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Empirical Communication-Based Soft Power Model: Operationalization and Contemporary Methodological Constraints

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Introduction

The primary aim of this paper is to explore, from the perspective of 2024, the feasibility of operationalizing the concept of communication-based soft power model that I published in 2021[1], though it was initially developed around 2018. At the time of the model's creation, I was fully aware of the challenges in incorporating all of its aspects into empirical analysis. However, my primary objective was to present a general framework that could facilitate a strictly empirical approach to soft power and enable the reliable operationalization of this concept.

Furthermore, during the model's development, I was confident that the growing prominence of social media and Big Data-related methodologies would make such operationalization increasingly viable. Today, however, while I remain firmly convinced of the necessity of an empirically-based approach to soft power – and more broadly to international relations and political science – my optimism regarding the reliability of the data has significantly diminished.

Thus, the primary goal of this article is to address the methodological constraints associated with the model, with particular emphasis on data accessibility, its representativeness, and the quality of measurement.

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1 J. Jura, *Specyfika chińskiej soft power w Afryce na przykładzie Zambii i Angoli. Operacjonalizacja pojęcia i analiza empiryczna na podstawie badania zawartości mediów oraz wypowiedzi internautów,* Uczelnia Łazarskiego, Oficyna Wydawnicza, Warszawa 2021.

The paper is structured into three sections. The first section addresses the main limitations of the soft power concept in its traditional understanding. In the second section, I introduce the communication-based soft power model. Finally, in the third section, I examine the aforementioned methodological challenges.

The classical approach to the soft power concept and its constraints

The concept of soft power was introduced in 1990 by Joseph Nye[2], who distinguished it from *hard power*, which relies on coercion or the threat of force (military, economic). Soft power, in contrast, is based on a state's ability to attract and influence others through its culture, values, and foreign policies[3].

In his early works, Nye treated hard and soft power as distinct from each other. He defined soft power as the ability of a state to "charm" others through its culture, promoted values – particularly democratic ones – and foreign policy[4]. His focus was primarily on governmental institutions as the key agents of soft power, with limited attention to other actors, such as NGOs or informal groups. Similarly, he gave little consideration to the role of recipients in estimating the soft power volume.

Due to its ambiguity and lack of precision, Nye's classical definition of soft power has faced substantial critique and revision, including by Nye himself[5] and others[6]. The most commonly highlighted criticisms of Nye's concept include universalism and Americentrism, an excessive focus on institutional actors, the rigid separation of soft power and hard power, and a lack of precision leading to challenges in operationalization.

Nye's concept of soft power is characterized by a high degree of **universalism** and **Americentrism**. For instance, Nye considers democracy[7] as one of the key elements

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2 U. Vyas, *Soft Power in Japan-China Relations: State, Sub-State and Non-State Relations,* Routledge, London – New York 2010, pp. 38.

3 J.S. Nye, *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, New York 1991, pp. 31–32.

4 Idem, *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York 2004 [Kindle DX Version], location 299.

5 See J.S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs 2011; idem, *The Powers to Lead*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2008.

6 See G.D. Rawnsley, *Reflections of a Soft Power Agnostic*, [in:] X. Zhang, H. Wassermann, W. Mano (ed.), *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa: Promotion and Perceptions*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2016, pp. 19–31; Mingjian Li, *Introduction. Soft Power: Nurture Not Nature*, [in:] idem (ed.), *Soft Power. China's…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–19.

7 J.S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means…*, *op. cit.*, location 299.

of soft power, assuming that democracy is an intrinsic human value that, regardless of culture, will always be seen as attractive. However, many critics, particularly those studying Chinese soft power[8], argue that Western values may not appeal to all global actors. A common example contrasts the so-called Washington Consensus with the Beijing Consensus[9].

Similarly, while culture is widely regarded as a crucial source of soft power, it may not play an equally significant role in every country. For example, research I conducted in 2013[10] suggested that in Zambia and Angola, China's attractiveness as an investor and economic partner was a far more significant aspect of its soft power than cultural appeal. Nye, however, overlooked these factors. Although he acknowledged economic issues, he considered them solely within the realm of hard power, rather than as part of a country's attractive image through its economic potential[11].

Nye seems to overlook that democracy and specific cultural values may not be universally appealing. Even within a single country, these values may resonate with some groups while being entirely unattractive to others. This approach, taken a priori without empirical support, raises numerous interpretative issues and can lead to flawed diagnoses, inaccurate rankings, and other analytical problems.

Another notable shortcoming of the classical approach to soft power is its **excessive emphasis on the role of institutional actors**. Much of the analysis in this field focuses on government institutions or those controlled by the state as the primary creators of soft power, with a particular focus on public diplomacy[12]. This appears to be an oversimplification. First, the information policy (public diplomacy) of country A is influenced by the information policies of other countries regarding country A, which can significantly affect its perception. For example, Iran's soft power in Poland might be low not only because its values are unattractive to Poles, but also because other countries present Iran in a negative light.

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8 See. Yongnian Zheng, Chi Zhang, *'Soft power' and Chinese Soft Power*, [in:] Hong Lai, Yiyi Lu (ed.), *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, Routledge, London – New York 2012, s. 21–39; Hongying Wang, Yeh-Chung Lu, *The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications. A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan*, „Journal of Contemporary China" 2008, vol. 17, pp. 425–447.

9 See Hong Lai, *Introduction: The Soft Power Concept and a Rising China*, [in:] Hong Lai, Yiyi Lu (ed.), *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, Routledge, London – New York 2012, pp. 1–21.

10 J. Jura, K. Kaluzynska, *Not Confucius, nor Kung Fu: Economy and Business as Chinese Soft Power in Africa*, „African East-Asian Affairs. The China Monitor" 2013, no 1, pp. 42–69.

11 J.S. Nye, *Soft Power. The Means…*, *op. cit.*, location 299.

12 See J. Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice*, in: idem (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy. Soft Power in International Relations, Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2005, pp. 3–28.

Focusing primarily on government agendas overlooks the growing role of individuals, NGOs, and businesses in shaping a country's image[13]. This is especially surprising given the current impact of globalization, the development of the internet, and the rising influence of social media. Non-state and non-institutional actors are increasingly shaping not only the image of countries but also broader aspects of social life.

Interestingly, in his later publications, Nye acknowledges[14] the role of the internet and social media in shaping a country's image, as well as the importance of actors not directly tied to government institutions. However, his focus remains on how state institutions should manage messaging in this domain, often neglecting the fact that much of the internet's content is created by non-state institutional actors and independent users.

Nye's approach is criticized **for its one-dimensionality – the separation of soft power and hard power.** Initially, Nye treated soft power as distinct from hard power, a division that many scholars argue is entirely artificial[15]. It seems clear that soft power often relies on a state's military potential and, more importantly, its economic strength, as well as its global standing. Nye's perspective may stem from his universalism and Americentrism, viewing American values and culture as inherently attractive. However, it is more plausible that this attractiveness – especially for institutional actors – is closely tied to the United States' economic, political, and military power.

Chinese scholars are among the most prominent critics of the rigid distinction between hard and soft power. They argue that these elements must be considered together, emphasizing that China's soft power advantage stems from its ability to seamlessly integrate hard power -particularly its economic influence – with soft power, often referred to as the "soft use of power"[16]. Interestingly, in his later works, Nye responds to these critiques by introducing the concept of *smart power*[17], which refers to the strategic blending of soft and hard power.

Nye's concept of soft power lacks precision, leading to **challenges in operationalization.** His definition remains vague, offering examples of soft power without

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13 See K. Imata, K. Kuroda, *Soft Power of NGOs. Growing Influence Beyond National Boundaries*, [in:] Y. Watanabe, D.L. McConnell (ed.), *Soft Power Superpowers. Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, M.E. Sharpe, Amonk 2008, pp. 262–279.

14 Por. J.S. Nye, *The Information Revolution and American Soft Power*, „Asia-Pacific Review" 2002, vol. 9, pp. 60–76.

15 See Shin-Wha Lee, *The Theory and Reality of Soft Power. Practical App.roaches in East Asia*, [in:] idem, J. Melissen (ed.), *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, pp. 11–32; Mingjian Li, *Introduction…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–19.

16 Mingjian Li, *Introduction…*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–19.

17 See J.S. Nye, *The Future of Power…*, *op. cit.*; idem, *The Powers to Lead…*, *op. cit.*

systematic detail[18]. Essentially, Nye identifies soft power as a country's ability to attract others, primarily through foreign policy, public diplomacy, and the promotion of culture and democratic values. However, he does not clearly explain the theoretical foundation for why or how this process occurs.

This imprecision has led to various interpretations, complicating its operationalization. Measuring something that is poorly defined remains problematic. Existing methods often rely on simplistic estimates based on survey data[19], which tend to reflect public perceptions rather than soft power itself. Soft power indices, while another approach, similarly suffer from imprecision. Moreover, these indices often adopt a universalist, Western-centric perspective, ignoring contextual and interpretive dimensions, which undermines their reliability.

A key example is *The Soft Power 30*[20], a global ranking developed in 2015 by Portland Communication in partnership with Facebook and Comres, which Nye endorsed as the most credible soft power index. It combines objective data on soft power potential across various sectors, including digital communication, with subjective survey data on country perceptions. For the first time, social media indicators are incorporated into the analysis, reflecting the importance of internet-based communication. Despite these innovations, Nye's imprecise framework undermines the effectiveness of such indices. The rationale for selecting certain indicators as measures of soft power remains unclear and lacks empirical support. Furthermore, while Nye's 2011 revision recognizes the role of promotional activities[21], there is little effort to measure their actual outcomes. It is often assumed that investment in cultural or educational institutions will automatically enhance soft power, overlooking the contextual and multifaceted nature of the process. For instance, Confucius Institutes in Europe have at times been met with distrust,

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18 See. Ch. Layne, *The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power*, [in:] I. Parmar, M. Cox (ed.), *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Routledge, New York 2010, pp. 51–82.

19 Byong-kuen Jhee, Nae-young Lee, *Measuring Soft Power in East Asia. An Overview of Soft Power in East Asia on Affective and Normative Dimensions*, [in:] Shin-Wha Lee, J. Melissen (ed.), *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011.

20 *The soft power 30. A global ranking of soft power 2019*, Portland, 2019, https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf [access 10.10.2021].

21 J.S. Nye, *The Future of Power…*, *op. cit.*; idem, *The Powers to Lead…*, *op. cit.*

with their presence generating negative perceptions instead of the expected positive outcomes[22].

Communication-Based Soft Power Model

Given the aforementioned limitations of existing soft power models and measurement methods, as well as differing theoretical assumptions and the empirical nature of my research, in 2018 I introduced the foundations of my own theoretical model. In my view, this model allows for a more precise operationalization of the concept of soft power. It is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of pragmatism, social constructivism, and a modified and expanded version of the interpretivist communication model.

Pragmatism in this context is primarily understood as the belief that there is no single method or theory that can uncover absolute truth; rather, theories serve to explain specific phenomena with varying degrees of effectiveness[23]. The constructivist framework is not limited to the narrow scope of international relations theory[24], but instead aligns with the broader perspective of social constructivism, which views reality as socially constructed, shaped by how social actors interpret data and messages[25].

This approach provides a clear theoretical framework for analyzing soft power as an interactive and communicative phenomenon. First, it is constructed by social actors across multiple levels and dimensions – institutional, individual, political, economic, and social – and is continuously negotiated and renegotiated. Soft power is directly tied to the process of interaction and social communication, based on the interpretation and renegotiation of meaning. Second, this approach imposes both analytical (soft power as the outcome of communicative acts) and methodological frameworks (soft power is analyzed as the result of how country A is interpreted in country B, with regard to political, economic, and social relations between the two countries).

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22 A good example of such a situation is the so-called Braga incident of 2014. Due to the rather unfortunate and orthodox actions of the then Director-General of the Confucius Institute–related to the censorship of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) conference program–the Confucius Institute branches in Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Toronto were closed. As a result, both the Institute and China suffered significant reputational damage within the academic community.

23 J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Open Court Pub., La Salle 1958.

24 See A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999; T. Hopf, *The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, „International Security" 1998, vol. 23, no 1, pp. 171–200.

25 PP.L. Berger, T. Luckman, *Społeczne tworzenie rzeczywistości*, PIW, Warszawa 1983.

The C**ommunication-Based Soft Power Model** is built upon an expanded communication framework, incorporating elements of Schramm's model[26] along with broader implications from social constructivism and the sociology of knowledge, particularly in the context of the social factors influencing message interpretation. It also integrates aspects of Lasswell's model[27], which addresses the effects of the communication process – a dimension absent from Schramm's model. While it draws on the classical definition of soft power and previous attempts to conceptualize it, particularly from the perspective of communication models, this approach represents an evolution of these ideas.

First, the concept of power itself is understood differently. Most existing approaches to soft power treat power as primarily volitional or intentional, assuming that country A undertakes certain actions with the aim of "charming" country B. In the Communication-Based Soft Power Model, however, soft power does not necessarily require a volitional or intentional aspect. The model assumes that the effect of "charming" or "repelling" another country can also result from unintentional actions. For instance, prior to 2022, the circulation of memes in Poland portraying the "peculiar" behavior of Russians may not have been intended to discredit Russia, yet it contributed to a less favorable image of the country and its people[28].

Additionally, power is conceptualized similarly to electrostatic charges in physics: bodies with opposite charges attract, while those with the same charge repel. In the same way, the set of messages or content constituting the soft power of country A may be attractive to country B, whose audience shares similar values and perspectives, but repellent to the audience of country C. Thus, the soft power of country A is not merely the sum of its public diplomacy efforts, but rather the cumulative influence or effect of how content related to country A is perceived by audiences in other countries (each considered separately) and its impact on political, economic, and social relations between country A and those countries (again, considered individually).

The **Communication-Based Soft Power Model** is divided into two phases: the **communication phase** and the **effect/reaction phase**. In some communication models, such as Lasswell's model[29], the reaction to a message is considered part

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26 W. Schramm, *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1954.

27 H.D. Lasswell, *The structure and function of communication in society*, [in:] L. Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*, Harper and Row, New York 1948, pp. 37–51.

28 J. Jura, K. Kałużyńska, *Obraz obcokrajowców i imigrantów w polskich mediach tradycyjnych i internetowych*, [in:] J. Konieczna Salamatin (ed.), *Imigranci o wysokich kwalifikacjach na polskim rynku pracy. Raport z badań 2014–2015*, Instytut Społeczno-Ekonomicznych Ekspertyz, Fundacja „Nasz Wybór", Warszawa 2015.

29 H.D. Lasswell, *The structure and function…*, *op. cit.*

of the communication process. However, I chose to separate these elements because the measure of soft power cannot be based solely on the image created but rather on whether that image has any impact on political, economic, or social relations between countries. It is possible, for instance, to have a situation where a country enjoys a very positive image, yet this has no tangible effect on bilateral relations. Hence, the distinction between the communication phase and the effect phase is necessary.

The **communication phase** builds upon the interpretivist communication model and consists of the following components: the source (or "agent") of the communication process, the communication channel and message, communication barrier(s), the receiver(s), and the interpretation of the message(s).

The **"agent"** that can serve as a source of information about country A and influence the image of country A in country B can include various entities: international organizations, governments/government institutions, regional institutions from country A or other countries, the media, and individual users. This approach differs from the classical understanding of soft power agents in three key aspects.

First, it includes private individuals, a group often overlooked in soft power studies. In today's globalized world, increased social mobility and mass tourism mean that individuals from country A can shape a positive or negative image in the eyes of audiences from country B. The growing influence of interpersonal interactions and the rise of social media, where private individuals' publications can significantly affect a country's image or even election outcomes, has become essential. What might have been a minor consideration a decade ago is now critical.

Second, many studies neglect the role of international organizations in shaping soft power. However, the opinions of institutions like the UN or IMF can play a significant role. These opinions, shaped by the member states, reflect the power dynamics within these organizations and on a global scale.

Third, in this model, sources of information (excluding international organizations) need not originate from the country being analyzed. Traditionally, research has focused on domestic actors and institutions, but here, the image of a country results from multiple communication sources. These can include a government promoting positive messages, a rival government issuing discrediting information, tourists creating a negative image of their homeland, or internet users and paid trolls presenting the country in a negative light.

The concept of the **communication channel**, and particularly the emphasis on its importance in the communication process, can be attributed to Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan. In 1964[30], he asserted that the transmission channel

[30] M. McLuhan, *Understanding media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York – Toronto 1964.

is itself a form of information, with its own specificity and meaning. For instance, face-to-face discussions between the leaders of two countries are fundamentally different from the exchange of official diplomatic notes. In other words, in a given context and for a specific recipient, the choice of communication channel can significantly influence the weight or importance of the message in shaping the image of country A in country B. Therefore, when analyzing the process of building soft power for country A, we should try to consider all messages about it, from all sources and in all forms (text, audio, audio-visual, video, etc.). Additionally, the communication channel itself should not be overlooked, as it may carry its own significance or value.

In the classical communication model by Shannon and Weaver[31], **communication barriers** are not explicitly addressed; instead, they refer to noise in the communication process. For the purposes of the presented model, the concept of communication barriers is more relevant and appropriate than "information noise", as it encompasses the idea of noise while extending beyond it. Here, communication barriers refer to any obstacles (institutional, infrastructural, translational, etc.) that prevent information about country A from reaching the audience in country B or cause it to arrive in a reduced, distorted, or otherwise difficult-to-interpret form. Examples of such barriers include restricted access to Facebook in China, underdeveloped communication infrastructure in certain countries (which limits citizens' access to radio, television, the internet, etc.), internet censorship, and others.

Recipients, unlike "agents," include only institutions, organizations, and private individuals from the country whose soft power is being analyzed. In practical terms, it is impossible for every recipient group to receive all the information transmitted by the senders, due to the presence of communication barriers and informational noise. Moreover, even in situations of theoretically full data transparency, a significant constraint – especially today – is the limited capacity to process large amounts of information and the challenge of data selection.

Thus, the set of messages reaches the recipient(s) in a more or less reduced form, depending on their access to information and their capacity for absorption, perception, and analysis of information. As a result, there is a disparity between institutional actors, who have greater access to data and a higher capacity for absorption and analysis, and individual recipients. Therefore, different recipients have varying capabilities in shaping soft power. While it can be assumed that institutional recipients have a greater influence than individual recipients, it is not possible to establish these proportions a priori. Furthermore, these proportions will likely vary depending on the political system, the country of the recipients, and over time.

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31 C.E. Shannon, W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication,* University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1949.

The **interpretation** of messages by recipients is an essential component of any communication model rooted in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. Surprisingly, this aspect has not been emphasized in previous studies on soft power that approach the concept as a communicative process[32].

In the present model, the interpretation of data is crucial to the decoding of the message. How the message is interpreted is an inherently complex process, discussed extensively in fields such as phenomenology, the sociology of knowledge, and cognitive science. In short, the way individuals interpret a message is largely shaped by socialization and the resulting cognitive framework – namely, the socially determined way they perceive the world.

This perception, however, is not fixed. For instance, a consistent flow of positive information about a country can alter the way it is perceived by the recipient. In simplified terms, the perception of country A by individual N is strongly determined by the set of norms and values that N has acquired (and continues to acquire, as socialization is an ongoing process) during socialization, combined with the cumulative messages about country A that N has received over time.

Thus, our interpretation of specific information about the actions of the Chinese government depends on the norms we have internalized (for example, if we are proponents of democracy, we are likely to view most of these actions negatively) and on the information we have previously encountered. If the majority of this information has been negative, a negative stereotype may develop. In such cases, even seemingly positive actions by the Chinese government may be viewed with suspicion, potentially interpreted as an attempt to hide bad intentions or, especially today, dismissed as fake news.

The above remarks primarily concern individual interpretation. The interpretation performed by institutions, however, is the result of the combined interpretations of the individuals working within that institution. Nevertheless, this is not a simple sum of individual interpretations and their respective hierarchies. Within institutions, a series of interactions occurs, and depending on their configuration, intensity, and content, these interactions can significantly influence the final reception of the message.

The interpretation phase of a message or set of messages can largely be equated with the perception of country A by recipients in country B. However, as previously mentioned its perception is equivalent to soft power. The essence of soft power lies in the fact that a country's attractiveness or unattractiveness produces some kind of **effect** – a force that either brings countries closer or pushes them apart in terms of political, economic, or social relations.

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32 See for ex. A. Chong, *Foreign Policy in Global Information Space. Actualizing Soft Power*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007, pp. 13–14.

It is also important to note that the same set of messages can be perceived differently by various audiences. For example, American pop culture may gain approval or popularity among Iranian youth but not among the ruling ayatollahs. As a result, fascination with this pop culture could influence economic relations (increased demand for its products) and social relations (a more positive image of Americans among Iranians), while simultaneously prompting the Islamic revolutionary government to impose an embargo on U.S. products and implement internet censorship. This would reduce the economic demand for American pop culture (diminishing its positive economic soft power effect), and if internet censorship proves effective, it could eliminate the targeted content, which over time may weaken the positive perception of the United States. Moreover, the admiration for Western values and pop culture among some segments of the Iranian population is unlikely to impact political relations with the U.S., as Iran is an authoritarian country where the political elite do not need to consider public opinion when shaping their domestic or foreign policy.

Model's operationalization possibilities and constrains

Basing this concept of soft power on a communication model, along with its other theoretical foundations, allows for the full empirical operationalization of soft power–at least in theory. In practice, however, this proves to be far more complex. In general, the methodological implications and constraints associated with the model presented above pertain to several aspects: **data access, data representativeness, data processability**, and the quality of **operationalization and measurement** in both the communication and effect phases.

Data access, particularly in combination with **data representativeness**, poses a significant challenge in the model's communication phase. It is practically impossible to gather all information related to a given country or to catalog every form of blockade (though the latter may be a somewhat more feasible task). Similarly, it is unrealistic to collect a complete dataset on what information about country A is received by all recipients in country B, as well as how this information is distributed and perceived.

The growing importance of the internet and social media in our lives theoretically brings us closer to an ideal scenario for data collection, even if it does not make the task entirely achievable. Social media platforms increasingly dominate people's time, serving as a primary source for news and a space for expressing opinions. Not only can users read information, but they can also comment on it and express their sentiments, providing valuable insights into how content is received. These tools, therefore, appear nearly ideal for assessing public perceptions such as a country's image and for tracking the communication process using specific indicators.

However, two significant challenges arise. First, researchers have limited access to user data, even in anonymized form. In theory, the best situation is with platforms like "X" (formerly Twitter), where all accounts are public, and access to the platform's full dataset is available through its Application Programming Interface (API). Recently, however, the platform's new owner discontinued the free academic API, leaving only the expensive commercial API as an option. While this does not eliminate the possibility of conducting research, it creates a potential barrier to data access for some scholars. On other social media platforms, it is effectively impossible to access all relevant data, which inevitably affects data representativeness.

Data representativeness is a crucial challenge for the empirical operationalization of the model. As mentioned earlier, it is impossible to gain full access to all relevant data. Even if we assume that social media data might be sufficient, the problem lies in whether this data constitutes a representative sample of relevant actors. For instance, while "X" (formerly Twitter) can be a valuable source of data for media, NGOs, and institutional players, it is not necessarily representative of the general public. The platform tends to exhibit an outlier bias, with frequent users often being activists, radicals, or trolls – a pattern that applies to other platforms public profiles as well.

In the case of Facebook, access to private user profiles is not available, which likely represent a more accurate sample of public opinion. These profiles often mirror traditional, "analog" forms of communication, with interactions confined to circles of "friends." Other social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, also do not offer API access to complete user data. Although these platforms might be considered less significant in the context of soft power, their influence on public opinion cannot be entirely dismissed.

As a result, researchers tend to rely primarily on Twitter data, and occasionally on Facebook data if they can secure access to Meta's API for public content. However, these datasets are inherently limited in representativeness. Facebook data is restricted to public posts, and social media data in general is incomplete since not everyone uses these platforms – or any at all.

A potential solution to improve representativeness and data quality, particularly regarding the reception of information about a given country, would be to incorporate survey results. While we cannot directly claim that the perception of country A in surveys is shaped solely by its image in social media or the broader media landscape, surveys could provide valuable data for triangulation with social media analysis. However, this approach also has limitations. Surveys focusing on specific countries are not typically conducted on a regular or frequent basis. Additionally, since the late 20th century, survey results have become less representative of the general population due to declining response rates[33].

[33] R.M. Groves, *Nonresponse Rates and Nonresponse Bias in Household Surveys*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 5, 2006, pp. 646–675.

Another potential methodological challenge in applying the model to empirical research is **data processability**. This issue is particularly significant today, given the rapid growth of Big Data and social media content. Even processing only textual data from platforms like "X" (formerly Twitter) for large entities such as major states can become problematic due to the sheer volume of data, despite recent advancements in the automation of text analysis. While processing such data is feasible for large tech companies like Meta, Google, and "X," it presents a considerable challenge for academic researchers. This challenge is further compounded by the increasing prominence of audio and audiovisual content on social media, which makes data processing even more complex.

Finally, **operationalization** and **measurement quality** also merit consideration. Both issues have been extensively studied in relation to the communication process and its reception. In recent years, advancements in machine learning and AI technologies have enabled reliable methods for automatic text classification, such as sentiment analysis, to be applied to large datasets. Additionally, audio files can now be easily converted into text, and significant progress is being made in the automatic classification of visual data, suggesting that it will soon be possible to automatically classify video content as well. However, while these developments are promising for large organizations (such as Google, Meta, "X"), the challenge of data processability remains significant for individual researchers.

However, the issue of operationalization becomes more significant when measuring the **effect** of soft power. The first challenge involves selecting relevant economic and political effect indicators. These indicators can encompass a wide range of actions. For economic relations between country A and country B, potential indicators might include the volume of foreign trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), economic aid and assistance, or the use of incentives and coercive tools such as tax reductions or increases, tax barriers, etc. For political relations, indicators could include the number of bilateral visits at various levels, voting alignment in the UN (between country A and B), the number and significance of signed bilateral agreements, and so on.

A further challenge is deciding whether to use these indicators separately or to combine them into a comprehensive economic and political relations index. While the latter option is more appealing, as it allows for a broader analysis of soft power effects, it also introduces methodological concerns. One key issue is the weighting of indicators, which is inherently subjective. While many economic indicators, such as trade volume or FDI, are quantitative, tools like tariffs, trade barriers, and tax exemptions require subjective assessment and quantification.

The dilemma becomes even more pronounced when assessing political relations. For instance, when considering factors like voting similarity at the UN or the number of signed international agreements, it raises the question: are all votes or agreements of equal importance? Furthermore, if the aim is to create a single indicator or index,

how should various factors – such as bilateral visits, signed agreements, or UN voting patterns – be weighted against one another? These issues of weighting and importance are crucial to address when constructing a comprehensive measure of soft power effects.

It is also important to note that, although researchers typically rely on official data – both statistical indicators and records of official documents – when measuring the state of bilateral relations between country A and country B, these data are not without quality issues. While data reliability is generally not a major concern in the EU and other Western countries, the situation is often different in other regions. For example, there is ongoing debate about the quality of data in Africa[34] (ref.), largely due to the informal nature of many economies and the lack of resources available to national statistical offices. In countries like China, the issue lies in the lack of transparency and the tendency of government institutions to obscure or even manipulate data for political purposes.[35]

Finally, there is the question of how to demonstrate that a particular perception of country A in country B, or changes in that perception, directly influence their bilateral economic and political relations – in other words, how to measure **soft power**. In this context, it is crucial to remember the adage that correlation does not imply causality. Therefore, any analysis must incorporate relevant control variables to ensure a comprehensive examination of the actual effects, rather than merely identifying a correlation between two indicators.

Conclusion

When I developed the foundation for the communication-based soft power model in 2018, I was confident that the growing importance of social media in individual and institutional activities, along with advancements in automatic data classification methods, would soon lead to a well-established methodology for reliably measuring this phenomenon empirically. While I still believe this is achievable, certain developments in social media, the internet, and the IT industry have made the task more challenging.

Firstly, full access to data and the tools necessary for such analysis are largely controlled by tech giants, limiting independent academic researchers in terms of both data access and processability. Additionally, the reliance on social media platforms for Big Data raises concerns about the reliability of these institutions. For instance, there is no guarantee that data obtained from platforms like "X" via their commercial API has

[34] M. Jerven, *Poor numbers: How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 2013.

[35] J.L. Wallace, *Juking the Stats? Authoritarian Information Problems in China*, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2016, pp. 11–29.

not been manipulated. While this may sound like a conspiracy theory, the platform's owner – who initially promoted "free speech" – has since become deeply involved in political campaigning, which has influenced the platform's interface and content prioritization. As a result, the owner's politically engaged posts are often prioritized and appear at the top whenever users open the platform, overshadowing other content.

Thus, the hope that Big Data might offer us nearly unlimited, unobtrusive, and unbiased insights into social behavior is increasingly diminished by the commercialization and politicization of social media. Despite these challenges, I strongly believe it remains essential to measure social and political phenomena, such as soft power, empirically. While the results may not be perfect, they would still be grounded in empirical data and scientific methodology, rather than speculative, methodologically unrestrained deliberations.

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Empirical Communication-Based Soft Power Model: Operationalization and Contemporary Methodological Constraints

Abstract

This article examines the feasibility of operationalizing the communication-based soft power model focusing on contemporary methodological challenges. The model was developed as an empirical framework for analyzing soft power, emphasizing the role of communication and social interaction in shaping international relations.The paper critiques the classical soft power concept developed by Joseph Nye, highlighting its universalism, Americentrism, excessive focus on institutional actors, and lack of precision. It introduces the communication-based soft power model as an evolution of previous approaches, integrating pragmatism, social constructivism, and interpretivist communication theories. This model treats soft power as an interactive, multidimensional process influenced by various agents, channels, and barriers. The article is structured into three sections: a critique of traditional soft power concepts, an introduction to the communication-based model, and an analysis of methodological constraints. Challenges discussed include data access and representativeness, processing limitations, and issues in measuring both the communication and effects phases of soft power. The paper underscores the complexity of empirically operationalizing soft power in an era dominated by social media and Big Data, while advocating for rigorous, empirically-based methodologies to better understand this phenomenon.

Keywords: soft power, communication model, operationalization, social media, methodology, big data, international relations

Empirycznie ugruntowany komunikacyjny model *soft power* – operacjonalizacja i ograniczenia metodologiczne

Streszczenie

Opracowanie analizuje problematykę operacjonalizacji autorskiego komunikacyjnego modelu *soft power*, koncentrując się na współczesnych wyzwaniach metodologicznych. Model ten kładzie nacisk na empiryczny kontekst analizy *soft power*, podkreślając rolę komunikacji i interakcji społecznych w kształtowaniu relacji międzynarodowych. Tekst krytykuje klasyczną koncepcję *soft power* autorstwa Josepha Nye'a, wskazując na jej uniwersalizm, amerykocentryzm, nadmierne skupienie na aktorach instytucjonalnych oraz brak precyzji. Wprowadza oparty na komunikacji model *soft power* jako ewolucję wcześniejszych podejść, integrując pragmatyzm, konstruktywizm społeczny oraz teorie interpretatywne w zakresie komunikacji. Model ten traktuje *soft power* jako interaktywny, wielowymiarowy proces, na który wpływ mają różnorodni aktorzy, kanały komunikacji i bariery. Opracowanie składa się z trzech części: krytyki tradycyjnych koncepcji *soft power*, prezentacji modelu opartego na komunikacji oraz analizy ograniczeń metodologicznych. Omówione wyzwania obejmują dostęp do danych i ich reprezentatywność, ograniczenia przetwarzania danych oraz problemy związane z mierzeniem faz komunikacji i efektów *soft power*. Artykuł podkreśla złożoność empirycznej operacjonalizacji *soft power* w erze dominacji mediów społecznościowych i *big data*, jednocześnie apelując o rygorystyczne, oparte na danych podejścia do zrozumienia tego zjawiska.

Słowa kluczowe: *soft power*, model komunikacyjny, operacjonalizacja, media społecznościowe, metodologia, *big data*, relacje międzynarodowe

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   In case of books with multiple authors, give the first name and surname of their editors. Online material is to be described in the same way as articles in print journals or books followed by a URL and the date of access. It is also necessary to add a bibliography after the article text. Detailed information for authors is published on the Lazarski University Publishing House website: https:// www. lazarski.pl/pl/badania-i-rozwoj/oficyna-wydawnicza-uczelni-lazarskiego/ dla-auto row/ (We encourage you to read the English version).
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6. An article should be in the range between 18 and 25 pages of a standard typescript (not including references) and a review, scientific news or information 12 pages.
7. The editor reserves the right to introduce changes in the manuscript submitted for publication, e.g. shorten it, change the title and subheadings as well as correct the style.
8. A manuscript shall contain the author's full given name and surname, their residence address with the telephone/fax number, their email address, the scientific degree or title and the name of the scientific institution the author works for.

Economic and Political Thought
publication review procedure

1. The Editorial Board appoints at least two independent reviewers, i.e. specialists who are not Lazarski University employees, to evaluate each publication
2. One of the two reviewers shall be an employee of a foreign research centre.
3. The reviewing procedure is a so-called double-blind peer review process, i.e. follows a rule that an author and reviewers do not know their identity.
4. Reviewers submit written declarations of non-existence of a conflict of interests in their relations with the authors of articles being reviewed.
5. A review must be developed in writing and provide an unambiguous recommendation to accept a manuscript for publication or decline it.
6. The above procedure and rules of reviewing are published on the *Economic and Political Thought* website
7. The names of reviewers of particular publications are not revealed. However, the name of the reviewer of each quarterly issue is publicised.

   The above procedures and reviewing principles conform to the directives of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

Editor-in-chief
dr Adrian Chojan

Uczelnia Łazarskiego rozpoczęła działalność 1 października 1993 r. Dziś jest to jedna z najbardziej prestiżowych niepublicznych uczelni w Polsce. Prowadzi studia na siedmiu kierunkach: prawo, administracja, stosunki międzynarodowe, ekonomia, finanse i rachunkowość, zarządzanie oraz kierunek lekarski.

W 2006 r. Uczelnia uzyskała uprawnienia do nadawania stopnia naukowego doktora nauk prawnych, w 2016 uprawnienia do nadawania stopnia doktora habilitowanego nauk prawnych, a obecnie czyni starania o uzyskanie uprawnień do nadawania stopnia naukowego doktora nauk ekonomicznych i w dziedzinie nauk społecznych w zakresie nauk o polityce. Od 2012 roku na kierunku stosunków międzynarodowych działa Centrum Naukowe Uczelni Łazarskiego i Instytutu Studiów Politycznych PAN. Kierunek ten w 2016 roku uzyskał ocenę wyróżniającą Polskiej Komisji Akredytacyjnej.

Uczelnię Łazarskiego wyróżnia wysoki stopień umiędzynarodowienia; prowadzi w języku angielskim studia I i II stopnia w trybie stacjonarnym na trzech kierunkach: ekonomia, stosunki międzynarodowe i zarządzanie. Cztery programy studiów otrzymały akredytację Coventry University z Wielkiej Brytanii – ich absolwenci otrzymują dwa dyplomy: polski i angielski. Uczelnia prowadzi też współpracę z prestiżowymi uniwersytetami amerykańskimi: Georgetown University w Waszyngtonie, University of Kentucky w Lexington i University of Wisconsin w La Crosse.

Nasza Uczelnia zajmuje trzecie miejsce w rankingach uczelni niepublicznych, a Wydział Prawa i Administracji od wielu lat jest liderem w rankingach wydziałów prawa uczelni niepublicznych. Realizowane u nas programy nauczania są współtworzone z wybitnymi praktykami i odpowiadają oczekiwaniom pracodawców. Dzięki temu 96% naszych absolwentów znajduje pracę w trakcie lub zaraz po studiach.

W ramach Uczelni działa również Centrum Kształcenia Podyplomowego, oferujące wysokiej jakości usługi z zakresu kształcenia podyplomowego, szkoleń i doradztwa dla firm, instytucji oraz jednostek administracji państwowej i samorządowej. Absolwentom studiów prawniczych oferujemy anglojęzyczne studia LLM (odpowiednik MBA), umożliwiające zdobycie międzynarodowego dyplomu prawniczego.

Wykładowcy Uczelni to znani w kraju i za granicą dydaktycy, którzy łączą pracę naukową z doświadczeniem zdobytym w renomowanych i cenionych na rynku firmach i instytucjach. To również znakomici profesorowie z Wielkiej Brytanii, Niemiec i ze Stanów Zjednoczonych.

Uczelnia Łazarskiego posiada certyfikaty „Wiarygodna Szkoła", „Uczelnia walcząca z plagiatami", „Dobra Uczelnia, Dobra Praca" oraz „Uczelnia Liderów".