiencies in implementation (MINISTER, 2011). Establishing a National Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, operating under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, would provide a centralized mechanism for policy development, cross-sector collaboration, and the long-term strategic planning of cultural diplomacy. This institution would serve as a think tank, funding body, and executive agency, ensuring that Vietnam's cultural soft power initiatives are well-resourced, systematically implemented, and globally competitive.

Alongside institutional reform, Vietnam must develop a cohesive and globally recognizable national cultural branding strategy. While South Korea has successfully leveraged Hallyu, and Japan has institutionalized Cool Japan, Vietnam lacks a distinct cultural narrative that unifies its traditional heritage and contemporary creative industries (Otmazgin, 2008; Shim, 2008). An effective cultural branding strategy should emphasize Vietnam's rich historical legacy, artistic diversity, and innovative cultural expressions, integrating traditional elements such as *ao dai*, water puppetry, and Vietnamese cuisine with modern sectors like cinema, music, design, and digital arts. Vietnam must also embed cultural branding within trade, tourism, and diplomatic engagements, ensuring that cultural diplomacy is not an isolated effort but an interconnected part of national development and global positioning. High-profile international campaigns, collaborations with global media outlets, and active participation in international exhibitions and festivals will be essential in elevating Vietnam's cultural visibility on the world stage.

In the digital era, Vietnam must harness digital diplomacy as a powerful tool for expanding cultural influence. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada have successfully utilized Twiplomacy (Twitter diplomacy), digital storytelling, and virtual engagement strategies to shape global narratives (BCW, 2018). However, Vietnam's digital presence remains underdeveloped, limiting its ability to engage international audiences effectively (Hùng, 2023). To enhance digital diplomacy, Vietnam should invest in high-quality digital content, including virtual reality cultural exhibitions, online festivals, and interactive storytelling platforms. Government-backed initiatives should prioritize official cultural diplomacy channels on YouTube, Netflix, and other streaming services, while partnerships with international influencers and content creators will

help expand Vietnam's reach. Additionally, integrating data analytics into digital engagement strategies will allow for more targeted and impactful communication with global audiences.

A critical yet underutilized dimension of cultural diplomacy is the establishment of Vietnamese Cultural Centers abroad. While China's Confucius Institutes and South Korea's Sejong Institutes have successfully institutionalized cultural education and language promotion, Vietnam lacks a comparable global network of cultural institutions (Hiền, 2024). Expanding Vietnamese Cultural Centers in major global cities, particularly in countries with large Vietnamese diaspora communities (e.g., the United States, France, Canada, and Australia), would create sustainable platforms for language instruction, artistic showcases, and cultural exchange programs. These centers should serve as hubs for public diplomacy, fostering deeper connections between international communities and Vietnamese culture while reinforcing Vietnam's cultural footprint in key global markets.

Engaging Vietnam's diaspora as cultural ambassadors is another crucial yet largely untapped resource. With over 5 million Vietnamese living abroad, the diaspora represents a significant soft power asset, comparable to the influential Indian and Irish diasporas, which have actively contributed to national soft power strategies (Nguyen, 2022). To effectively mobilize the diaspora, Vietnam should develop structured engagement programs, such as Vietnamese heritage festivals, diaspora-led cultural forums, and digital storytelling initiatives that highlight the transnational Vietnamese experience. Additionally, digital platforms that connect the diaspora with domestic cultural and diplomatic initiatives can strengthen cross-border collaborations and transnational networks, turning overseas Vietnamese communities into active promoters of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy.

Vietnam must also increase its presence in high-profile international cultural events and media markets to solidify its global cultural influence. While Vietnam has participated in film festivals, book fairs, and artistic exhibitions, its representation has been sporadic and underfunded, limiting its impact on the global cultural landscape (Hòa & Thắng, 2024; Sơn, 2024). Establishing a sustained, government-backed presence at major cultural events, such as the Venice Biennale, Cannes Film Festival, and Frankfurt Book Fair, will position Vietnam as a serious cultural contender. Additionally, fostering co-productions with international media companies and securing global distribution channels for Vietnamese films, literature, and performing arts will further enhance Vietnam's soft power influence.

To effectively integrate culture and diplomacy, Vietnam must transition from short-term, event-driven initiatives to a structured, institutionalized, and globally strategic approach. Establishing a National Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, developing a cohesive cultural branding strategy, leveraging digital diplomacy, expanding Vietnamese Cultural Centers abroad, engaging diaspora networks, and increasing participation in international cultural institutions are essential steps toward enhancing Vietnam's soft power. A well-funded, innovation-driven, and globally competitive strategy will ensure that Vietnam not only preserves its cultural heritage but also amplifies its cultural influence in the international arena, solidifying its position as a leading cultural and diplomatic force in the 21st century.

Recommendations for Strengthening Vietnam's Soft Power

To effectively strengthen its soft power, Vietnam must adopt a comprehensive, long-term strategy that integrates culture, diplomacy, and digital initiatives in a cohesive and sustained manner. While the country has made notable progress in enhancing its international influence,

key gaps remain in institutional coordination, cultural branding, and digital diplomacy. Addressing these challenges will require a multi-pronged approach that leverages Vietnam's rich cultural heritage, global diplomatic ties, and emerging technological platforms to enhance its global standing (Vinh, 2023; VNA, 2024 -b).

A critical first step is the institutionalization of cultural diplomacy. Vietnam currently lacks a centralized agency responsible for coordinating its cultural and diplomatic efforts, which leads to fragmented initiatives and inefficiencies. To rectify this, Vietnam should establish a National Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, akin to the Korea Foundation or Japan Foundation, which would serve as a dedicated body to manage cultural diplomacy. This institution would centralize efforts across ministries, develop long-term strategies, and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently to support Vietnam's global cultural outreach. A unified, institutionalized approach would not only streamline diplomatic efforts but also enhance the consistency and impact of Vietnam's cultural initiatives (Pham, 2020b; Yen & Huong, 2021).

Alongside institutional reform, Vietnam must develop a cohesive national cultural branding strategy. While the country boasts a wealth of cultural assets, including traditional arts, cuisine, and heritage sites, these elements are often presented in an inconsistent manner, limiting their global impact. Drawing inspiration from successful models such as South Korea's Hallyu and Japan's Cool Japan, Vietnam should craft a unified cultural narrative that integrates both traditional elements, like *ao dai*, water puppetry, and Vietnamese cuisine, with contemporary creative industries in music, film, and digital arts. This branding strategy should emphasize authenticity, innovation, and sustainability, positioning Vietnam as a vibrant cultural hub in Southeast Asia. By developing and implementing a targeted global marketing campaign, Vietnam can ensure its cultural narrative resonates on the global stage, driving awareness and admiration for its heritage (Ben, 2013; VNA, 2023).

In the digital age, digital diplomacy is a powerful tool for expanding soft power and fostering global engagement. Many countries have successfully harnessed digital platforms to project their culture and values globally, yet Vietnam's digital presence remains relatively underdeveloped. To enhance its digital diplomacy, Vietnam must invest in high-quality digital content that highlights its culture, history, and contemporary achievements. Platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok provide enormous opportunities for reaching global audiences, and Vietnam should leverage these platforms to share virtual exhibitions, interactive storytelling, and online festivals. Collaboration with international influencers and content creators can amplify Vietnam's global cultural reach, ensuring that its messages are seen and appreciated by diverse audiences worldwide. In addition, data analytics can be employed to assess the effectiveness of these digital initiatives, enabling Vietnam to optimize its digital outreach strategy (Center, 2021; Diep, 2024 ; VNA, 2024 -a).

A significant resource that remains underutilized in Vietnam's soft power strategy is its diaspora. With over 5 million Vietnamese living abroad, the Vietnamese diaspora represents an invaluable asset for strengthening Vietnam's global cultural influence. To capitalize on this, Vietnam should formalize diaspora engagement through structured programs that encourage overseas Vietnamese communities to actively promote Vietnamese culture. This can include heritage festivals, cultural forums, and collaborations with local media. By creating stronger links between the homeland and the diaspora, Vietnam can transform its overseas communities into cultural ambassadors, helping to expand its influence in international markets (NDO, 2023; Nguyen, 2022).

In parallel, Vietnam should expand its international cultural institutions by establishing Vietnamese Cultural Centers in key global cities. Unlike countries such as China and South Korea, which have successfully created a network of Confucius Institutes and Sejong Institutes to spread their culture, Vietnam's presence in the international cultural landscape remains limited. Establishing cultural centers in cities with significant Vietnamese diaspora populations, such as Paris, Washington D.C., and Sydney, will provide a platform for language programs, artistic performances, and cultural exchanges, further enhancing Vietnam's global visibility. These centers will also serve as hubs for public diplomacy, where international audiences can engage with Vietnamese culture in deeper and more meaningful ways (Giang, 2024).

Finally, to solidify its cultural and diplomatic influence, Vietnam should increase its participation in high-profile international cultural events such as the Venice Biennale, Cannes Film Festival, and Frankfurt Book Fair. While Vietnam has participated in some of these events, its representation has often been sporadic and underfunded, limiting its ability to make a lasting impression on the global stage. By investing in sustained participation at major international festivals, Vietnam can build long-term visibility and establish itself as a key player in global cultural dialogues. Support for Vietnamese filmmakers, artists, and musicians in securing international distribution and collaborations will also ensure that Vietnam's cultural output is seen, heard, and appreciated worldwide (An, 2023 ; Anh, 2023).

In examining the factors that contribute to Vietnam's soft power, we can identify several key elements, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. These factors reflect the country's rich cultural heritage and growing diplomatic influence, but also highlight areas that require further development for greater global impact. The table 2 below summarizes the primary factors contributing to Vietnam's soft power, alongside their associated strengths and weaknesses.

Vietnam Soft Power Factors

	Factor	Impact Level	Strengths	Weaknesses
1	Cultural Heritage	High	Numerous UNESCO sites, rich traditions	Limited global promotion
2	Cuisine	High	Globally recognized dishes (Pho, Banh Mi)	Lacks structured branding strategy
3	Arts & Entertainment	Moderate	Unique traditional performances and cinema potential	Low international visibility
4	Diplomacy	Moderate	Strong ASEAN and UN presence	Not integrated with cultural promotion
5	Digital Diplomacy	Low	Emerging presence, but lacks strategy	Weak engagement on streaming/social media

Table 2

This table illustrates that while Vietnam’s cultural heritage and cuisine have a high global impact, their promotion remains limited. Similarly, while Vietnam has unique arts and entertainment offerings, their international visibility is still low. Diplomatically, the country enjoys strong influence within ASEAN and the UN, yet this is not yet fully integrated with cultural promotion. Additionally, while digital diplomacy is emerging, there is still significant room for improvement in engaging with international audiences via social media and digital platforms.

In conclusion, to strengthen its soft power, Vietnam must adopt a strategic, long-term approach that integrates cultural diplomacy, digital engagement, and diaspora involvement into a cohesive framework. By institutionalizing cultural diplomacy, developing a cohesive cultural brand, expanding digital outreach, engaging the diaspora, and increasing international cultural participation, Vietnam can ensure that its soft power efforts are sustained, impactful, and globally competitive. This multi-faceted strategy will help position Vietnam as a leading cultural and diplomatic force in the 21st century, ensuring that its rich heritage and cultural innovations are celebrated on the global stage.

Conclusion

Vietnam has made significant strides in enhancing its soft power, leveraging its rich cultural heritage and growing diplomatic influence. However, there are still critical gaps that need to be addressed to ensure the country can fully capitalize on its potential. The fragmented nature of

cultural diplomacy, coupled with limited institutional coordination and underdeveloped digital diplomacy efforts, hinders the effectiveness of Vietnam's soft power strategy. To unlock the full potential of its cultural and diplomatic assets, Vietnam must adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach that aligns cultural initiatives with strategic diplomatic goals, supported by long-term institutional reforms and innovative engagement strategies.

The establishment of a National Institute for Cultural Diplomacy is essential to streamline and institutionalize Vietnam's cultural diplomacy efforts. This centralized body would provide the necessary infrastructure to develop and execute a coherent national cultural strategy, allowing Vietnam to project a unified global cultural identity. Furthermore, the development of a cohesive cultural branding strategy is paramount to positioning Vietnam as a culturally vibrant and innovative nation on the global stage. By integrating traditional cultural elements with contemporary creativity, Vietnam can craft a narrative that resonates with international audiences and enhances its influence in global cultural dialogues.

In the digital era, digital diplomacy offers Vietnam an unparalleled opportunity to expand its reach and influence. With the increasing importance of social media and digital platforms, Vietnam must prioritize the expansion of its digital diplomacy efforts by creating high-quality, engaging content that showcases the country's cultural richness. Collaborating with global influencers and leveraging online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok will allow Vietnam to connect with younger, more diverse international audiences. By embracing the digital realm, Vietnam can ensure its cultural diplomacy is accessible, dynamic, and globally impactful.

Additionally, Vietnam must recognize the untapped potential of its diaspora. With over 5 million Vietnamese living abroad, the diaspora is an invaluable resource that can serve as ambassadors of Vietnamese culture, amplifying the country's soft power in key international markets. Structured diaspora engagement programs, alongside the establishment of Vietnamese Cultural Centers in strategic locations, will deepen cultural ties and strengthen global networks, enhancing Vietnam's cultural influence on the world stage.

Finally, increased participation in international cultural events is crucial for Vietnam to cement its position as a cultural leader in the global arena. Regular engagement in high-profile events like the Venice Biennale, Cannes Film Festival, and Frankfurt Book Fair, along with greater investment in international co-productions, will ensure that Vietnam's culture reaches a wider audience and is acknowledged by the global cultural community.

In conclusion, for Vietnam to fully realize its soft power potential, a strategic, long-term vision that integrates cultural diplomacy, digital innovation, and diaspora involvement is necessary. By addressing the gaps identified in its current strategy, Vietnam can strengthen its position as a global cultural and diplomatic force, ensuring that its cultural heritage and contemporary contributions are widely recognized and celebrated worldwide. The adoption of these strategic recommendations will not only enhance Vietnam's global influence but also pave the way for a more coherent, sustainable, and impactful cultural diplomacy approach, positioning Vietnam as a leading player in global cultural and diplomatic relations in the 21st century.

Author Contributions

Đậu Tuấn Nam contributed to the writing of the original draft, funding acquisition, investigation, and conceptualization of the study.

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There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [NAC], upon reasonable request.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This study did not involve any surveys or human participants, and therefore, informed consent is not applicable. (The manuscript has been revised, and as a result, no semi-structured interviews or human participants are involved in the study anymore. Therefore, a statement regarding informed consent is no longer applicable.)

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