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Tourism Is More Than a Passport Stamp: The Limits of Tourism Diplomacy

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Annotatsiya

International tourism is usually measured by numbers such as how many visitors come how money they spend and how many jobs are created.. Tourism can also shape international relations by letting people share cultures change how a place looks to the world and give chances for people from different societies to talk. This article looks at what tourism diplomacy can do and what stops it from working. It uses the idea of power and compares Japan's public diplomacy projects with tourism talks between Bulgaria and Denmark during the Cold War. Using scholars' studies the article shows the difference between making a destination look good and achieving bigger diplomatic aims. It also looks at how tourism's political value depends on what visitors feel what governments do and what is happening worldwide. The article says tourism can help bring people to a country. Tourism alone does not always make people see a country in a better light or keep good diplomatic ties. The article ends by saying that tourism diplomacy must be judged by both tourism numbers and by proof that people understand each other better and that global views have changed.

Kalit so'zlar tourism diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, destination image, cultural exchange, international relations

Introduction

International tourism is often talked about as a business that brings money, jobs and helps a country grow. Governments spend money on advertising the country building roads and hotels and hosting events to pull visitors and do well in the world tourism market.. Tourism is more than just money. Every trip abroad lets people meet cultures learn about history see different values and live in new ways.

These meetings can change how visitors see the places they go. A trip can confirm what people already think or can change what they believed based on news, politics and stereotypes. Because of this tourism can matter to diplomacy especially when a government wants to talk to people in other countries outside of normal diplomatic contacts.

Tourism diplomacy is not a sure way to make a country look good abroad. A country can pull visitors but still not get a better political reputation. A place can show

its culture well. People around the world may still dislike its government or its foreign policy.

The article asks: When does international tourism help power and public diplomacy and what stops it from working well?

The main idea is that tourism gives chances for people to visit and learn about each other. The diplomatic benefit of tourism depends on how trustworthy a country looks how good the visitor experience is and what is happening in politics. To show this the article compares Japan's cultural and sports diplomacy work with studies of tourism talks between Bulgaria and Denmark during the Cold War.

Theoretical Framework: Tourism, Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Joseph S. Nye's idea of power gives a good base for seeing how tourism can act in diplomacy. Nye (2008) says soft power is the power to persuade others by attracting them of forcing them or paying them. Culture, political values and foreign policies can help draw people. How much they help depends on how people in other countries see them. Tourism can show a country's treasures to people from around the world. Old buildings, museums, food, festivals and everyday meetings give visitors chances to learn about a destination in a way. In this way tourism can help power by turning a nation's image from a vague idea into a real experience. Tourism and soft power are not the same. A nice trip does not always change what a visitor thinks about politics. A beautiful picture of a country does not always make people support its politics. Attraction, awareness and politics are. Not the same. It is also vital to separate tourism diplomacy from destination branding. Destination branding mainly wants to pull visitors and make a place stronger in the tourism market. Public diplomacy on the hand talks and works with people, in other countries to push bigger national goals. Casado Claro et al. (2023) Show that these actions can mix, especially when a country puts culture and tourism in its plans. For instance showing a country's buildings can bring more tourists and also send a clear idea of its culture.. The money goal and the diplomatic goal of such a program should not be mixed. Tourism promotion can bring money even if it does not bring diplomatic wins.

Methodology

This article uses a secondary-research approach that reviews published studies closely and compares them. It looks at three themes: the theoretical link between soft power and public diplomacy how Japan uses culture and sports to promote itself and how tourism talks shaped relations between Bulgaria and Denmark during the Cold War. The study draws on Nye's 2008 theory, Casado Claro and colleagues' 2023 work on destination branding and public diplomacy Pedersen and Stanoeva's 2024 history of tourism diplomacy and Chu and others' 2022 review of destination-image research. These sources cover parts of tourism's global role. The Japanese case shows how national image, cultural promotion and big events connect. The Bulgarian–Danish case shows how negotiation, institutional interests and politics shape tourism talks. Chu et al.'s review gives a picture of how scholars study destination image. The comparison is thematic not statistical. The aim is not to prove a causal link between tourism and diplomatic power but to spot ways tourism can help international relations and to note limits. Because the paper uses existing research of new interviews or surveys its

findings are analytical and should not be seen as proof that tourism directly changes political views.

Japan: Cultural Promotion and the Limits of Destination Branding

Japan gives an example of how tourism promotion links to public diplomacy. Its worldwide image is built from heritage, tech advances, pop culture and big sports contests. These elements can boost tourism while sending a national message. Casado Claro and colleagues (2023) study Japan's use of culture including the Cool Japan plan and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. They separate the money goals of destination branding from the political and social aims of public diplomacy. The Cool Japan plan shows how cultural industries can raise awareness. Cultural goods and traditions may draw people who then want to visit the country. Tourism can widen the reach of culture by letting visitors experience sites and customs directly. The link between cultural popularity and diplomatic impact is still unclear. Foreign audiences may enjoy culture without gaining a deep insight into Japanese society or changing their political views. Cultural visibility is useful. It is not the same as proven diplomatic success. The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games give another lesson. The event actually happened in 2021 after being delayed because of COVID-19. Casado Claro and colleagues (2023) say the Gaes made destination branding harder. They still mattered for sports diplomacy. This shows that one project can give results depending on how you measure it. An event might not hit all its tourism goals. It can still show national strength, open doors for international contact or build sports ties. Japan's case therefore reminds us to separate attracting tourists sharing an image and reaching bigger diplomatic goals. These aims can help each other. Success in one does not guarantee success in the others.

5. Tourism Diplomacy as Negotiation: Bulgaria and Denmark

Tourism diplomacy is more than culture or sports shows. It can also be talks between governments about travel, trade and cultural links. Pedersen and Stanoeva (2024) look at tourism diplomacy in Cold War Europe by studying talks about a two-way tourism pact between Bulgaria and Denmark. Their research shows that tourism became a topic because each government gave the travel of tourists different economic, cultural and political meanings. Bulgaria wanted to grow tourism and saw deals with Western European countries as chances for economic growth and global cooperation. Denmark on the hand had a different institutional and political view on tourism. The talks reveal that governments did not always agree on the purpose or value of tourism deals. This example shows that tourism is not a tool. Choices, about travel plans and international cooperation can mirror competing interests, institutional priorities and broader foreign-policy concerns. At the time the example shows that tourism diplomacy is not always a single-object strategy. Tourism bodies may focus on visitor numbers and money while foreign ministries may aim at ties and other agencies may stress security or trade. Private companies also have their business goals. The Bulgarian–Danish example shows two limits. First tourism can bring people together when politics still clash. Second diplomatic efforts may be limited by how each government sees the worth of tourism. Compared to Japan, which stresses image and big events this older example focuses more on talks and official interests. Together both show that tourism diplomacy works through messages and formal state relations.

Measuring Diplomatic Outcomes Beyond Visitor Numbers

A problem in judging tourism diplomacy is figuring out what success looks like. Governments and tourism groups normally look at numbers such as how many visitors come how much they spend, how long they stay and how jobs they create. These numbers help gauge the economy. They do not alone prove that tourism has made a country look better abroad.

Studying destination image gives a start for a wider review. Chu and others (2022) studied 151 papers published from January 2012 to February 2022 in six international hospitality and tourism journals. They found four research topics: what makes up destination image how it is measured and marketed, what shapes people's views and how destination image links to tourists' actions.

That review shows how broad the image research is,. A destination's image is not the same as its overall political standing. A visitor might love a place's buildings, food, friendliness and culture while still criticizing its government. Likewise a good marketing push can raise awareness without deepening insight.

A fuller assessment of tourism diplomacy should look at angles. First surveys taken before and after a trip can spot shifts in views. Second talks or open-ended feedback can show which moments caused those shifts. Third later studies can see if those shifts stay after tourists come home.

Lastly researchers must separate an image of a place from broader feelings about its people or government. These results may overlap,. They need different proof.

This method does not assume that every good experience gives gain. It asks whether how and when tourism adds to a country's appeal.

Discussion and Practical Implication

Looking at Japan and the Bulgarian–Denmark case we see tourism diplomacy works in ways. Japan shows how cultural push and big events lift image and public diplomacy. The Bulgarian–Denmark example shows how tourism fits into government talks driven by money and politics.

With those differences both point to tourism's diplomatic worth being conditional. Cultural sights and ads can open doors. The results depend on the larger context where visitors meet a place.

Some practical lessons come from this review.

First tourism leaders should pair ads with wider cultural-exchange programs. Ads can draw eyes. Real contact with locals, museums, cultural groups and schools can create deeper understanding.

Second governments should not claim that tourism ads prove foreign ties. A lot of visitors means people want to travel, not that they back the country's policies. Diplomatic statements must be backed by evidence for the claims made.

Third tourism growth should focus on steady visitor experiences. If the promises in ads clash with what tourists find the image of the destination can suffer. Good hospitality, access, protecting heritage and respectful interaction with locals all shape how visitors read their visit.

Finally policymakers must see that tourism can be hit by things beyond marketers' control. Health crises, friction, security worries and global disputes can stop

travel or change how people see a place. Tourism diplomacy must be viewed inside the political scene not as a stand-alone tool.

These points show that strong tourism diplomacy needs more than global visibility. It needs a link between the image a country pushes and the real experiences visitors get.

Tourism diplomacy

Tourism diplomacy can add to power and public diplomacy by giving chances, for cultural exchange global dialogue and building a destination's image.. We must not think that a country's influence automatically grows just because it draws many foreign visitors.

Japans experience shows that promoting culture and hosting events can have different economic and diplomatic uses. The Bulgaria–Denmark example demonstrates that tourism can also become a topic of talks shaped by institutional priorities and political disputes. Studies on destination image show that perceptions and behavioral intentions are subjects that need careful assessment.

The main conclusion is that tourism diplomacy must be judged by both its results and its possible contribution to long-term international understanding. Visitor arrivals and spending remain markers but they cannot replace evidence of cultural learning shifts in perceptions or lasting engagement between societies.

In the end tourism is more than a passport stamp because travel can bring people into direct contact with unfamiliar societies.. That contact does not automatically produce mutual understanding or political influence. Tourism becomes diplomatically meaningful when the opportunities it creates are backed by communication, meaningful cultural engagement and a realistic grasp of the limits of national image-making.

Results

The comparative analysis identifies three main findings concerning the relationship between tourism and diplomacy.

First, tourism promotion and diplomatic influence are distinct outcomes. Japan's experience demonstrates that cultural strategies and international events can increase a country's visibility without necessarily producing equivalent improvements in its international reputation. The effectiveness of tourism as a soft power instrument therefore depends on more than the ability to attract visitors.

Second, tourism can serve as a platform for diplomatic negotiation rather than simply as a means of promoting national culture. The Bulgaria–Denmark case illustrates how tourism agreements can reflect different governmental priorities and broader political interests. This finding challenges the assumption that international tourism operates independently of political relations.

Third, conventional tourism indicators are insufficient for evaluating diplomatic outcomes. The reviewed destination-image research highlights the importance of examining how perceptions are formed and how they relate to tourists' behavioral intentions (Chu et al., 2022). However, positive destination perceptions should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of greater political trust or soft power.

Overall, the findings suggest that tourism diplomacy operates through at least three interconnected mechanisms: cultural exposure, national image formation, and institutional cooperation. These mechanisms may reinforce one another, but their outcomes depend on the political context and the quality of international engagement. Because this study uses secondary research, the findings represent a comparative synthesis of existing literature rather than new empirical measurements.

Conclusion

This article has examined the potential and limitations of tourism diplomacy as an instrument of soft power and public diplomacy. The analysis demonstrates that international tourism can create opportunities for cultural exchange, strengthen destination image, and facilitate communication between societies. However, attracting international visitors does not automatically lead to greater diplomatic influence or more favorable political perceptions.

The Japanese case illustrates the distinction between destination branding and broader public diplomacy objectives, while the Bulgaria–Denmark case demonstrates that tourism can become part of formal negotiations shaped by political and institutional interests. Together, these examples indicate that tourism diplomacy operates through multiple mechanisms whose effectiveness depends on the wider international context.

The analysis also highlights the limitations of evaluating tourism diplomacy solely through visitor arrivals and expenditure. Although these indicators remain important for measuring economic performance, a more comprehensive assessment should consider visitors' experiences, changes in destination perceptions, and the persistence of cultural understanding after travel. Future research could investigate these outcomes through comparative visitor surveys, interviews, and longitudinal studies.

Ultimately, tourism should be understood as a potential contributor to international attraction rather than a substitute for conventional diplomacy. Its diplomatic value depends not only on how successfully a country promotes its image, but also on the credibility of that image and the quality of the encounters it facilitates. Tourism can open doors to mutual understanding, but lasting diplomatic influence requires meaningful engagement beyond the journey itself.

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