

Humanities and Social Sciences Communications

Article in Press

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-06644-y>

Global soft power in the 21st century: a two-decade global perspective

Received: 3 January 2025

Accepted: 28 January 2026

Cite this article as: Yaqoub, M., Matusitz, J., Jingwu, Z. *et al.* Global soft power in the 21st century: a two-decade global perspective. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-06644-y>

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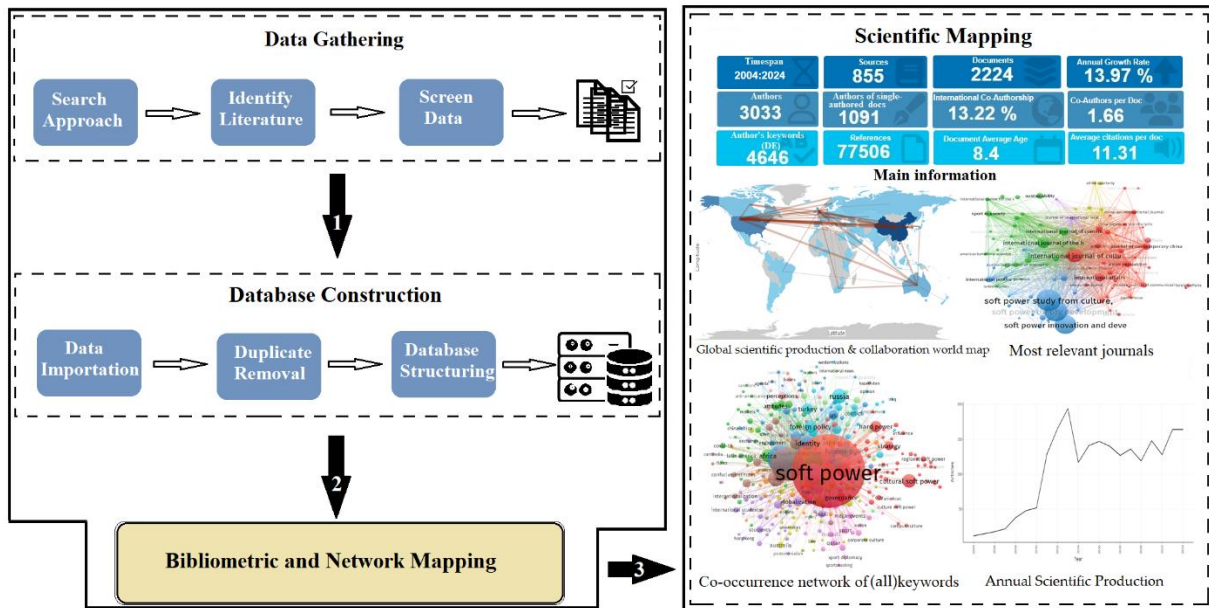
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Global soft power in the 21st century: a two-decade global perspective**ABSTRACT**

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of global soft power research over the last two decades (2004–2024) by examining its evolution, dominant themes, and geopolitical dimensions. Drawing on 2,224 documents retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, the analysis reveals a robust annual growth rate of 13.97% in soft power scholarship. The thematic evolution highlights significant shifts in the research focus, moving from foundational concepts like cultural diplomacy and civil society to emerging trends such as strategic competition between the United States and China, Global South perspectives, and sports diplomacy. Keyword co-occurrence analysis identified *soft power*, *China*, *public diplomacy*, and *cultural diplomacy* as central themes, with increasing interdisciplinary engagement across communication studies, international relations, and cultural policies. The United States and the United Kingdom dominate global citations, whereas China leads in total academic output, indicating a shift in research priorities and redistribution of intellectual influence. Joseph S. Nye, Jr.'s seminal works remain the most cited globally and locally, underscoring his foundational role in the soft power framework. This study highlights key gaps, emerging priorities, and global collaboration patterns, offering a roadmap for future research to explore the utility of soft power in addressing the evolving dynamics of global influence and strategic rivalry.

Keywords: bibliometric analysis; China; culture; education; Joseph Nye; soft power; United States

Graphical abstract



Graphical Abstract

Introduction

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, has become central to global diplomacy and international relations (Nye, 1990, 2004a, 2017, 2023). Soft power refers to a country's ability to shape others' preferences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. It operates through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy—mechanisms that enable nations to influence outcomes by inspiring rather than compelling others (Nye, 2004b). In scholarly contexts, soft power functions as a conceptual framework that enriches international relations analyses, particularly within liberal theory, by emphasizing the roles of culture, ideology, and communication in shaping global influence. For instance, the U.S. leverages Hollywood and higher education to promote its values, while China advances Confucius Institutes to cultivate international goodwill (Shah et al., 2020, 2021).

In the 21st century, soft power has expanded to encompass a wide range of cultural, political, and economic tools that enhance a nation's global standing (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Nye, 2021). Emerging powers, such as China and India, increasingly employ strategies of cultural diplomacy, economic partnership, and educational exchange to strengthen their international influence (Gray & Murphy, 2014; Narlikar, 2019). Globalization and digital technologies have amplified this process, as states use media, online platforms, and creative industries to build cross-border appeal (Adoui, 2023; Estevens, 2024; Korkmaz, 2024). The rise of digital diplomacy—where governments engage global audiences through social media and virtual platforms—illustrates how attraction operates in networked and participatory environments (Li, 2018; Yang, 2010).

Amid this transformation, the strategic competition between the United States and China has redefined how soft power is projected and perceived worldwide. This rivalry has intensified the struggle for narrative dominance, influencing global debates on governance models, value systems, and technological futures. Revisiting soft power research through this geopolitical lens allows for a richer understanding of how states use culture, information, and reputation to compete for legitimacy and leadership in the international system. Nevertheless, despite the concept's prominence, existing bibliometric studies seldom integrate this strategic context, limiting their relevance to the current global power dynamics.

Recent scholarship has examined the design and effectiveness of soft power strategies (Gallarotti, 2011; Hartig, 2013; Johansmeyer, 2022; Leite & Rodrigues, 2023; Matthew et al., 2010; Mokdad, 2024; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015; Voci & Hui, 2017), but large-scale quantitative analyses remain limited. This study addresses this gap by using bibliometric methods to map the evolution of global soft power scholarship in the 21st century, including its publication patterns, collaboration networks, and intellectual discourse. The growing relevance of soft power has attracted scholars from political science, communication, sociology, education, and cultural studies (Gallarotti, 2022; Ohnesorge, 2020; Sun, 2012). Bibliometric analysis, through techniques such as citation mapping and co-authorship analysis, provides a systematic way to evaluate a field's development, revealing how knowledge production aligns with geopolitical change (Yaqoub et al., 2023, 2024).

While previous studies have analyzed soft power in specific domains—leadership (Acar, 2023), tourism (Kumari & Kondala, 2023), sports diplomacy (Jeong et al., 2024), and foreign policy

networks (Vladimirova, 2022; Zhu, 2020)—few have examined it as a unified and evolving field. This study offers a macroscopic perspective by situating global soft power research within the context of strategic rivalry and shifting global hierarchies. By identifying the major contributors, collaboration networks, and thematic trends, this study traces the evolution of the concept from case-based applications to an interdisciplinary and geopolitically responsive domain.

Ultimately, this study contributes to both scholarship and policy by revealing how intellectual engagement with soft power reflects the broader contests for global influence. Understanding these patterns offers critical insights into how nations harness culture, values, and digital tools to shape the international order. This insight is increasingly indispensable in an era of ideological competition and information warfare.

To provide a more coherent analytical framework, this study is organized around three overarching research questions. These integrate the thematic and methodological dimensions of soft power research while maintaining analytical rigor and clarity.

- *RQ1: How has global scholarly attention to soft power evolved in the 21st century, and to what extent do temporal shifts in publication and citation activity align with major U.S.-China geopolitical events and policy signals (e.g., BRI launch, high-profile cultural program closures, trade tensions, and COVID-19)?*

Testing temporal alignment probes whether scholarship reacts to geopolitics (event-driven bursts) or follows an independent intellectual trajectory.

- *RQ2: How do thematic emphases, citation impact, and co-authorship/collaboration networks differ among authors and institutions in the U.S., China, and other regional blocs, and do these differences conform to—or cut across—geopolitical lines?*

Comparing country-level outputs and network modularity reveals whether the field is integrated or segmented along geopolitical/ideational lines (e.g., inward-focused literature vs. transnational exchanges).

- *RQ3: How have competition-related topics (e.g., BRI, Confucius Institutes, digital diplomacy, disinformation/propaganda) emerged or declined in the soft power literature, and what do these shifts imply for the concept's credibility and policy relevance?*

Isolating competition-centered topics helps determine whether soft power is being reconceptualized as a competitive tool (and whether scholarship treats it as benign cultural exchange or strategic leverage).

Through this analysis, the study aims to provide not only descriptive statistics but also a coherent narrative of how soft power has been conceptualized, researched, and institutionalized in global scholarship. By combining bibliometric methods with critical reflection on the intellectual and geopolitical context, it offers valuable insights into how soft power research shapes and is shaped by the international system.

Method

This study employs a quantitative bibliometric approach to analyze the growth, collaboration patterns, and thematic focus of soft power research worldwide. Data were collected from the leading academic database, WoS, filtered according to pre-defined inclusion criteria, and processed using bibliometric tools to identify publication trends, influential authors, and institutional networks. Quantitative metrics, such as citation counts, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrence, were employed to provide a systematic overview of the field.

A quantitative bibliometric approach was selected because it enables the systematic measurement of publication trends, citation patterns, and collaboration networks across a large dataset, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the field's growth and structure. This method offers objectivity and replicability, enabling longitudinal tracking and comparisons of contributions across regions and institutions over time. However, it has limitations: while bibliometric analysis captures measurable outputs, it cannot fully assess the quality, depth, or theoretical innovation of the scholarship. Future research could complement this study with qualitative analyses that explore the interpretive dimensions of soft power discourse.

Data source

The data for this study consisted of all soft power-related papers retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, one of the most extensive global databases of scientific literature, accessed via an institutional library. WoS citation data are considered more accurate and reproducible within the scientific community. Many scholars have used the WoS core collection for bibliometric analyses (Wang & Sun, 2023). The WoS core collection remains a vital tool for academic research, now holding over 22,619 journals, books, and conference proceedings (<https://clarivate.libguides.com/librarianresources/coverage>).

The Flowchart and PRISMA flow diagram outline the selection process for identifying studies on soft power, with data sourced exclusively from the WoS Core Collection (Haddaway et al., 2022; Moher et al., 2010; Page et al., 2021). An initial search using the topic term “soft power” across all editions yielded 2,429 records. The dataset was then refined to include only entries indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Conference Proceedings Citation Index – Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), reducing the number of records to 2,224 documents.

The majority of documents were in English (2,161, or 97% of the total), with additional entries in Chinese (23), German (9), Russian (9), Spanish (9), Turkish (7), Slovak (2), Croatian (1), French (1), Norwegian (1), and Portuguese (1) languages. No further language filtering was applied, and all documents were included in the analysis (**Figure 1** and **Table 1**).

This systematic process ensured that the final dataset was both robust and relevant, providing a solid foundation for an in-depth evaluation of 21st-century soft power scholarship. Methodical filtering underscores the importance of index-specific criteria in bibliometric studies, ensuring the inclusion of high-quality, relevant literature for a nuanced analysis of soft power mechanisms and their global impact.

Inclusion and exclusion

Discrepancies in retrieved records can arise from (i) the time lag inherent in database indexing, (ii) geographically restricted content, and (iii) variations in institutional subscriptions to the Web of Science.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) article, book review, editorial material, proceedings paper, and review. (2) Publications published from January 1, 2004, to December 31, 2024, to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature. The latest publication date of the included articles was December 31, 2024. (3) We included only all-language publications for consistency and comparability. (4) Records contained the title, abstract, and indexing. All records were exported in “plain text” format to prevent alterations due to continuous updates.

Exclusion Criteria: (1) No relevant publication was identified before January 1, 2004 and after December 31, 2024, no studies were included therefore, publications outside this period were excluded. (2) All manuscripts other than SSCI, CPCI-SSH, and A&HCI. (3) Studies with incomplete or missing publication details (such as title, abstract, or keywords).

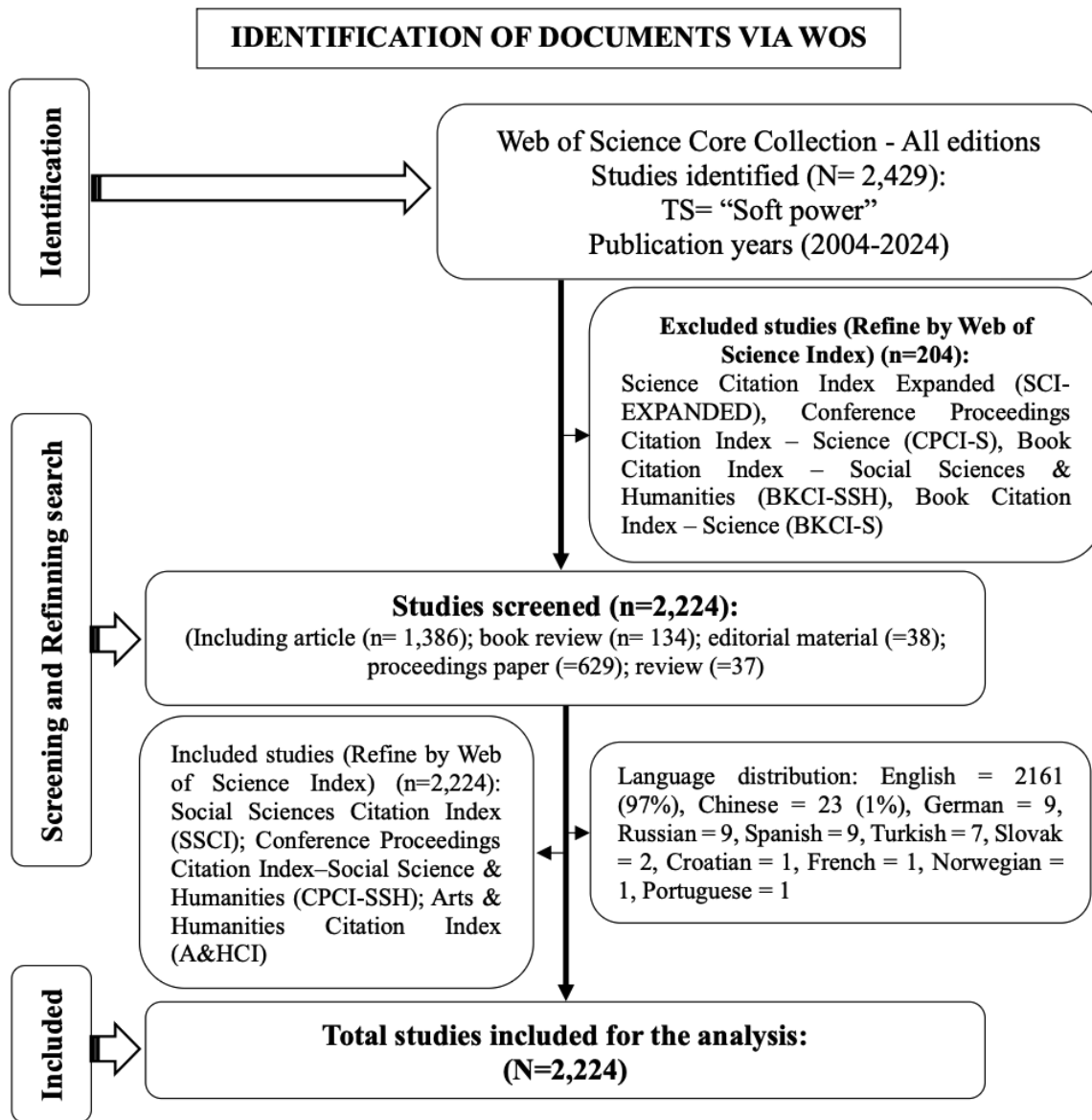


Figure 1. Flowchart of the literature search and study selection process.

Table 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the selection of soft power-related studies from the WoS core collection.

Category	Documents collection and refinement overview
Search database	Web of Science Core Collection
Editions	All editions
Search criteria	Topic* based search (TS: title, abstract, and indexing). Search documents
Search query	"Soft power"

Total records retrieved	2,429
Refinement process	Refine results for Web of Science Index: SSCI or CPCI-SSH or A&HCI
Refined dataset	2,224
Terminologies	* Title: The leading name of the document, which often reflects its content. Abstract: A brief summary of the document, providing an overview of its main points and findings. Indexing: The process of assigning keywords or terms to a document to make it easier to find relevant information in databases or search engines. TS means topic

Data processing and methods

In alignment with the research objectives and scope of this study, the data sources and processing methodologies were systematically organized (**Table 1**). The raw data were analyzed and processed using multiple software tools, namely Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365), VOSviewer (version 1.6.19), and mainly Bibliometrix (version 6.1 R6), each offering distinct advantages. VOSviewer, a widely utilized tool in bibliometric research, excels in visualizing co-occurrence networks, making it particularly effective for mapping relationships among keywords, authors, and institutions. Similarly, Bibliometrix and its web-based companion, Biblioshiny, provide comprehensive bibliometric analysis (**Appendix A**). These include generating detailed metrics on citation impact and visualizing collaboration networks. Together, these tools complement each other, enabling an integrative approach to data analysis and visualization that supports the study objectives.

Main information

The bibliometric analysis offers detailed insights into soft power literature from 2004 to 2024. The timeframe of 2004 to 2024 emerged organically from the systematic search conducted in the Web of Science (WoS) core collection (<https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/basic-search>) using the query “soft power” to identify key research articles in the social sciences and arts & humanities, without imposing an initial temporal restriction. Notably, no studies were identified before 2004 within the search parameters, suggesting that relevant literature either did not exist in the WoS core collection or did not align with the specified query criteria before this period. The reason for using the WoS core collection is that the BibTeX/Plaintext output option is available only for the Web of Science Core Collection and not for all databases. In contrast, the plaintext file format is recommended for Biblioshiny in bibliometric analysis.

Following standard bibliometric search protocols, refinements were applied to ensure relevance and quality, culminating in the identification of the period. Data collection occurred during the first week of January 2025, at which point no publications from 2025 were available for inclusion in this review. Even if such publications existed, their incorporation might have been precluded due to the absence of a full year of data or an insufficient number of studies, potentially compromising the robustness of our analysis. A total of 2,224 documents were

examined, spanning 855 sources, including journals and conference proceedings. The dataset shows a strong annual growth rate of 13.97%, with an average document age of 7.4 years and 11.31 citations per document, reflecting sustained scholarly interest and its impact on the field. These works collectively cited 77,506 references, demonstrating extensive intertextuality.

Keyword analysis identified 1,404 instances of “Keywords Plus” and 4,646 author-defined keywords, highlighting significant thematic diversity. Authorship data indicate contributions from 3,167 authors, including 1,107 single-authored scholarly articles and 1,254 single-authored documents across other formats, such as conference papers, book reviews, and editorials.

Collaboration trends revealed an average of 1.66 co-authors per document, with 13.22% of publications featuring international co-authorship, emphasizing the importance of global academic collaboration.

The dataset included 1,386 articles, 629 conference proceedings, 134 book reviews, 38 editorial materials, and 37 reviews, showcasing that peer-reviewed articles were the dominant publication type. This analysis underscores the dynamic growth and diverse academic engagement in soft power research.

Top related and locally cited journals

The analysis of the most relevant and cited journals highlights significant contributors to the academic discourse on soft power. The *International Journal of Cultural Policy* emerged as the most pertinent journal, with 48 published articles, reflecting its critical role in exploring cultural dimensions of soft power. Following this, the *International Journal of the History of Sport* (31 articles) and *International Affairs* (24 articles) emphasized their contributions to the interdisciplinary nature of soft power research.

In terms of the local citation frequency of relevant journals, The *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* leads with 465 citations, underlining its influence in shaping theoretical and empirical discussions on soft power politics. The *Foreign Affairs* (461 citations) and *Journal of Contemporary China* (414 citations) also rank prominently, highlighting their pivotal roles in examining the geopolitical and strategic aspects of soft power (**Table 2**).

These findings underscore the diversity of publication and citation dynamics, with some journals prioritizing cultural policy and others focusing on international relations and geopolitics. This distribution aligns with Bradford’s Law, as illustrated in **Figure 2**, which identifies a concentration of core journals that dominate the field and provide a robust foundation for ongoing scholarly exploration of soft power.

However, the distribution of publications across journals and the concentration within certain outlets reveal far more than index scores, impact factors, or Bradford’s law. This study acknowledges that such patterns may reflect disciplinary biases, geographic preferences, editorial processes, and audience segmentation that extend beyond raw metrics. A fuller investigation of these contextual dynamics, such as the dominance of cultural policy outlets in Europe or

geopolitics journals in the U.S., would provide more profound insights than rankings alone and remains a direction for future research.

Table 2. Most relevant journals with publication counts and citation frequencies.

Most relevant journals		Most locally cited journal	
Journal names	Articles (f)	Journal names	Citation frequency
International Journal of Cultural Policy	48	The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science	465
International Journal of the History of Sport	31	Foreign Affairs	461
International Affairs	24	Journal of Contemporary China	414
International Journal of Communication	24	International Organization	400
Journal of Contemporary China	20	Foreign Policy	398
Asian Perspective	17	International Affairs	297
International Politics	17	International Security	281
Journal of Asian and African Studies	17	Journal of Communication	280
Sustainability	17	The Chinese Journal of International Politics	249
Europe-Asia Studies	15	Asian Survey	239
International Communication Gazette	15	International Journal of Cultural Policy	233
Pacific Affairs	15	Third World Quarterly	229

Source: Authors based on WoS Documents 1557 (1386 articles, 134 book reviews, and 37 reviews)

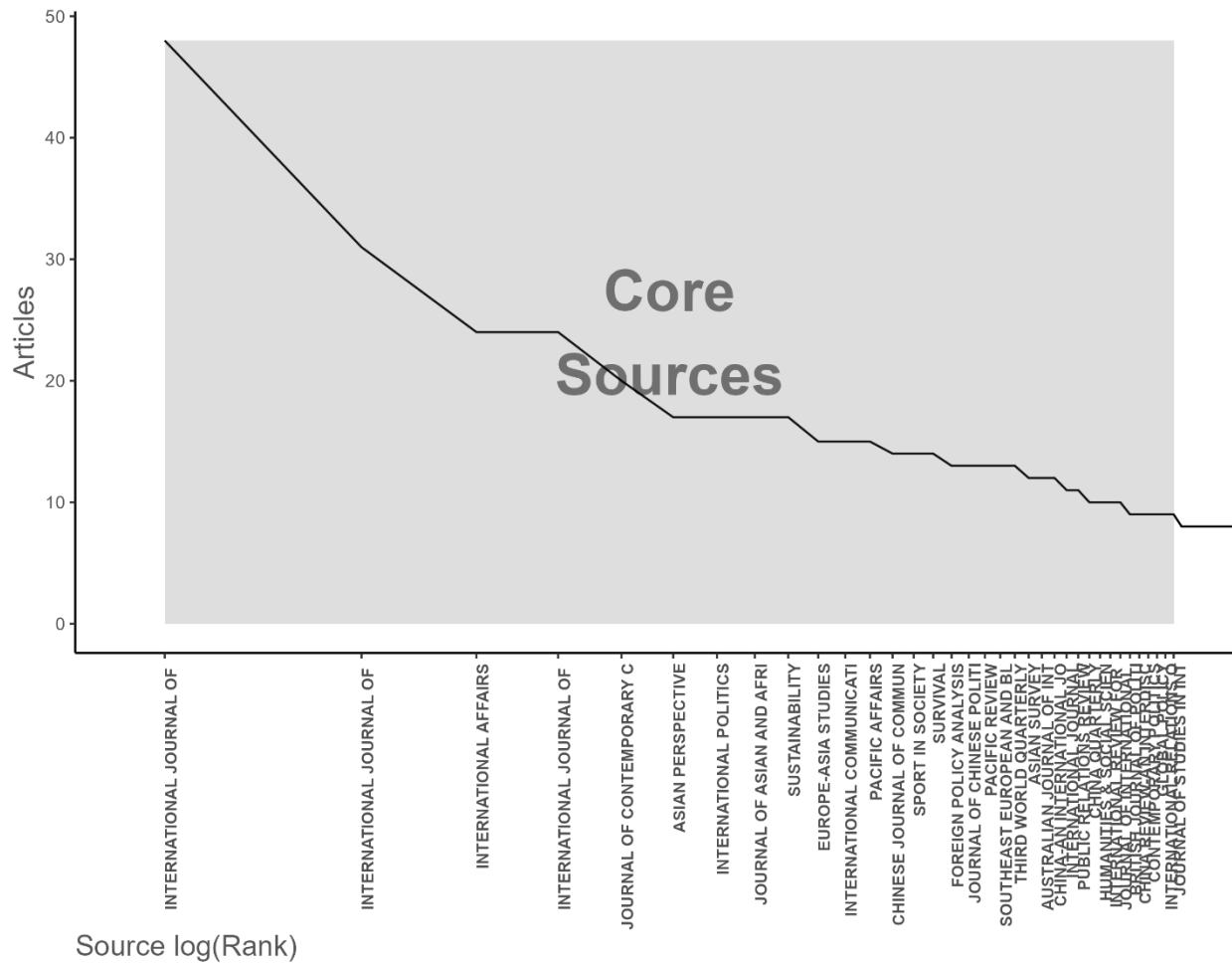


Figure 2. Core journals using Bradford's Law.

Journals' local impact

The analysis of journals' local impact reveals key metrics that underscore their contributions to soft power studies. The *International Journal of Cultural Policy* stands out with the highest h-index (15) and g-index (26), along with a substantial total citation count (TC) of 742 and 48 published articles (NP) since 2009, reflecting its central role in the academic discourse on the cultural dimensions of soft power.

Similarly, the *International Journal of Communication* (h-index 12, g-index 19) and *International Affairs* (h-index 10, g-index 22) demonstrate a strong citation influence, with total citations of 383 and 509, respectively. Journals such as the *Journal of Contemporary China* and the *International Journal of the History of Sport* have significant impact, with h-indices of 10 and 9, respectively, highlighting their scholarly contributions to the geopolitical and historical aspects of soft power.

Other notable journals include *Third World Quarterly*, *Asian Perspective*, and *Sustainability*, which have made moderate but noteworthy contributions to article output and total citations. These journals emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of soft power research. The m-index values (e.g., 0.938 for the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*) further reflect consistent research productivity (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Journals' local impact on soft power.

Source	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP	PY_start					
International Journal of Cultural Policy						15	26	0.938	742	48	2009
International Journal of Communication					12	19		0.8	383	24	2010
International Affairs					10	22		0.476	509	24	2004
Journal of Contemporary China				10	20			0.667	432	20	2010
International Journal of the History of Sport					9	16		0.563	274	31	2009
Public Relations Review					9	11		0.75	305	11	2013
Third World Quarterly				9	13			0.5	268	13	2007
Asian Perspective					8	13		0.5	177	17	2009
Asian Survey					7	12		0.35	408	12	2005
Chinese Journal of Communication				7	12			0.467	153	14	2010

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Chinese Journal of International Politics	7	8	0.412	289	8	2008
Foreign Policy Analysis	7	13	0.467	262	13	2010
International Relations of the Asia-Pacific	7	9	0.412	188	9	2008
Journal of Asian and African Studies	7	10	0.636	120	17	2014
Journal of Chinese Political Science	7	13	0.7	227	13	2015
Pacific Review	7	12	0.333	147	13	2004
Sustainability	7	12	0.778	152	17	2016

Journals' production over time

Temporal trends in key journals on soft power research from 2004 to 2024 reveal a steady increase in publications. Notably, the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* experienced the highest consistent growth, rising from zero in 2004 to 48 in 2024. Other journals, such as the *International Journal of the History of Sport* and *International Affairs*, also showed steady growth, reflecting growing academic interest in global policy and soft power.

The *International Journal of Communication* and the *Journal of Contemporary China* experienced gradual increases in their publication output, peaking in 2024 with 24 and 20 articles, respectively. This trend reflects the increasing focus on communication studies and China's role in global diplomacy and the exercise of soft power. Additionally, journals such as *Sustainability* and *Asian Perspective* saw growth, with *Sustainability* publishing 15 articles in 2024, underscoring its focus on soft power in sustainable development.

This consistent rise in publications highlights the growing academic engagement with soft power, underscoring its interdisciplinary nature, spanning communication studies, international relations, and political science. The findings also indicate an increasing scholarly focus on China's global influence, as reflected in its publications in these journals (**Figure 3**).

Simultaneously, the analysis of temporal shifts should move beyond raw publication counts to interrogate *how and why* specific themes rise or decline, and which geographic or political contexts drive these changes. For example, the post-2010 surge in Chinese contributions reflected broader strategic initiatives, while the Global South's recent engagement aligned with heritage and sustainable development agendas. Future work must engage more critically with these drivers to uncover significant regional and global dynamics that remain obscured by descriptive trend lines.

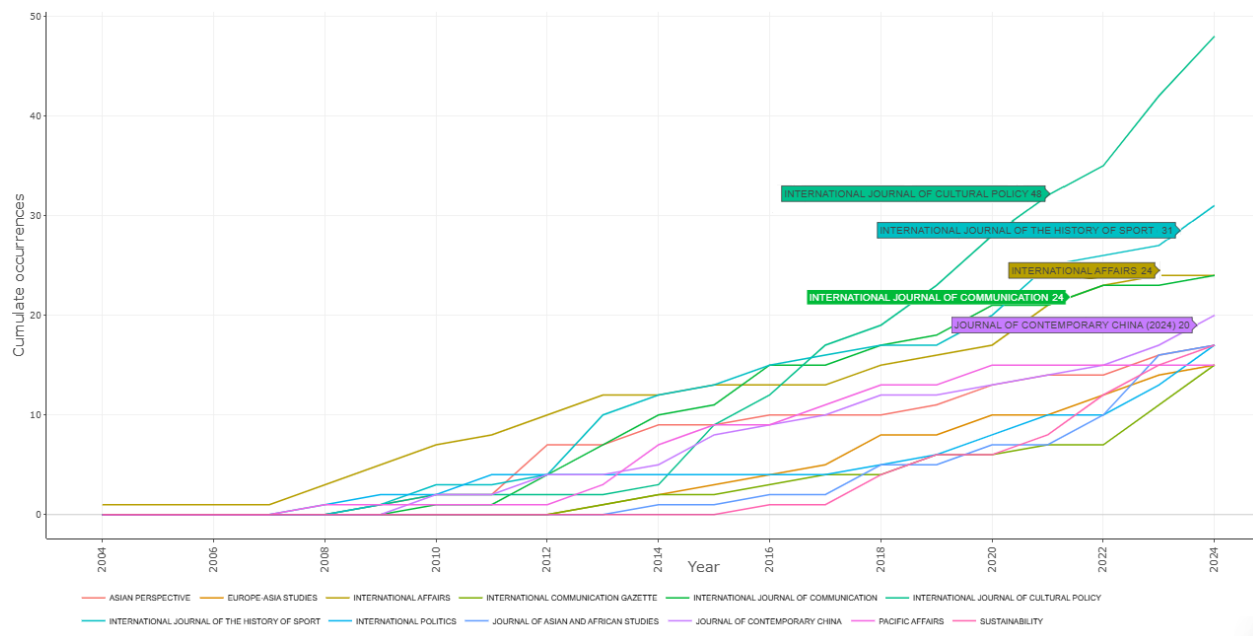


Figure 3. Journals' production over time.

Leading authors

The analysis of leading authors in soft power research highlights the contributions of both highly published and cited scholars in the field. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., emerges as the most influential figure in the field, ranking first in both total papers (10 articles) and total local citations (298). Nye's seminal contributions have also earned him the highest h-index (7) and the most significant global citation count (1,404), cementing his role as a foundational scholar in soft power studies (**Table 4**).

Nevertheless, ranking scholars solely by publication and citation counts risks overlooking foundational contributors and the lasting influence of their seminal works. Metrics privilege quantity and visibility but may underrepresent figures whose ideas shaped the field without sustained publishing output in Web of Science-indexed outlets. While this study maintains a quantitative approach for consistency, we acknowledge its limitations and caution that these rankings should be interpreted as partial indicators rather than definitive measures of intellectual impact.

Other prolific authors include Jonathan Grix and Xia Li, each with nine published articles, followed by Florian Hartig and Donald Lien, with 8 and 7 publications, respectively. Despite a slightly lower publication count, Yusaku Horiuchi and Bates Gill ranked second in local citations (71 each), reflecting their significant influence. Similarly, Richard Giulianotti and Benjamin E. Goldsmith show high local citation counts (67 and 65, respectively), emphasizing their impact despite fewer publications.

From a global citation perspective, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt and Filipe M. Santos follow Nye, with 673 global citations each, while Eytan Gilboa and B.M. Blechman contribute significantly, with 361 and 354 citations, respectively.

These findings underscore the dominance of a few key scholars, such as Joseph Nye, Andrew Grix, and Yoshiharu Horiuchi, in shaping the discourse on soft power. They also highlight the notable contributions of less-published yet highly cited authors who provide focused insights into specific dimensions of the field. This distribution reflects a balance between broad scholarly engagement and concentrated intellectual leadership in soft power studies.

Table 4. Leading authors with publications, citations, and impact factors.

Rank	Ranking by total papers		Authors	M.L.C.
	Authors	A.P.		
1	Nye, Joseph S., Jr.	10	Nye, Joseph S., Jr.	298
2	Grix, Jonathan	9	Gill, Bates	71
3	Li, Xia	9	Horiuchi, Yusaku	71
4	Hartig, Florian	8	Giulianotti, Richard	67
5	Lien, Donald	7	Goldsmith, Benjamin E.	65
6	Tella, Oluwaseun	7	Paradise, James F.	64
7	Wang, Yupeng	7	Mattern, Janice Bially	63
8	Akbar, Ali	6	Huang, Yanzhong	62
9	Brannagan, Paul Michael	6	Brannagan, Paul Michael	61
10	Guo, Chunyan	6	Wang, Yiwei	59
11	Hong, Xiaonan	6	Grix, Jonathan	58
12	Horiuchi, Yusaku	6	Blechman, Bm	56
13	Li, Jing	6	Cho, Young Nam	52
14	Ma, Li	6	Jeong, Jong Ho	52
15	Pamment, James	6	Li, Mingjiang	51
Rank	Authors	H.I.	Authors	M.G.C.
1	Nye, Joseph S., Jr.	7	Nye, Joseph S., Jr.	1404
2	Grix, Jonathan	6	Eisenhardt, Kathleen M.	673
3	Horiuchi, Yusaku	5	Santos, Filipe M.	673
4	Lien, Donald	5	Gilboa, Eytan	361
5	Pamment, James	5	Blechman, Bm	354
6	Szostek, Joanna	5	Grix, Jonathan	343
7	Tella, Oluwaseun	5	Simmons, Beth A.	319
8	Brannagan, Paul Michael	4	Kelley, Judith G.	318
9	Ding, Sheng	4	Hyde-Price, A	298
10	Goldsmith, Benjamin E.	4	Giulianotti, Richard	275

11	Pierro, Antonio	4	Palazzo, Guido	267
12	Servaes, Jan	4	Rasche, Andreas	267
13	Tsygankov, Andrei P.	4	Scherer, Andreas Georg	267
14	Bettine, Marco	3	Spicer, André	267
15	Breslin, Shaun	3	Brannagan, Paul Michael	246

Note: A.P.= Articles published; M.L.C.= Most local cited; H.I.= H-index.; M.G.C.: Most global citations

Most relevant affiliations in soft power research

The analysis of affiliations reveals the global distribution of leading institutions contributing to soft power research. The University of Jinan in China ranked as the most prolific institution, with 89 articles reflecting China's strong academic engagement in the field. Other Chinese institutions, such as Liaoning Technical University (21 articles), Zhejiang Normal University (20 articles), and Jinan University (18 articles), also feature prominently, highlighting China's significant focus on soft power research.

Internationally, the University of London in the U.K. is the second-most active affiliation, with 53 articles, followed by the University of California System (29 articles) and Harvard University (28 articles) in the U.S. These institutions have made robust contributions to the field. Additionally, the University of Texas System (27 articles) and the University of Oxford (22 articles) underscore the U.S. and U.K.'s roles in advancing global scholarship on soft power (Figure 4).

Australia's Deakin University also ranks among the top contributors, with 21 articles emphasizing the interdisciplinary and international nature of soft power research. These affiliations reflect diverse geographic and institutional representations, with significant contributions from both Western and Chinese universities, showcasing the field's global relevance and collaborative nature.

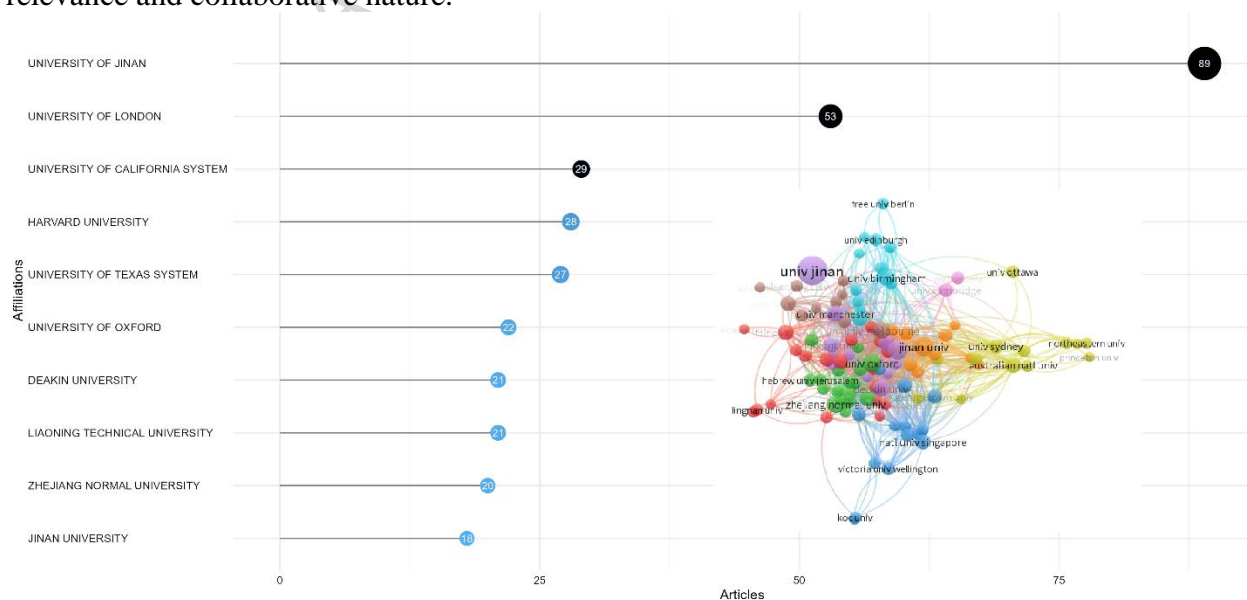


Figure 4. Most related to the affiliations.

Most cited countries in soft power research

The analysis of the most-cited countries highlights the global influence of academic research on soft power. The United States leads with the highest total citations (5,450) and an average of 16.60 citations per article, reflecting its dominant position in academic discourse on soft power. The United Kingdom is closely followed with 4,868 total citations and boasts the highest average citations per article (20.80), indicating the substantial impact of its work.

China ranked third with 2,236 citations; however, its average citations per article (3.20) were notably lower, suggesting a focus on volume rather than global citation impact. It also shows China's future. This further indicates that soft power research in China is poised for increased citation dominance and international collaboration, given its rapid academic growth and strategic focus, which began accelerating significantly after 2010. Other leading contributors include Australia (1,783 total citations, 14.70 average) and France, which stands out with the highest average article citations (44.50), reflecting the exceptional influence of fewer but impactful publications in the field.

Countries such as Türkiye (777 total citations, 14.40 average) and Korea (691 total citations, 15.00 average) exhibited moderate citation influence, along with Germany (622 total citations, 12.00 average) and Canada (552 total citations, 11.70 average). Denmark is distinguished by a high average citation rate (18.20), underscoring the significant impact of its contributions. These findings reveal the U.S. and the U.K. as dominant contributors to soft power scholarship, with emerging influences from China, Australia, and other European regions. They emphasized interdisciplinary and international engagement in the field (**Figure 5**).

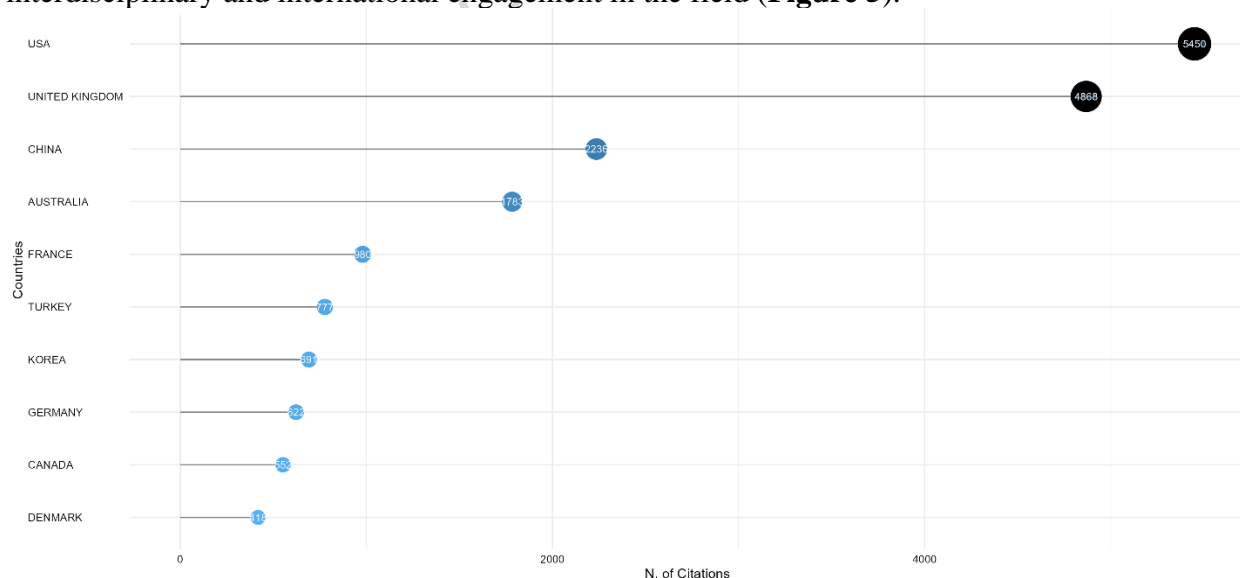


Figure 5. Most cited countries.

Top countries' academic production over time

The dataset illustrates the growing global engagement with soft power research, highlighting notable contributions from various countries between 2004 and 2024. By 2024, the total number of articles per country highlights cumulative academic output since the country's first publication. Leading the field, China has produced an impressive 977 articles, reflecting its rapid academic growth and strategic focus on soft power topics. This can be interpreted as a focus on volume over global citation impact and a largely domestic research agenda. This significant rise began post-2010, coinciding with China's expanding global influence and investment in cultural diplomacy. Xi Jinping, the President of China, has focused on soft power since taking office in 2013. The United States follows with 529 articles, demonstrating steady growth and reinforcing its leadership in international relations and soft power scholarship. This consistency reflects the long-established academic prominence of the U.S. in this field.

The United Kingdom ranks third, with 353 articles, showcasing a sustained focus on the cultural and policy-oriented aspects of soft power. The U.K. has a high average citation count (20.80), indicating that its work is highly influential despite the relatively small volume of publications. Among the emerging contributors, Australia stands out, with 186 articles, highlighting its growing interest in sustainability and regional diplomacy. Türkiye, with 83 articles, maintains a steady focus on regional soft power dynamics. Germany (86 articles) and South Korea (74 articles) also made notable contributions, particularly in the fields of cultural diplomacy and international relations.

The dataset reveals global diversification in soft power research. While traditional leaders such as the U.S. and the U.K. remain dominant, China's rapid ascent signals a shift in global research priorities. Emerging contributors such as Türkiye, South Korea, and Australia reflect the increasing interdisciplinary and regional interest in soft power as a vital instrument in international relations. This evolution underscores the field's dynamic, ever-changing nature (Figure 6).

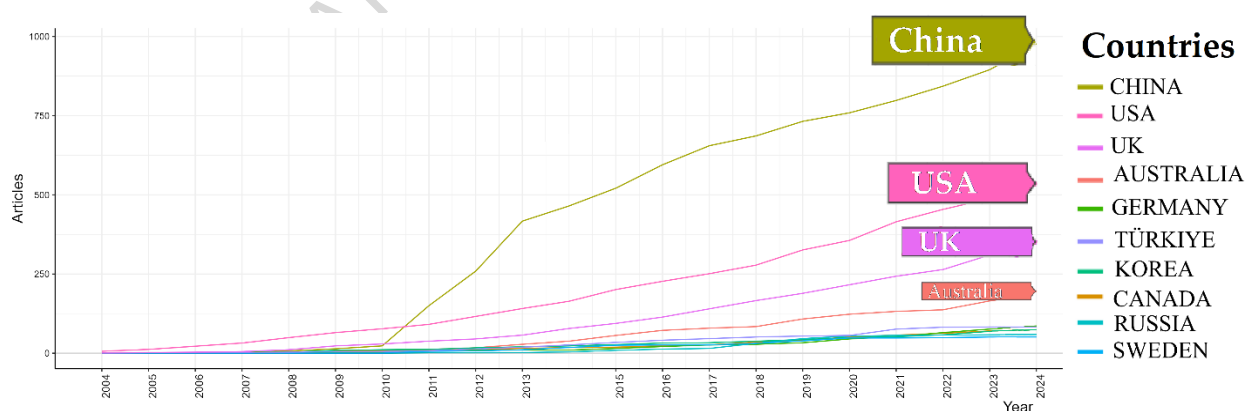


Figure 6. Countries' soft power production over time.

Corresponding authors' countries

Table 5 highlights the geographical distribution of corresponding authors in soft power research, differentiating between single-country publications (SCP) and multiple-country publications

(MCP). China led the field with 701 articles, accounting for 31.5% of total contributions. Of these, 653 are single-country publications, while 48 (6.8%) involve multiple-country collaborations, emphasizing domestic research with limited international engagement. The United States followed with 329 articles (14.8%), of which 15.2% (50 articles) involved international collaboration, reflecting its active participation in global research networks.

The United Kingdom ranks third, contributing 234 articles (10.5%), of which 20.1% (47 articles) are multi-country collaborations, highlighting its emphasis on international partnerships. Australia has a relatively high proportion of multiple-country collaborations, with 23.1% (28 articles) of its 121 publications featuring international co-authors, thereby showcasing its strong global academic connections. Similarly, Canada (29.8% MCP) and Korea (21.7% MCP) demonstrated significant international collaboration despite producing fewer outputs of 47 and 46 articles, respectively, compared to other countries.

In contrast, Russia (2.2% of MCP) and Spain (6.9% of MCP) exhibit minimal international engagement, with most of their outputs (44 and 27 articles, respectively) being single-country publications. These patterns reveal diverse collaborative dynamics across different countries. While China and the United States dominate in terms of volume, the U.S. shows greater international engagement. Countries such as Australia, Canada, and the U.K. display strong integration into global academic networks. Russia and Türkiye focus on localized research, reflecting regional priorities and the structure of academic networks in soft power research.

Table 5. Corresponding author's country.

Country	Articles	Articles %	SCP	MCP	MCP %
China	701	31.5	653	48	6.8
United States	329	14.8	279	50	15.2
United Kingdom	234	10.5	187	47	20.1
Australia	121	5.4	93	28	23.1
Türkiye	54	2.4	48	6	11.1
Germany	52	2.3	43	9	17.3
Canada	47	2.1	33	14	29.8
Korea	46	2.1	36	10	21.7
Russia	45	2	44	1	2.2
Spain	29	1.3	27	2	6.9

SCP: Single Country publication

MCP: Multiple Country publications

Note: Missing Corresponding Author data occurred in 256 documents (11.51% \leq 15%), meeting the pre-defined acceptable threshold.

International institutional-affiliation-based collaboration patterns in soft power research

The institutional collaboration network in soft power research (**Figure 7**) reveals a highly interconnected but unevenly distributed landscape of academic partnerships. Four primary clusters emerged, each characterized by distinct regional and interdisciplinary dynamics of the research. Cluster 1 is dominated by the U.K.-based institutions, with the University of

Birmingham (betweenness: 78.481, PageRank: 0.034) and Loughborough University (betweenness: 32, PageRank: 0.025) exhibiting significant collaborative ties, particularly with Danish institutions such as the University of Copenhagen (betweenness: 6.617, PageRank: 0.023) and Aarhus University (betweenness: 8.129, PageRank: 0.015). These institutions' moderate to high betweenness centralities underscore their roles as intermediaries, facilitating knowledge exchange across regions. Cluster 2 comprises a diverse mix of institutions from the U.K., U.S., SAR Hong Kong, and China, with the University of London (betweenness: 154.851, PageRank: 0.1) and Harvard University (betweenness: 115.316, PageRank: 0.032) serving as central nodes.

The high PageRank values of these institutions reflect their extensive influence, likely driven by robust collaborative networks and citation impact. SAR Hong Kong-based institutions, including the Education University of Hong Kong (betweenness: 62.123, PageRank: 0.035) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (betweenness: 49.975, PageRank: 0.027), also play pivotal roles, highlighting the region's strategic importance in soft power scholarship. Cluster 3 features the U.S. and Australian institutions, including the University of California System (betweenness: 49.372, PageRank: 0.03), and emerging Australian contributors, such as the University of Melbourne (betweenness: 18.855, PageRank: 0.025). Cluster 4 includes elite institutions such as the University of Oxford (betweenness: 24.395, PageRank: 0.016), University of Cambridge (betweenness: 44.652, PageRank: 0.035), and Fudan University (betweenness: 128.603, PageRank: 0.034), indicating strong transcontinental collaborations between Europe and Asia. This network reflects a globalized research field in which institutions in the U.K., the U.S., and China dominate as research hubs. However, the presence of smaller, less connected nodes suggests disparities in global engagement, mirroring broader patterns of academic influence.

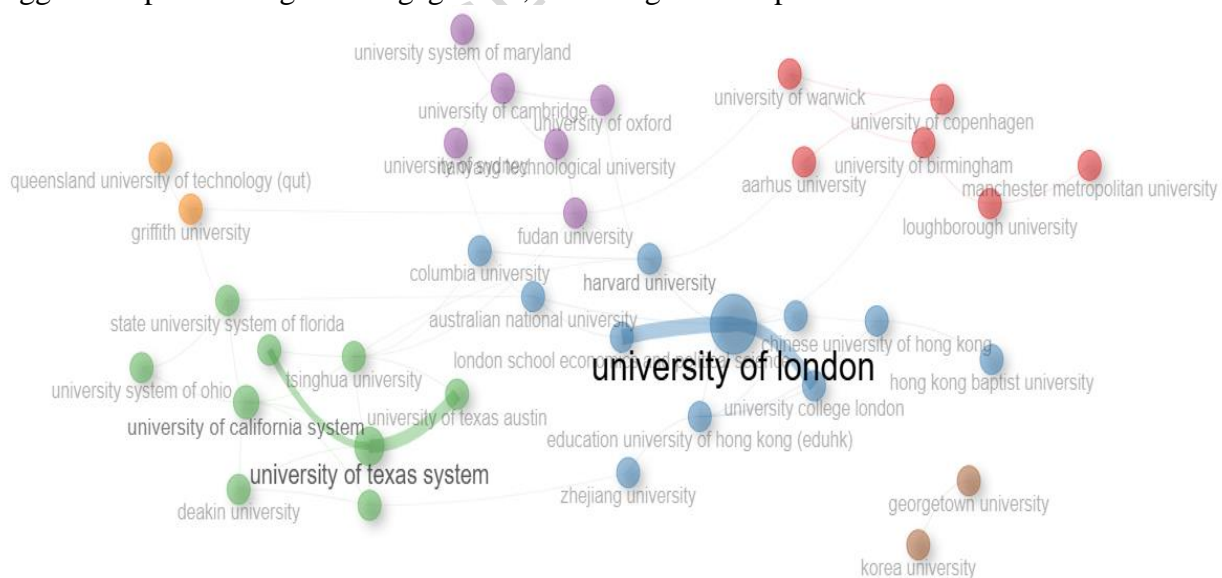


Figure 7. Institutional collaboration networks in soft power research.

Country-level collaboration patterns in soft power research

The country-level collaboration network in soft power research further elucidates global engagement, with a core-periphery structure evident in several clusters (**Figure 8**). Cluster 1 is

the most prominent, encompassing nations from North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania, with the United States (betweenness: 335.21, PageRank: 0.159), the United Kingdom (betweenness: 315.262, PageRank: 0.124), and China (betweenness: 179.679, PageRank: 0.106) as central actors. Their high betweenness centrality and PageRank values highlight their roles as primary connectors and influential players, linking diverse research communities in countries such as Australia (betweenness: 98.226, PageRank: 0.067) and South Korea (betweenness: 46.622, PageRank: 0.027). Cluster 2 focuses on European collaboration, with Germany (betweenness: 38.04, PageRank: 0.034) as the key node, though its lower PageRank suggests a more regionally constrained network. Cluster 3 included Denmark (betweenness: 55.259, PageRank: 0.026), Brazil (betweenness: 16.987, PageRank: 0.017), and Switzerland (betweenness: 26.195, PageRank: 0.023), with Denmark. Smaller isolated clusters, such as Cluster 5 (Turkey, betweenness: 46.341, PageRank: 0.016) and Cluster 6 (Russia, betweenness: 46, PageRank: 0.012), alongside countries such as India (Cluster 7, betweenness: 0, PageRank: 0.005) and Poland (Cluster 9, betweenness: 0, PageRank: 0.004), exhibit limited integration, reflecting geopolitical or structural barriers. This pattern underscores the concentration of soft power research in nations with significant global influence—namely, the U.S., the U.K., and China—while peripheral countries, particularly in the Global South, remain less connected, suggesting uneven global engagement that aligns with geopolitical and cultural power dynamics.

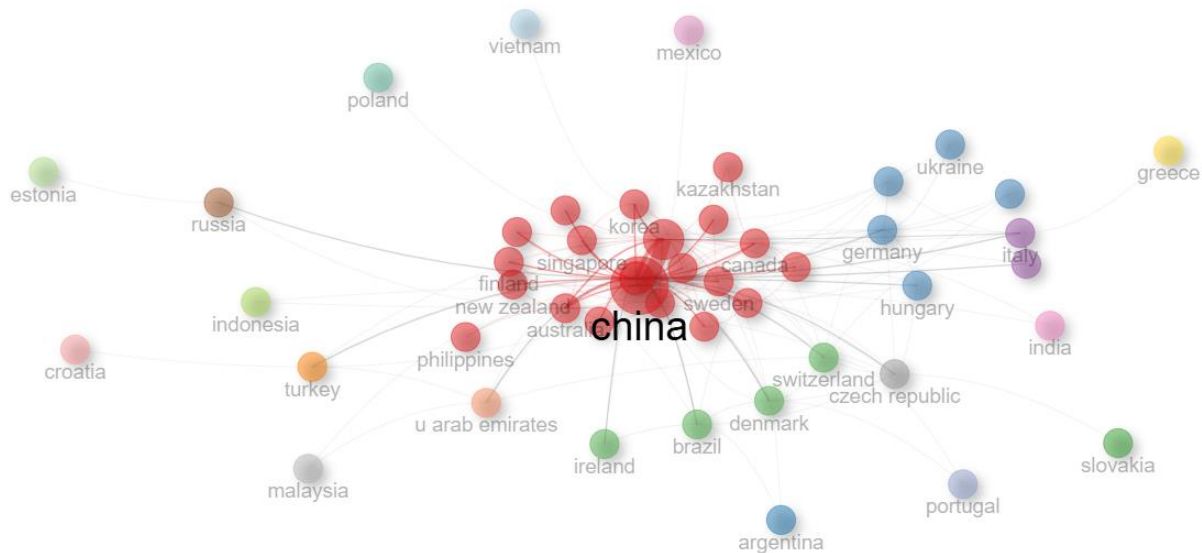


Figure 8. International cooperation network in soft power research (by country).

Collectively, these institutional and country-level collaboration patterns demonstrate that soft power research is a globally distributed field dominated by a few key hubs. The high centrality of institutions, such as the University of London, and countries, such as the U.S. and China, reflects their roles in driving international collaboration and shaping research agendas. However, the isolation of smaller clusters and peripheral nations indicates a disparity in their participation. This suggests that while soft power is a globally relevant concept, its academic exploration remains concentrated in regions with established academic and geopolitical influence, reflecting the broader dynamics of global engagement in the field.

Most globally and locally cited documents

Analysis of the most globally and locally cited documents highlights seminal contributions to the discourse on soft power. Among the most influential works, Joseph S. Nye Jr.'s (2008) article, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," stands out with 876 global and 185 local citations, underscoring its foundational impact on regional and international academic discussions among WoS core scholars. Its 21.12% LC/GC ratio demonstrates a balanced influence on local and global research communities.

Other prominent works include Filipe Santos and Kathleen Eisenhardt's (2009) study, which has garnered 673 global citations and a high normalized global citation score of 14.45, underscoring its significance in entrepreneurial and market-related soft power studies. Similarly, Eytan Gilboa's (2008) work on public diplomacy garnered 361 global and 47 local citations, reflecting its theoretical contributions.

Notably, Adrian Hyde-Price (2006) and Barry M. Blechman (2004) exhibit strong normalized global citation scores of 6.49 and 5.51, respectively, indicating their continued relevance to realist critiques and political strategy. In contrast, Yiwei Wang's (2008) article highlights China's rising soft power, with a high LC/GC ratio of 29.21%, and emphasizes its greater local impact relative to global citations (**Table 6**).

This analysis underscores the diverse theoretical and practical contributions of these documents and reveals their varying local-to-global citation dynamics. Some works have achieved broad international influence, whereas others resonate more locally in specific geopolitical contexts. These patterns highlight the interdisciplinary and evolving nature of soft power research.

Table 6. List of the most globally and locally cited documents on soft power.

Papers	Citations*		LC/GC Ratio (%)	Normalized Local Citations	Normalized Global Citations
	Local Citations	Global Citations			
Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2008. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." <i>The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> 616 (1): 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699 .	185 ①	876	21.12	12.78	12.87
Filipe Santos and Kathleen Eisenhardt. 2009. "Constructing Markets and Shaping Boundaries: Entrepreneurial Power in Nascent Fields." <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> 52 (4): 643–71.	5	673	0.74	0.81	14.45

<https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2009.43669892>.

Eytan Gilboa. 2008.

“Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (1): 55–77.

47 ⑨

361

13.02

3.25

5.30

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207312142>.

Barry M. Blechman. 2004.

“Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.”

Political Science Quarterly 119 (4): 680–81.

56 ⑥

354

15.82

5.25

5.51

<https://doi.org/10.1002/J.1538-165X.2004.TB01291.X>.

Adrian Hyde-Price. 2006.

“‘Normative’ Power

Europe: A Realist

Critique.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (2): 217–34.

8 ⑩

298

2.68

1.38

6.49

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500451634>.

Andreas Georg Scherer, Andreas Rasche, Guido Palazzo, and André Spicer.

2016. “Managing for Political Corporate Social Responsibility: New Challenges and Directions for PCSR 2.0.” *Journal of Management Studies* 53 (3): 273–98.

0

267

0.00

0.00

18.93

<https://doi.org/10.1111/JOMS.12203>.

Judith G. Kelley, and Beth A. Simmons. 2015.

“Politics by Number:

Indicators as Social Pressure in International Relations.” *American Journal of Political*

0

242

0.00

0.00

14.75

Science 59 (1): 55–70.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/AJPS.12119>.

Janice Bially Mattern.

2005. "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft:

Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics."

63③

229

27.51

12.95

9.39

Millennium: Journal of International Studies 33 (3): 583–612.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>.

Ben Crewe. 2011. "Soft Power in Prison:

Implications for Staff–

Prisoner Relationships,

Liberty and Legitimacy."

7

214

3.27

17.37

26.78

European Journal of Criminology 8 (6): 455–68.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370811413805>.

Yiwei Wang. 2008. "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power."

The ANNALS of the American

Academy of Political and

Social Science 616 (1):

257–73.

59 ⑤

202

29.21

4.08

2.97

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207312757>.

James F. Paradise. 2009.

"China and International

Harmony: The Role of

Confucius Institutes in

Bolstering Beijing's Soft

Power." *Asian Survey* 49

(4): 647–69.

64② ⑨

174

36.78

10.38

3.74

<https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2009.49.4.647>.

2009.49.4.647.

Bates Gill and Yanzhong

Huang. 2006. "Sources and

Limits of Chinese 'Soft

Power.'" *Survival: Global*

Politics and Strategy 48

62 ④

181

34.25

10.73

3.94

(2): 17–36.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330600765377>.

Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong. 2008. “China’s Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects.” *Asian Survey* 48 (3): 453–72.

52 ⑦

115

45.22

3.59

1.69

<https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2008.48.3.453>.

Hongying Wang and Yeh Chung Lu. 2008. “The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan.”

49 ⑧

96

51.04

3.39

1.41

Journal of Contemporary China 17 (56): 425–47.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560802000191>.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2009. “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power.”

47 ⑨

177

26.55

7.62

3.8

Foreign Affairs 88 (4): 63–66.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20699631>.

**Documents were initially sorted based on the number of global and local citations. Subsequently, it was observed that some documents were cited both locally and globally, prompting the merging of these entries. The most globally cited documents are arranged in descending order of citation count, whereas the most locally cited documents are indexed numerically.*

Locally cited references

Figure 9 highlights the most locally cited references, emphasizing the importance of foundational works on soft power, public diplomacy, and China’s global influence. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., a pivotal figure in soft power research, dominates the table with several highly cited publications that offer both theoretical frameworks and practical insights into power dynamics in international relations. Contributions from other scholars, including Joshua Kurlantzick and James F. Paradise, further explore the regional and thematic applications of soft power, with a particular focus on China’s strategies in this regard.

The most cited work by Nye, his book titled *Power in the Global Information Age: From Realism to Globalization*, with 330 citations, provides a comprehensive theoretical analysis of

power in the context of globalization. Similarly, Nye's journal article titled "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power (2008)," cited 185 times, extends his conceptualization of soft power in public diplomacy. Another seminal work, *Soft Power* (1990), with 172 citations, introduced the term and its significance for international relations.

Nye's books *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) and *The Future of Power* (2011), with 147 and 116 citations, respectively, examine shifts in the U.S. power. Beyond Nye, other influential works include Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (2007), which has 112 citations, and Paradise's work on Confucius Institutes (2009), which has 64 citations. Both offer critical perspectives on China's soft power initiatives.

Theoretical critiques and extensions, such as Mattern's article titled "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft" (2005), with 63 citations, and Gill and Huang's analysis of Chinese soft power (2006), with 62 citations, add depth to scholarly discourse on the complexities and limitations of soft power. This citation distribution underscores the enduring relevance of Nye's framework and its adaptability to an evolving global political context.

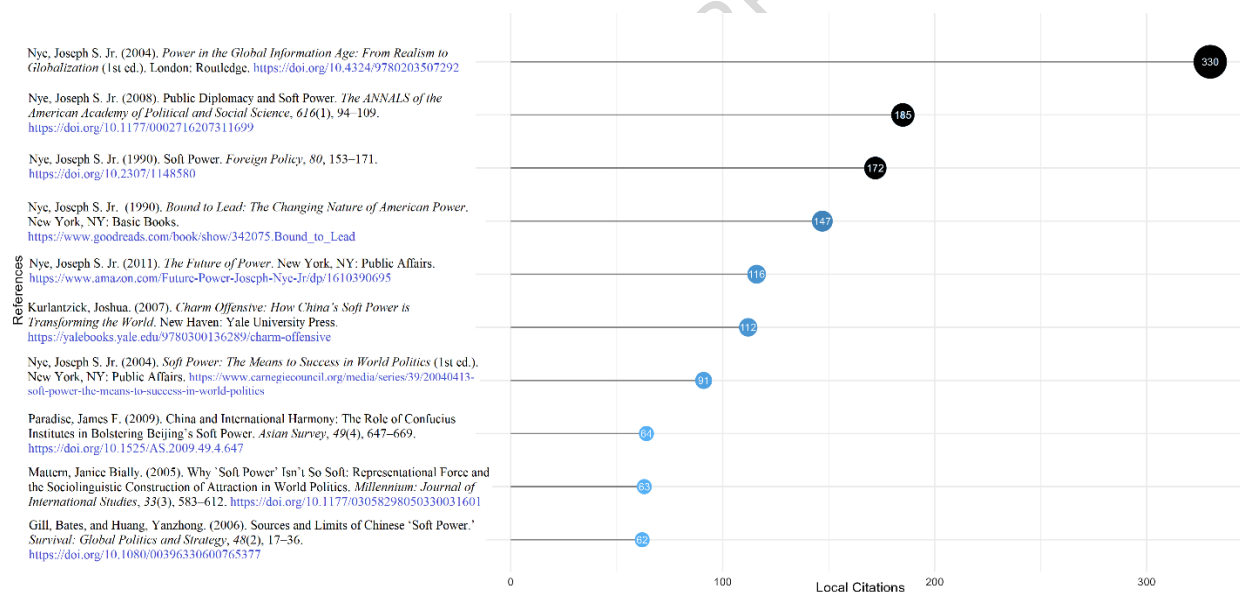


Figure 9. Most local cited references on soft power.

Thematic evolution of soft power research

Figure 10 depicts the thematic evolution of soft power research from 2004 to 2024, divided into five intervals: 2004–2012, 2013–2015, 2016–2018, 2019–2022, and 2023–2024. This progression reveals a dynamic shift in scholarly focus, reflecting the field's response to global political and cultural shifts.

Between 2004 and 2012, foundational themes such as "Confucius Institute," "cultural soft power," and "civil society" dominated discussions, highlighting early efforts to define and operationalize soft power in global governance and in China's cultural diplomacy. During 2013–

2015, the focus diversified to include “hard power,” “nation branding,” and “national soft power,” indicating a growing interest in contrasting soft power with traditional hard power and exploring its role in nation building.

By 2016–2018, new themes emerged, such as “socialist core values,” “Middle East,” and “communications,” reflecting soft power’s regional and ideological applications. The inclusion of “CSR” (Corporate Social Responsibility) and “Olympics” demonstrates the integration of soft power in non-governmental sectors, sports, and global image-building efforts.

The period 2019–2022 saw a surge in geopolitical themes like “BRICS” (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), “politics,” and “regional culture,” alongside key areas such as “sustainable development” and “China-Africa relations.” These trends underscore soft power’s role in addressing global challenges, fostering alliances, and being strategically deployed by emerging powers to achieve their goals.

In 2023–2024, attention shifted toward Global South-centric themes, including “civil society,” “Global South,” and “sports mega-events,” reflecting the growing academic focus on underrepresented regions and soft power in post-pandemic global relations. Meanwhile, themes such as “heritage diplomacy” and “Confucius Institutes” remain central, underscoring the lasting importance of cultural tools in soft power strategies.

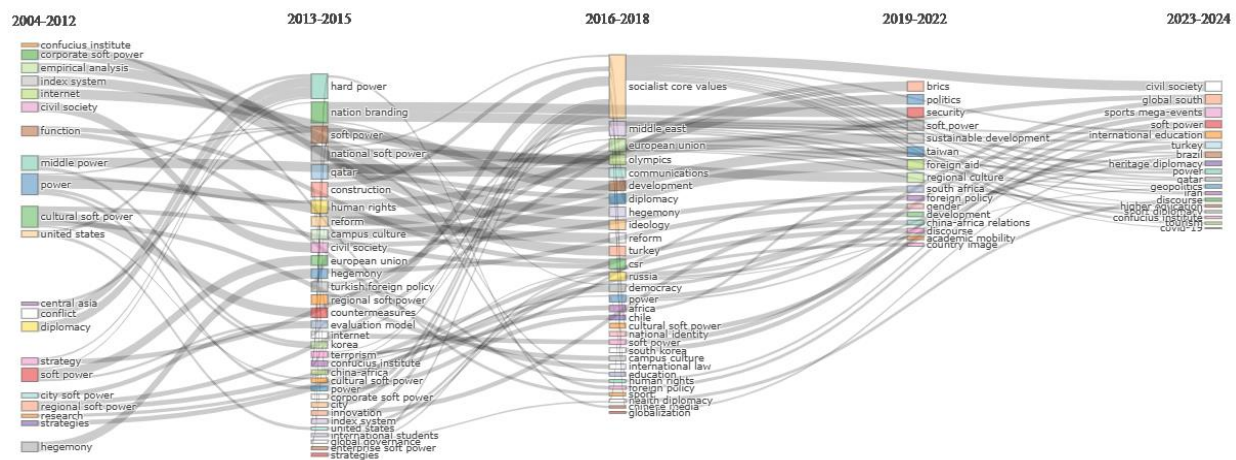


Figure 10. Thematic evolution.

Trending topics in soft power research

Figure 11 illustrates the longitudinal trends in key topics within soft power research, charting the evolution and diversification of scholarly interest from 2004 to 2024. The frequency and duration of terms reveal dynamic shifts in focus, with notable thematic patterns emerging over the past two decades.

During the early years (2004–2010), foundational themes such as “rising power,” “interpersonal power,” and “China’s rise” dominated, reflecting an emphasis on emerging powers like China as key case studies in international relations. Terms such as “integration process” and “mutual

cooperation” point to early explorations of the cooperative aspects of soft power in international relations.

Between 2010 and 2016, the field expanded significantly to include terms such as “smart power,” “public diplomacy,” and “nation branding,” highlighting the integration of soft power concepts into diplomacy, strategic influence, and national image-building. The emergence of “social media” and “Chinese media” during this period underscores the growing role of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and projecting soft power.

Post-2016, there was a marked increase in both the frequency and variety of topics, with terms such as “Global South,” “cultural heritage,” “international students,” and “power projection” reflecting a broader regional and cultural focus. Themes such as “foreign aid,” “public opinion,” and the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) underscore the significance of economic and cultural diplomacy in exerting influence.

From 2020 to 2024, recurring terms such as “cultural values,” “global economics,” and “country image” dominate, indicating a strong emphasis on the interconnected roles of culture, economics, and national image in soft power strategies. The prominence of “international relations” and “power bases” highlights the continued scholarly interest in the theoretical and practical dimensions of soft power in the evolving global order.

Overall, the analysis showcases the increasing complexity of soft power research, transitioning from conceptual foundations and single-region studies to more multifaceted approaches. These encompass Global South dynamics, media, education, and economic strategies, reflecting the field’s maturity and relevance to contemporary geopolitical and cultural challenges.

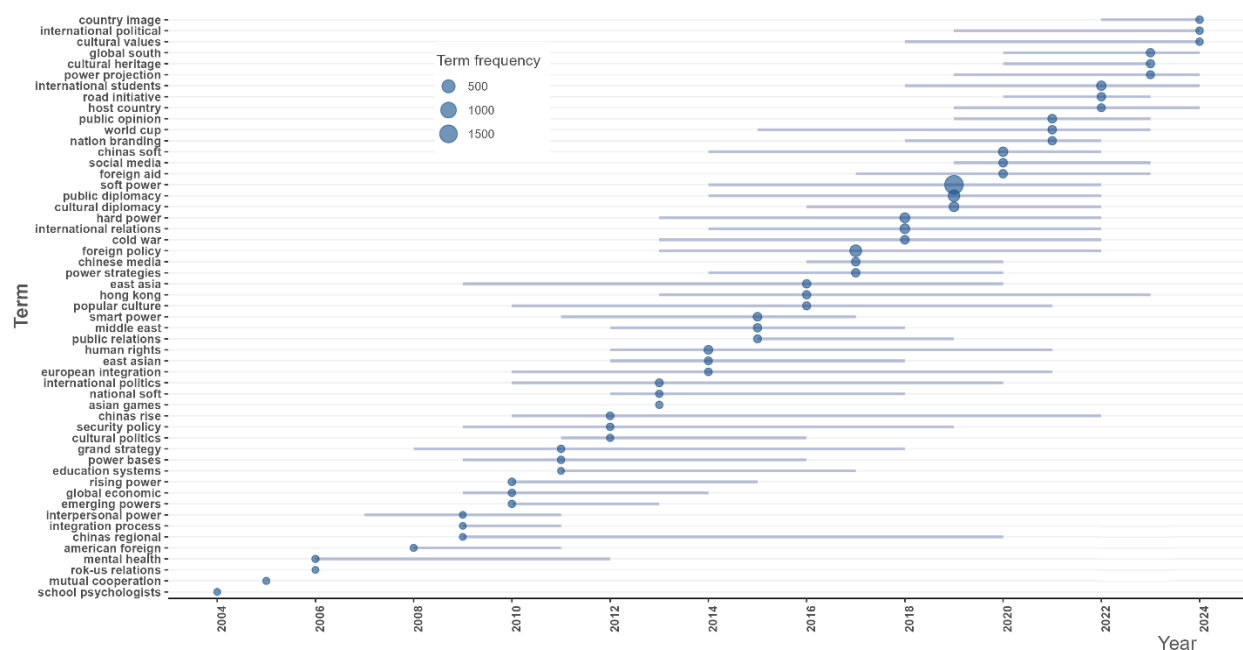


Figure 11. Trending topics.

Visualization of research themes

In the context of a strategic map, centrality and density are computed for each theme (Cobo et al., 2018). Centrality serves as an indicator of a theme's significance in advancing a particular field of knowledge. In contrast, density reflects the robustness of a network's internal connections, thereby indicating the degree of development of that theme. The strategic diagram categorizes themes into four distinct groups (Cobo et al., 2011). The upper-right quadrant contains motor themes characterized by high centrality and density. The upper-left quadrant includes themes that are well developed and/or isolated. Themes located in the lower-left quadrant are identified as either emerging or disappearing, whereas those in the lower-right quadrant are considered basic and transversal (García-Fernández et al., 2024).

Figure 12 presents a strategic map of soft power research themes categorized by relevance (centrality) and level of development (density). Quadrant analysis offers the following insights:

- **Motor Themes (High Centrality, High Density):** Dominant and well-developed themes such as “soft power,” “China,” and “public diplomacy” occupy this quadrant, underscoring their pivotal role in driving theoretical and empirical research across diverse contexts.
- **Basic Themes (High Centrality, Low Density):** Foundational concepts such as “cultural soft power,” “national soft power,” and “globalization” fall into this category. While central to the field, they remain underdeveloped compared to motor themes, suggesting potential areas for further exploration.
- **Niche Themes (Low Centrality, High Density):** Specialized themes, including “China-Africa relations,” “peaceful rise,” and “Beijing consensus,” are well developed but lack broader interdisciplinary or cross-regional influence. These represent specific domains that could benefit from their integration into mainstream research.
- **Emerging or Declining Themes (Low Centrality, Low Density):** Topics such as “empirical analysis,” “countermeasures,” and “index system” indicate declining interest or emerging significance. These areas may reflect methodological or niche issues that require further examination in future research.

The thematic evolution and strategic mapping highlight the expanding scope and interdisciplinary nature of soft power research. Over time, the focus has shifted from foundational cultural and institutional aspects to broader geopolitical, economic, and developmental applications of soft power. The growing emphasis on “soft power” in the Global South and among emerging powers underscores its value as a strategic tool in contemporary international relations (IR).

Motor themes such as “public diplomacy” and “China” continue to shape theoretical debates and empirical studies. However, basic themes such as “cultural soft power” and “national soft power” require further conceptual refinement and empirical testing to advance our understanding.

Niche themes such as “China-Africa relations” reveal regional applications that could be enriched by cross-disciplinary studies connecting soft power with sustainable development, governance, and global partnerships. The emergence of topics such as sports and heritage

diplomacy highlights innovative research pathways, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery and international cooperation.

This analysis offers a roadmap for future research, identifying gaps and emerging priorities for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to leverage soft power as a critical dimension of global influence.

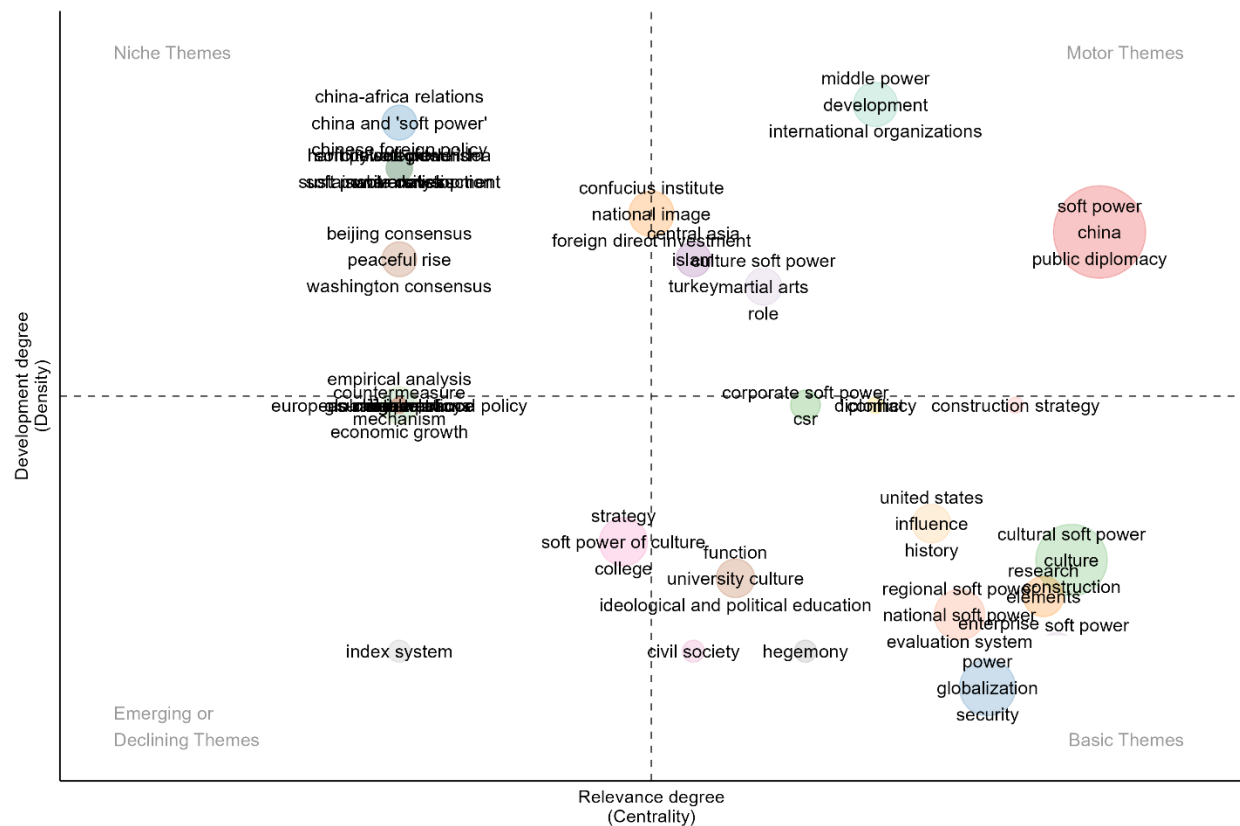


Figure 12. Strategic mapping of research themes.

Keyword co-occurrence analysis of soft power research

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords in **Figure 13** reveals the intellectual framework and thematic emphasis of soft power research. The keyword “soft power” dominated with 933 occurrences and a total link strength of 2,967, affirming its centrality in academic discourse. Closely following, “China” (254 occurrences; link strength: 1109) highlights the substantial focus on China’s soft power strategies as a key case study in contemporary research. In 2025, China’s soft power ranking rose to second; in 2010, it was 17th.

Other notable keywords included “public diplomacy” (174 occurrences; link strength: 723), “politics” (113 occurrences; link strength: 567), and “policy” (91 occurrences; link strength: 412), reflecting the intersection of soft power with political strategies and policymaking. Themes such as “cultural diplomacy” (74 occurrences; link strength: 302) and “security” (61 occurrences;

link strength: 291) emphasize the connection between cultural influence and global security concerns.

The presence of “foreign policy” (50 occurrences; link strength: 242) and “media” (51 occurrences; link strength: 258) underscores the significance of media and diplomacy in advancing soft power. Emerging topics, including “education” (56 occurrences; link strength: 229) and “identity” (57 occurrences; link strength: 318), highlight the growing focus on cultural identity and education as soft-power tools.

The network visualization reveals strong linkages between soft power and related concepts such as “globalization,” “strategy,” and “governance,” showcasing the field’s multidimensional and interdisciplinary nature. Keywords such as “Africa” and “regional soft power” point to a diversification of studies into regional contexts, broadening the empirical scope of soft power applications (**Figure 13**).

While “soft power” remains the conceptual anchor, research has expanded to encompass cultural, political, and regional dimensions, with China as the primary focus. The keyword co-occurrence network provides a comprehensive view of current research priorities and emerging themes, suggesting opportunities for further exploration of education-, identity-, and media-focused soft power strategies.

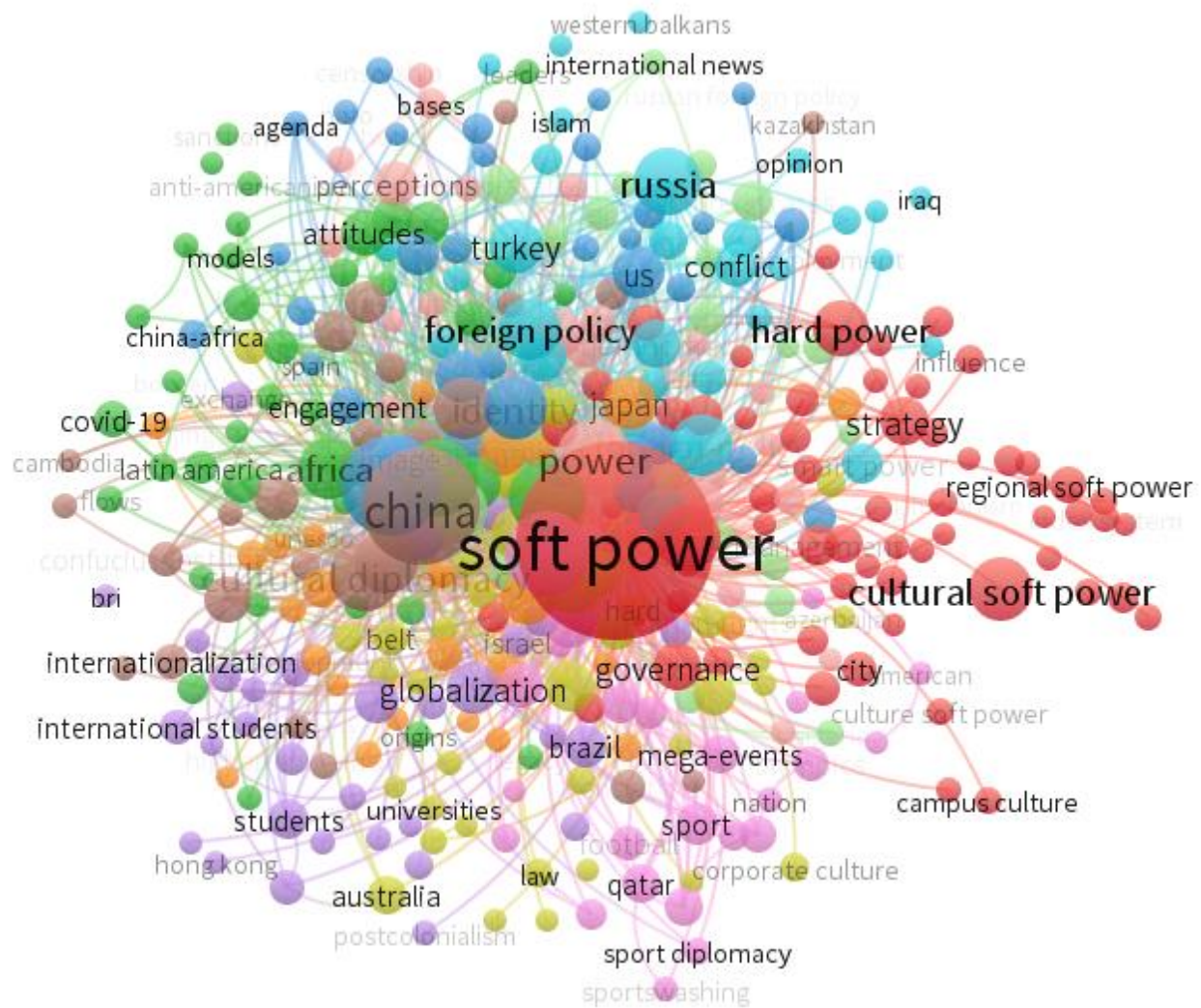


Figure 13. All keyword co-occurrence analyses.

Discussion

The findings underscore the dynamic, interdisciplinary, and geopolitically contextualized nature of soft power research. This bibliometric analysis of soft power research from 2004 to 2024 provides a systematic examination of its evolution, thematic diversity, and global contributions, addressing the study's core research questions. Drawing on 2,224 documents from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, the analysis reveals a robust annual growth rate of 13.97% in soft power scholarship, underscoring its increasing prominence in the academic discourse. This growth, which peaked notably in 2022 and continues its upward trajectory into 2024, reflects the increasing relevance of soft power amid globalization, technological advancements, and the intensifying U.S.–China geopolitical competition.

This study is significant because it clarifies how soft power has evolved from a conceptual tool into an interdisciplinary research field with discernible policy implications. By mapping the

global research landscape, it identifies not only where scholarly influence originates but also how ideas circulate across regions, reflecting broader geopolitical realignments and strategic rivalries. For scholars, this analysis highlights intellectual gaps, such as underexplored perspectives from the Global South, that offer fertile ground for theory building. For policymakers, understanding the distribution of knowledge production and collaboration patterns may inform strategic investments in education, culture, and diplomacy. Ultimately, this study positions soft power as a useful analytical lens for analyzing non-coercive influence in an increasingly competitive multipolar world.

A key finding was the geographical distribution of the research productivity and influence. The United States and the United Kingdom lead citation impact, with 5,450 and 4,868 total citations, respectively, highlighting their roles in shaping the conceptual and empirical foundations of soft power. Conversely, China dominated publication volume, contributing 977 articles, indicating its rapidly growing strategic emphasis on soft power as a tool of geopolitical influence. This divergence suggests distinct research priorities: Western nations focus on theoretical frameworks and the global dissemination of research findings. Simultaneously, China prioritizes operationalizing soft power through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Confucius Institutes. With respect to RQ2, this finding reveals that geopolitical competition translates into different national patterns of academic production—one emphasizing conceptual leadership and the other emphasizing strategic implementation. These differences underscore how research collaboration and citation impacts parallel broader alignments and divisions in global politics.

Thematic analysis, derived from keyword co-occurrence, identified “soft power,” “public diplomacy,” and “cultural diplomacy” as the field’s central pillars. These themes reflect a focus on non-coercive influence through cultural and diplomatic channels, with an interdisciplinary scope spanning international relations, communication studies, cultural policy, and sustainable development. The longitudinal analysis of thematic evolution indicates a marked shift from foundational concepts such as “cultural soft power,” “Confucius Institutes,” and “civil society” in the early 2000s to more contemporary foci, including “higher education,” “geopolitics,” “Global South,” and “sports mega-events” dynamics by 2024—demonstrating the field’s adaptability to contemporary global challenges. In relation to RQ1, temporal trends suggest that peaks in scholarly output correspond with significant geopolitical developments—including the 2013 launch of the BRI, the 2018–2019 U.S.–China trade tensions, and post–COVID-19 diplomatic recalibrations—indicating that academic attention to soft power is closely attuned to geopolitical change.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.’s foundational contributions remain unparalleled. Works like ‘Public Diplomacy and Soft Power’ (2008) and ‘Soft Power’ (1990) rank among the most cited globally and locally, continuing to anchor the discourse with strong local and global citation metrics. His enduring influence underscores the theoretical bedrock he provided, which subsequent scholars have built upon to explore the diverse applications of soft power. As for RQ3, the thematic emergence of competition-related topics—such as “BRI,” “Confucius Institutes,” and “digital diplomacy”—suggests a conceptual shift in soft power from the normative idea of attraction to a strategic instrument of influence. This evolution indicates that soft power scholarship

increasingly interprets cultural diplomacy, education, and media initiatives as part of a larger strategic rivalry rather than purely benign cultural exchanges.

The study's scope, limited to the WoS Core Collection over a 20-year period, offers a robust yet focused lens on high-impact research. However, this approach may exclude insights from other databases, non-English publications, or non-indexed publications, a limitation that is addressed later in this paper. Compared to prior bibliometric studies focusing on specific domains—such as Acar (2023) on leadership or Jeong et al. (2024) on sports diplomacy—this analysis contributes a broader, integrative perspective, situating soft power research within shifting global power structures. Overall, the findings across all three research questions indicate that the evolution, geography, and thematic orientation of soft power scholarship are intertwined with geopolitical developments and changing centers of influence.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this study offers a global perspective on the evolution of soft power research, providing insights into its thematic diversity, key contributors, and emerging trends. The findings show significant growth in scholarly interest driven by the increasing relevance of soft power in a strategically competitive, multipolar world. While the United States and the United Kingdom lead in global citation impact, China's rapid rise in academic production reflects its strategic focus on soft power as a geopolitical and discursive tool. With respect to RQ1, this growth trajectory aligns with periods of heightened geopolitical contestation, showing that global events and diplomatic strategies directly influence research intensity and themes. With respect to RQ2, cross-national comparisons reveal asymmetries in collaboration and influence that mirror the power differentials in world politics. With respect to RQ3, the prominence of competition-linked themes, such as the BRI, digital diplomacy, and Confucius Institutes, demonstrates the conceptual shift in soft power from an analytical proxy for strategic influence.

The results highlight the interdisciplinary nature of soft power research, which encompasses international relations, cultural diplomacy, communication studies, and sustainable development. Motor themes such as public diplomacy, China, and soft power continue to dominate. In contrast, emerging topics such as heritage diplomacy, sports diplomacy, and Global South dynamics offer new avenues for research. Collectively, these findings illustrate how academic knowledge production reflects and contributes to the evolving global narrative of influence, legitimacy, and rivalry.

By mapping the intellectual structure of soft power scholarship, this study offers a context-sensitive framework for advancing research in this field. It supports scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in understanding how soft power operates across academic, cultural, and geopolitical domains, while identifying gaps and emerging priorities. By linking bibliometric evidence to geopolitical trends, the study moves beyond descriptive mapping to illuminate how soft power functions as a site of negotiation and contestation among global actors.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretical implications

This bibliometric analysis enriches the academic understanding of soft power by systematically mapping its intellectual landscape over the past two decades. By identifying key contributors (e.g., Joseph S. Nye, Jr.), dominant themes (e.g., “soft power,” “public diplomacy,” “China”), and emerging trends (e.g., “Global South,” “sports diplomacy”), the study provides a foundation for refining theoretical frameworks. It also demonstrates that the theoretical development of soft power cannot be separated from the geopolitical context in which it is studied; its conceptual evolution reflects not only academic inquiry but also strategic narratives advanced by competing powers. It highlights gaps in the literature, such as underexplored regional perspectives and interdisciplinary connections, and offers researchers a basis for developing new studies that address these deficiencies. The thematic evolution from foundational concepts to contemporary applications underscores soft power’s dynamic role in international relations theory, particularly as a lens for interpreting the intersection of non-coercive influence and strategic competition in a multipolar world.

Practical implications

Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for policymakers, diplomats, and practitioners seeking to harness soft power. The prominence of themes such as “cultural diplomacy” and “public diplomacy” suggests that investments in cultural exports, education, and media can enhance national influence, as exemplified by the U.S.’s Hollywood and China’s Confucius Institutes (CIs). However, this study cautions that the credibility and reception of such initiatives depend heavily on the geopolitical environment and perceptions of intent. Understanding global collaboration patterns, such as the U.S.’s 15.2% and the U.K.’s 20.1% of multiple-country publications, can inform strategies to build international partnerships, fostering mutual benefit rather than unilateral influence. For emerging powers, particularly in the Global South, the study’s insights into emerging trends such as “sustainable development” and “heritage diplomacy” provide a blueprint for crafting soft power strategies that align with global priorities, thereby enhancing their geopolitical standing. In sum, the practical implications extend beyond cultural outreach to strategic positioning, showing that adequate soft power now requires both symbolic appeal and geopolitical sensitivity.

Limitations and future research

Limitations

The present study is limited to an analysis of the WoS Core Collection in the fields of social sciences, arts, and humanities. This constraint limits the analysis by excluding a broader range of scholarly resources. Future investigations could enhance the scope of research on soft power by incorporating additional databases, such as Scopus, which contains over 4,000 publications indexed under the term “soft power.” Furthermore, an intriguing avenue for future research lies in exploring Chinese-language databases based in China, such as the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Within CNKI, the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) includes more than 5,000 documents associated with the key term “软实力” (translated as “soft power”). Expanding research on these resources could provide valuable insights and address the

limitations of the current study, thereby enriching our understanding of soft power in diverse academic contexts.

In line with these contentions, it is essential to acknowledge that recent geopolitical developments have intensified global debates on soft power, particularly in nations such as China and the United States. Traditionally, soft power has been a key tool in foreign policy. However, its credibility has come under scrutiny as strategic narratives clash on the global stage. China's expansion of its international presence through initiatives such as the BRI has raised concerns about whether its cultural diplomacy serves coercive ambitions. The BRI extends infrastructure and trade links globally, enhancing soft power through economic influence and cultural outreach (Oo & Dai, 2025). Critics, however, argue that its investments in infrastructure and media are less about mutual benefit and more about cultivating dependency and strategic leverage, leading to growing mistrust of its soft power motives. In contrast, China has improved its ranking among the top soft power countries from 17th in 2010 to 2nd in 2025.

Similarly, the United States faces challenges. While it once enjoyed widespread admiration for its democratic values and cultural exports, recent foreign policy decisions, such as its shifting stance on multilateral agreements and visible internal divisions, have eroded its moral authority. Skepticism is rising in regions where the U.S. influence was once unchallenged. These tensions have led to a more cynical view of soft power, where cultural outreach and diplomatic engagement are increasingly seen as veiled instruments of geopolitical competition rather than genuine partnerships. Consequently, the concept of soft power now faces a credibility crisis. This geopolitical framing is central to interpreting the patterns observed in this study. This underscores that the credibility and function of soft power are contingent upon the evolving structure of global power relations.

Future research

One important avenue for future research is to explore the intersection of digital diplomacy and soft power in the context of digital media and artificial intelligence. As digital platforms become increasingly central to global communication and politics, the influence of social media and online public diplomacy on soft power is an underexplored yet crucial area. Future studies should assess how digital diplomacy reflects and amplifies geopolitical competition, potentially serving as a proxy battleground for influence between major powers. Future studies could examine how states, particularly emerging powers like China, utilize digital tools for strategic cultural diplomacy and the role digital diplomacy plays in shaping perceptions of global leadership in a multipolar world. Future research could also investigate how digital diplomacy supports traditional soft power concepts, such as cultural values and public diplomacy, and how it influences soft power strategies in a post-pandemic context.

Another significant direction for future research is to address the disparity in international collaboration within soft power scholarship, particularly in countries with high academic output, such as China. Despite China's leading role in soft power research, the low level of cross-country collaboration indicates a gap in the global academic networks. Future studies could focus on understanding the barriers to international co-authorship and propose strategies to enhance global scholarly exchange, particularly with Western scholars who dominate citation impact.

This aligns with the broader implications of RQ2, suggesting that bridging collaboration divides can mitigate the academic manifestations of geopolitical polarization. Future research could explore how increased international collaboration enriches theoretical development and produces more comprehensive global perspectives on soft power.

Finally, examining niche themes and Global South perspectives offers promising avenues for research. Emerging topics such as heritage diplomacy, sports mega-events, and the role of soft power in the Global South offer valuable insights into how different regions deploy soft power in unique ways. Future research could examine how countries in the Global South employ soft power strategies to assert their influence, particularly vis-à-vis the Global North. In addition, specific case studies, such as China-Africa relations or the Beijing Consensus, could benefit from broader interdisciplinary approaches, offering fresh perspectives on how non-Western powers shape global diplomacy through soft power. Such inquiries would also extend the implications of RQ3 by tracing how conceptual innovations in the Global South challenge, diversify, and potentially rebalance the prevailing Western-centric understanding of the soft power perspective. Exploring these niches can lead to a deeper understanding and more nuanced theoretical frameworks for soft power research.

ETHICS DECLARATIONS

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available via the following link:

https://osf.io/6ejns/overview?view_only=324181a555ab4e8fb84a586bef5e4a35

However, the data can also be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We thank the editorial team and anonymous reviewers for their valuable time and insightful suggestions.

Ethical approval

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

Informed consent

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

Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to this study and jointly supervised it. The cover letter provides detailed information about the authors' contributions.

Funding: The funding sources are included in the cover letter/title page to prevent a double-blind review from being compromised.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to XYZ (to prevent double-anonymized reviews).

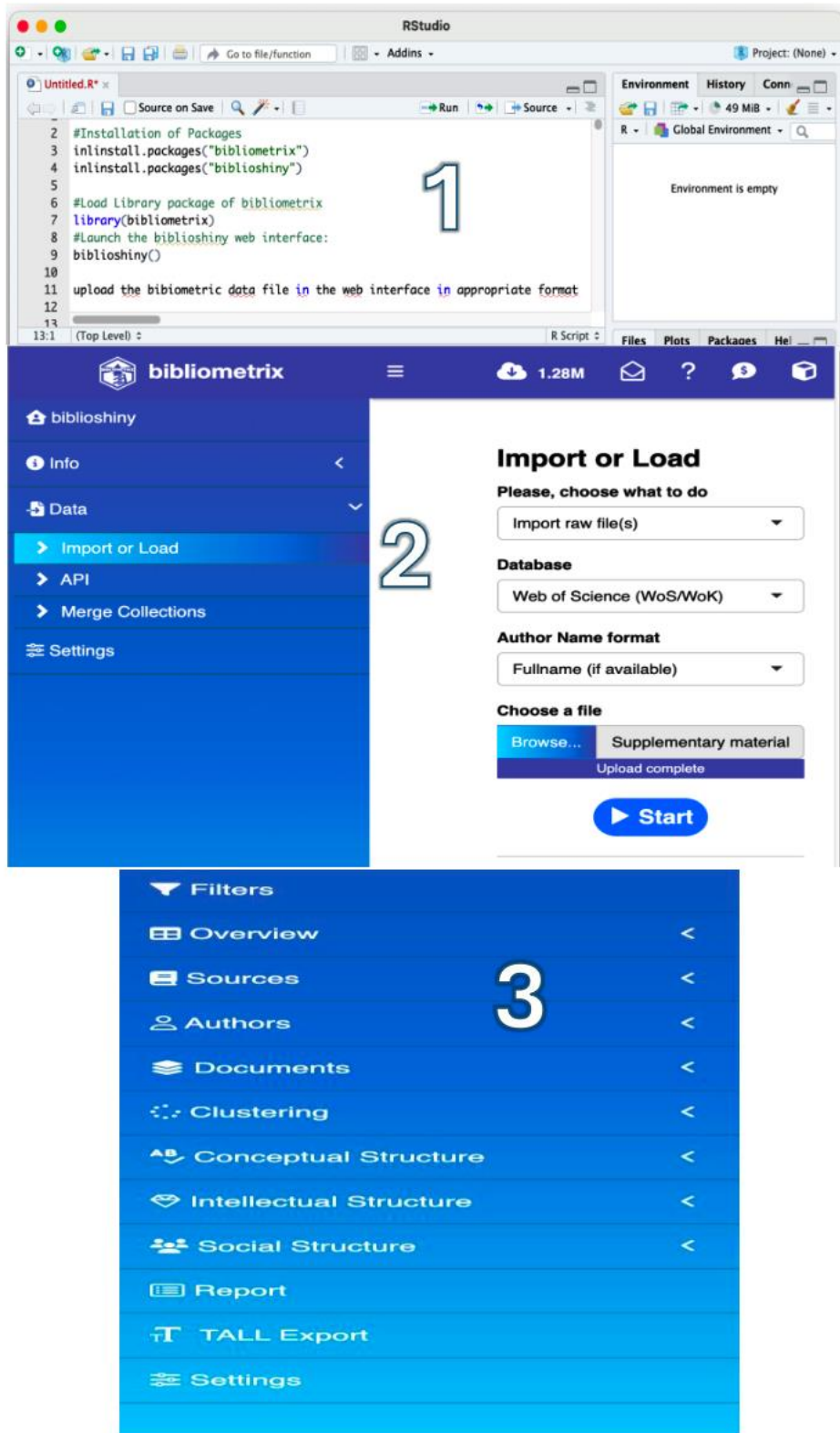
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Appendix A. Code syntax and workflow for Biblioshiny: A Shiny application for Bibliometrix.