

Play for Peace? South Korea's Esports Ecosystem as a Digital Soft Power Instrument for Promoting Global Citizenship

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Abstract

The rapid globalization of digital entertainment has led to the emergence of esports beyond their role as entertainment tools. In the current world, esports have become a hyper-competitive global industry and a critical civic arena where cross-border identities, values and cultural practices intersect. This paper examines South Korea's highly institutionalized esports ecosystem as one of the mechanisms of interactive digital soft power. This mechanism is designed to cultivate global citizenship, facilitate cross-cultural communication and drive youth engagement. By using qualitative case study of South Korean sports-diplomacy materials, state-backed institutional frameworks and landmark public events, this paper investigates how virtual play is mobilized to shape the perceptions of transnational youth demographics. The paper integrates Joseph Nye's Soft Power theory with the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) framework, to answer the main question: "How does South Korea leverage its esports ecosystem as an interactive digital soft power instrument to foster global citizenship?" The paper argues that South Korea's esports model serves as a participatory digital platform that operationalizes the Contact Hypothesis in virtual spaces. This eventually enables a bottom-up intercultural dialogue, community-building and a shared global vocabulary. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how digital youth cultures can transcend traditional, physical-centric sports diplomacy, offering a replicable, state-sanctioned blueprint for deploying esports to foster inclusive forms of global citizenship and transnational belonging.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, esports for development and peace, digital soft power, global citizenship, South Korea

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Introduction

The global information revolution has decentralized and leveled the international stage, by lowering market entry costs and reducing the reliance on physical resources. The revolution also turned soft power into a tool for nation branding, allowing states to proactively manage their reputation to attract foreign visitors, investments and supporters. At the same time, the expansion of the digital economy has created other forms of soft power, known as digital soft power. Under these new forms, the digital technologies including social media, big data and artificial intelligence, are being utilized to actualize public diplomacy. Similarly, the rise of the digital economy also extended sports diplomacy into the virtual realm, through esports.

South Korea has a long history as the global pioneer of soft power projection through a collaboration between the public and private sectors. For instance, President Kim Dae-jung, following the 1997 financial crisis, identified the cultural industry as the new core of economic growth. The administration significantly increased budgets and enacting the “Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion” in 1999 (Sari, 2025). Currently, South Korea is viewed as the birthplace of modern esports, presenting an institutionalized blueprint for other nations seeking to develop their own infrastructures. In 2000, South Korea created the world’s first national-level esports association, KeSPA, which standardized rules and professionalized players, ahead of other countries (Chung, 2021). By integrating electronic gaming into its national branding and public diplomacy portfolio, the country has elevated esports from a commercial entertainment or subculture into a hyper-institutionalized, state-sanctioned instrument for international outreach.

This paper examines South Korea’s unique esports ecosystem as a significant mechanism of interactive digital soft power. Rather than treating esports merely as a digital economy sector, this paper re-conceptualizes the Korean esports industry as a strategic, transnational platform purposefully designed to cultivate global citizenship, facilitate cross-cultural communication and institutionalize new modalities of youth engagement.

Literature Review

Soft Power and Hallyu

Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power focuses on the ability to affect the behavior of others to achieve desired outcomes, emphasizing the differences with hard power. Hard power relies on coercion through military force (sticks) or inducements through economic payments (carrots). Soft power, on the other hand, relies on the capacity to influence others through attraction and persuasion (Solomon, 2014). According to Nye, a state’s ability to attract others depends primarily on three resources (Solomon, 2014). First is through culture, referring to the set of practices and values that create meanings for a society. Second is through political values, where a nation gains soft power when it lives up to its stated values such as democracy and human rights, both domestically and internationally. Third is through foreign policies, where policies that are viewed as legitimate and having moral authority serve as powerful soft power assets.

South Korea has shifted from a security- and export-driven state to a collaborative mode of cultural governance that utilizes the global Hallyu (Korean Wave) as a strategic soft power resource. Within this digital K-content framework, esports emerged as an interactive, globally networked arena that amplifies South Korea’s cultural visibility, especially among youth.

Esports also act as a participatory extension of the broader K-content wave, moving it beyond passive consumption to active community engagement and national branding (Bandopadhyay, 2026).

The Hallyu has expanded from early TV dramas to music, digital games and animation as key export industries. The Hallyu has evolved through four distinct periods, where each period helped expand the country's global footprint. Most of the journalists and researchers identify that Hallyu 1.0 is around the late 1990s to mid-2000s (Jang & Kim, 2024). This observation is based on the popularity of the Korean drama *What is Love?* in China, which was broadcast nationally via China Central Television. At the same time, *Winter Sonata* also successfully captivated Japanese viewers, broadcast via NHK several times between 2003 and 2004 (Jang & Kim, 2024). Hallyu 2.0 existed between mid-2000s to early 2010s, driven by the K-pop explosion and the rise of global idol groups (Jang & Kim, 2024). Driven by social networking sites and the smart phone, the vogue of Hallyu 2.0 reached worldwide, extending its influence beyond the East Asia.

In the early 2010s to 2019, Hallyu 3.0 was characterised by “K-culture”, where the prefix “K” became a national brand, covering food, fashion and beauty. Hallyu 4.0, from 2019 to present, is characterized by “K-style” and global mainstreaming, with films like *Parasite* showcasing its influence through global digital platforms (Ganghariya et al., 2020). The main differences between Hallyu 3.0 and Hallyu 4.0 can be seen in their digital reach and platform sovereignty, where Hallyu 3.0 utilised SNS to spread K-pop and dramas globally. Hallyu 4.0, on the other side, built on the instantaneous global circulation made possible by streaming sites like Netflix (Jin et al., 2023) and specialised fan platforms like Weverse (Bollmer & Tillerson, 2025).

South Korea also leverages esports as a unique participatory extension of Hallyu, as esports also build on transnational digital infrastructures that facilitate instantaneous cultural exchange. The international esports tournaments, such as the League of Legends World Championship, serve as a tool of public diplomacy and a channel of international influence (Bandopadhyay, 2026). At the same time, elite players, for instance Faker, serve as cultural ambassadors, paralleling the diplomatic roles of K-pop icons. Unlike music and film audiences, esports fans are described as active participants who contribute to the development of the brand's identity within the game's ecosystem (Calapez et al., 2023).

The Sport for Development and Peace and Esports

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiatives commonly use the popularity of sport to attract marginalized youth and then work toward outcomes like health promotion, social inclusion and peacebuilding (Van Der Veken et al., 2020). Foundational literature in SDP describes sport as a strategic “hook” or “fly paper” designed to attract youth into structured environments, where prosocial messages can be delivered (Coalter, 2010). According to Fred Coalter (2010), how sports is utilized as an enticement can be understood through three program types: (1) plus-sport; (2) sport-plus; and (3) traditional sport. Under plus-sport programs, sport acts primarily as “fly paper” to attract youth to non-sporting interventions, with the systematic development of sport rarely a strategic aim. Sport-plus initiative adapts sports and augments them with parallel programs to maximize developmental objectives. Traditional sport model assumes that participation in sport possesses inherent developmental properties, such as character building, without requiring modified curricula.

Sports sociologists and philosophers have historically dismissed video games as legitimate sports primarily due to the “Achilles heel” of esports, which is the absence of visibly active, whole-body performance that characterizes traditional sporting ontologies. Parry (2018) argues that while gaming requires skills, it is limited to fine motor skills, such as finger and hand movements, rather than the decisive whole-body control required of an Olympic athlete. Hence, video gaming was stereotyped as a passive activity that failed to meet the “kinesthetic quality” at the hub of sport rhetoric (Witkowski, 2012), putting it as mere games rather than athletic activities (Parry, 2018). Some scholars suggest that competitive gaming operates in the “dysopticon”, a concept defined by the absence of a surveyed physical body (Riatti & Thiel, 2021). Different from traditional sports which are governed by centralized bodies, the authority in gaming is often concentrated in private publishers who prioritize commercial interests rather than social behavioral standards.

Despite these historical dismissals, there is emerging work arguing that key Sport for Development and Peace mechanisms, such as social inclusion, social capital and personal development can be realized in esports. Hayday et al. (2023) locate esports within Sport for Development (SfD), proposing an “esports Sport for Development (eSfD) model” treating esports as a mechanism to support human development and social inclusion outcomes. A scoping review on esports concludes that people engage in esports for motives similar to those in traditional sports, and develop communicative, cognitive and fine-motor skills while also posing risks (Riatti & Thiel, 2023), paralleling the mixed outcome profile in SDP. At the same time, SfD initiatives are increasingly using esports as a “hook” to engage vulnerable youth (Hayday et al., 2023). For instance, esports education for vulnerable Danish youth can be interpreted as social inclusion, helping them bridge between leisure and education, acting as a “springboard to participate in new communities” (Hanghøj et al., 2025).

Global citizenship education (GCE) aims to equip people of all ages with the tools they need to build more peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies both locally and globally. Esports facilitate this through several mechanisms. The first mechanism is transnational community building (Bandopadhyay, 2026). Different from traditional media, esports foster active participation and real-time interaction, allowing the participants to form social bonds across borders. The second mechanism is through the neutralization of physical barriers. The virtual nature of esports provides a digitally standardized environment where performance is realized through avatars, offering groups marginalized by physical ability, gender or age a platform for inclusive participation (Hayday et al., 2023). The third mechanism is the fostering of global competencies. Participation in esports has been linked to the development of 21st-century skills (Jensen et al., 2024), including communication, collaboration and strategic thinking. These skills are especially essential for navigating a hyper-connected global society.

Conceptual Framework

The Strategic “Why”: Utilizing Soft Power Theory

This dimension draws on Joseph Nye’s conceptualization of soft power, wherein a state’s influence is derived not from coercion or payment, but through the ability to shape the preferences of others by attracting them to its culture, political values, and foreign policies. Within this study, soft power theory explains the state’s motivation to enhance its national image and international perception. By leveraging esports as a cultural export, the South Korean government aims to foster international affinity and strengthen its position within the global digital landscape.

The Sociological “How”: Integrating the Sport for Development and Peace Framework

This dimension employs the SDP paradigm to analyze the mechanism of peace-building and social cohesion. Central to this framework is the concept of sport as a “hook” to attract diverse audiences and facilitate structured social outcomes. This research adapts the SDP framework to the digital realm, examining how organized competitive esports structures can foster intercultural contact, community building, and mutual understanding. By moving beyond the “physical bias” of traditional sport, this study posits that digital arenas serve as viable sites for achieving developmental objectives, such as global citizenship and cross-cultural communication.

Synthesis: The Convergence of Soft Power and SDP

The framework culminates by synthesizing these two approaches to address the research gap: the intersection of national branding and social development. While soft power focuses on the state’s intent to cultivate international appeal, the SDP framework illuminates the mechanisms of engagement that translate this appeal into tangible social interaction. Together, they provide a multi-dimensional lens to evaluate how South Korea deploys esports as both a tool for strategic nation-branding and a vehicle for transnational peace-building. This dual-pronged approach reflects broader shifts in digital diplomacy, where states leverage esports to project cultural capital while simultaneously navigating the tensions between state-driven sovereignty and the platform-based commercial models managed by private publishers (Luguterah, 2025).

Methodology

This research adopts a single-instrumental qualitative case study design, in which the Worlds 2023 fan festival at Gwanghwamun Square functions as the empirical case selected specifically for its capacity to illuminate the theoretical propositions developed in the conceptual framework. The case boundary is defined by four-day festival operations in November 2023, encompassing both Riot Games' official event infrastructure and the Seoul Metropolitan Government's public permitting and security arrangements, as captured in the official Riot Games news release and the press reporting on the civic takeover.

Data collection triangulates three sources: (i) observational evidence from the official festival press release and Riot Games public communications; (ii) secondary media reporting describing fan attendance, demographic composition and cross-national participation at the square; and (iii) institutional documents consisting of the 1999 Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion and KeSPA's 2000 founding mandate, which together establish the policy backdrop against which the empirical events are interpreted. While primary ethnographic fieldwork was not conducted at the site, the combination of these three sources permits a structured reconstruction of the public event and its policy scaffolding within the boundaries of a publicly available dataset.

The analytical strategy is directed qualitative content analysis, in which empirical observations from the case are systematically mapped onto the theoretical propositions outlined in the conceptual framework. Specifically, each empirical observation is coded against: (a) the three resources of soft power, namely culture, political values and foreign policy; (b) the three program types of SDP, plus-sport, sport-plus and traditional sport; and (c) the structural empathy and shared participatory ritual mechanisms theorized in the

literature review. Coding decisions were documented in an audit trail to enable transparency for replication. This procedure ensures that the empirical evidence from Worlds 2023 is interpreted not as raw description, but as a critically informed illustration of how a state-sanctioned esports event can simultaneously discharge the analytical functions of soft power and SDP within a single civic infrastructure.

The methodological choice carries one explicit limitation. Worlds 2023 is a single, exceptional case granted unique civic privileges; analytic generalization, rather than statistical generalization, is therefore the valid inference mode. The aim of the analysis is not to claim that all esports events reproduce these dynamics, but to demonstrate that under specific state-sanctioned conditions, the convergence of soft power and SDP mechanisms in esports is theoretically coherent and empirically observable.

Finding

Case: Worlds 2023 at Gwanghwamun Square

In November 2023, Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square, which is known as the historic, cultural, and political heart of South Korea, was converted into four-day public fan festival celebrating the League of Legends World Championship (Riot Games, 2023). It was the first time the Seoul Metropolitan Government allowed an esports event to fully occupy the arena, making it one of the historic milestones. Historically, Gwanghwamun Square has been reserved for monumental national events, political demonstrations and profound cultural displays. The South Korean state signaled a shift in its nation-branding strategy by dedicating this physical center to a virtual tournament. The event offers a case study of how digital sport can be integrated into physical spaces to achieve the core objectives of the SDP framework.

Traditional SDP literature emphasizes the importance of community spaces in post-conflict zones. The Gwanghwamun Square reframes this geographical constraint. The South Korean government utilised its advanced national telecommunications network, turning an existing urban space into a digital amphitheater instead of building a separate physical infrastructure. The large-scale viewing screens, gaming zones and cultural exhibition booths replaced the traditional sports fields, demonstrating how esports function within the SDP framework. Esports serves as the "Hook", capturing the youth attention by operating entirely within its dominant cultural language. At the same time, the public takeover brought the digital experience directly into the open air, exposing diverse demographics to the collaborative dynamics of competitive gaming. This helps fulfill the SDP mandate of deploying sport as a mass public engagement mechanism.

Another core pillar of the SDP framework is universal access, which ensures that socio-economic barriers do not limit participation. In traditional international sporting events, some marginalized groups are often excluded due to high ticket prices and limited access to elite stadiums. In order to address this limitation, the Seoul Metropolitan Government made the Gwanghwamun Square festival free and open to the public. The venue served as a street viewing party, providing a free option for fans to watch the event on a large screen. The layout allowed thousands of international tourists, local youths and casual passersby to mingle on equal footing.

South Korea has increasingly utilized interactive and participatory cultural initiatives to enhance its international presence. With the establishment of a highly accessible public zone,

the state cultivated a sense of global citizenship. This can be seen where fans from different nationalities not only watched a screen, but also actively participated in a shared global “ritual”. This shared participation built mutual empathy and a unified, transnational youth identity that bridges linguistic and geographic diversity. At the same time, during the tournament, the square became a neutral ground where the typical geopolitical friction of Northeast Asia was minimized. Fans from China, Japan, South Korea and other states stood side-by-side, wearing the same team apparel, celebrating the same in-game achievement.

By hosting the event, South Korea demonstrated a movement beyond the cessation of hostilities characteristics of negative peace. Instead, they bring it toward the structural integration that defined as positive peace (Galtung, 1969). The shared cross-cultural celebration in a highly symbolic civic space marked beyond the absence of conflict. At the same time, it serve as the generation of structural empathy among global youth, representing one of the first cases in which cooperative contact was deliberately cultivated within an entirely digital, commercially governed arena.

Discussion

Restating the central question, South Korea leverages its esports ecosystem as an instrument of interactive digital soft power to foster global citizenship. First, the South Korean government institutionalizing competitive esports as a state-supported cultural export within the Hallyu portfolio, communicating national brand value through culture rather than coercion. Second, the opening of digital arena to physical civic space, as demonstrated by the 2023 takeover of Gwanghwamun Square, allow the conversion of esports from a spectator sport into a contact-based. This structured participation ritual makes the transnational empathy becomes an observable and replicable social outcome.

A persistent objection within sports sociology argues that competitive gaming lacks the ontological legitimacy of “true” sport. Parry (2018) contends that esports depend on fine motor skills alone, rather than the decisive whole-body control that defines Olympic competition, while Witkowski (2012) and Riatti and Thiel (2021) extend the critique by characterizing esports as operating in a “dysopticon”, defined as an environment governed by commercial publishers rather than centralized sport bodies. At the same time, the surveyed physical body itself is absent. The Worlds 2023 case does not refute these distinctions, instead, it relocates them. The Gwanghwamun takeover demonstrated that the developmental mechanisms identified in SDP scholarship, such as universal access, structured social interaction and public community building, do not require whole-body physical exertion to be operationalized. What the Square substituted for “kinesthetic quality” was the participatory co-presence of diverse national bodies at a shared civic screen. For instance, the Chinese, Japanese and Korean fans stood side-by-side wearing identical team apparel, in identical structured rules, inside an identical physical demarcation of public space. The findings therefore suggest that the developmental logic of sport is more portable than its ontological definition has assumed, where a portability that the eSfD framework explicitly anticipates.

The transition from the passive cultural consumption of early Hallyu generations to the interactive engagement of esports signalled that South Korea does not merely project its culture. At the same time, South Korea provides a highly regulated and structural space, allowing international youth to actively participate. Instead, it is anchored in the state’s capacity to build inclusive, democratic and technologically advanced platforms that address the social needs of a globalized digital youth culture.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the intersection of digital soft power, sports sociology, and public diplomacy and addresses a central question. By analyzing the South Korean esports ecosystem through the dual lenses of Joseph Nye's Soft Power theory and the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) framework, this study illuminates a structural evolution in international relations. South Korea's intentional orchestration of virtual environments proves that esports is no longer merely a commercial enterprise or a sedentary pastime. Instead, it serves as a highly institutionalized, interactive soft power mechanism capable of fostering global citizenship, cross-cultural communication, and deep youth engagement. The empirical evidence gathered from the civic takeover of Worlds 2023 at Gwanghwamun Square challenges the traditional physical-centric bias of SDP scholarship. South Korea demonstrates that the social benefits traditionally attributed to physical sports, such as the creation of democratic safe spaces, adherence to universal rules and the generation of *communitas*, are also fully reproducible within digital spaces. By shifting the definition of SDP from physical exertion to game-structured socialization, this paper provides a new theoretical paradigm: Esports for Development and Peace (eSfD). Through eSfD, virtual competition successfully humanizes the geopolitical "other" and builds a shared global vocabulary among transnational youth, offering a definitive, empirical confirmation that peace can indeed be achieved digitally through play.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research. The author also used Quill Bot to refine word choice and to generate alternative phrasings of selected passages during drafting. The output was reviewed, edited, and where necessary rewritten by the author

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