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Digital Platforms as Instruments of Soft Power: A Sociological Analysis of International Relations in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The digitalization of international communication has transformed soft power operations, shifting influence from material resources toward strategic meaning management in digital spaces. This study examines how TRT World, Turkey's international broadcaster, utilizes digital platforms as instruments of soft power production and international image construction. Drawing on Nye's soft power concept, Bourdieu's symbolic capital framework, and Castells' network society theory, the study analyzes framing strategies and symbolic patterns in TRT World's digital content. Using purposive sampling, 50 content units were selected from Instagram (n=20), YouTube (n=15), and the official website (n=15), and subjected to qualitative content analysis across five categories: political framing, humanitarian framing, cultural framing, positive image construction, and international audience orientation. Findings reveal that political framing was dominant in 78% of all the units, supported by a humanitarian layer (62%) and a limited cultural dimension (26%). Positive image construction was observed in 46% of the segments, while an international audience orientation was observed in all units (100%); this points to consistent multi-platform communication strategy. The study concludes that TRT World's digital platforms operate as active symbolic spaces that reproduce international identity and transform influence dynamics in the global public sphere. On this basis, the study proposes a network-based model of symbolic power production.

Keywords

Digital Platforms, Soft Power, Symbolic Power, International Relations, TRT World

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Yumuşak Güç Enstrümanı Olarak Dijital Platformlar: Dijital Çağda Uluslararası İlişkilerin Sosyolojik Bir Analizi

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Öz

Uluslararası iletişimin dijitalleşmesi, yumuşak güç koşullarını dönüştürerek etkiyi maddi kaynaklardan dijital alanlarda stratejik anlam yönetimine kaydırmıştır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin uluslararası yayıncısı TRT World'ün dijital platformları yumuşak güç üretimi ve uluslararası imaj inşası araçları olarak nasıl kullandığını incelemektedir. Çalışma, Nye'nin yumuşak güç kavramından, Bourdieu'nun sembolik sermaye çerçevesinden ve Castells'in ağ toplumu teorisinden yararlanarak, TRT World'ün dijital içeriğindeki çerçeveleme stratejilerini ve sembolik örüntüleri analiz etmektedir. Amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak Instagram (n=20), YouTube (n=15) ve resmî web sitesinden (n=15) toplam 50 içerik birimi seçilmiş ve bu birimler siyasi çerçeveleme, insani çerçeveleme, kültürel çerçeveleme, olumlu imaj inşası ve uluslararası izleyici yönelimi olmak üzere beş kategoride nitel içerik analizine tabi tutulmuştur. Bulgular, birimlerin %78'inde siyasi çerçevelemenin baskın olduğunu, bunun insani bir katman (%62) ve sınırlı bir kültürel boyut (%26) ile desteklendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Olumlu imaj inşası birimlerin %46'sında, uluslararası izleyici odaklılık tüm birimlerde (%100) gözlemlenmiştir; bu da tutarlı bir çoklu platform iletişim stratejisine işaret etmektedir. Çalışma, TRT World'ün dijital platformlarının yalnızca bilgi kanalları olarak değil, uluslararası kimliği yeniden üreten ve küresel kamusal alanda etki dinamiklerini dönüştüren aktif sembolik alanlar olarak işlev gördüğü sonucuna varmakta ve sembolik güç üretiminin ağ tabanlı bir modelini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Dijital Platformlar, Yumuşak Güç, Sembolik Güç, Uluslararası İlişkiler, TRT World

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Introduction

International relations have undergone a fundamental transformation over the past seven decades, driven by the rapid expansion of digital technology and the emergence of networked platforms as new arenas of global interaction. Power in the contemporary international system is no longer confined to its traditional military and economic dimensions [1]. It increasingly operates through symbolic and cultural channels, and digital platforms have become central instruments through which states and international institutions construct international identities, shape global public opinion, and project influence beyond their borders. This shift reflects a deeper reconfiguration in how power is exercised in world politics, moving away from direct coercion toward more indirect, symbolic, and representational forms of influence.

The concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, provides an important starting point for understanding this transformation. By defining power as the capacity to attract and persuade rather than coerce or compel, Nye drew attention to the cultural and normative dimensions of international influence that hard-power frameworks had largely overlooked. When effectively deployed, soft power can facilitate voluntary alignment and issue framing without any need for overt coercion[2], relying primarily on culture, political values, and foreign policies that others regard as credible and normatively legitimate.[3] However, the classical soft power framework was formulated before the rise of social media and multi-platform digital architectures that now mediate the production and circulation of political meaning on a global scale. Understanding how soft power operates in digital environments, therefore, requires theoretical tools that go beyond Nye's original formulation. Two additional frameworks are particularly relevant in this regard. Manuel Castells' theory of the network society argues that digital networks have become the structural foundation within which social and political relations are organized, and that power in networked environments derives primarily from the capacity to control communication flows and shape the meanings that circulate within them[4].

In this context, power is no longer exercised solely through traditional diplomatic channels but is increasingly produced through digital interaction, content creation, and the construction of international image on a global scale. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power complements this perspective by illuminating how certain actors acquire the authority to define reality for others, not through open coercion but through the accumulation of symbolic capital and the naturalization of particular representations and

1 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.

2 Ben D. Mor, «Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy», *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2/2 (2006), 157.

3 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power,* 50; Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 88-98.

4 Manuel Castells, «The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance», *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616/1 (2008), 78-82; Jan Van Dijk, *The Network Society* (London: Sage, 2012), 50-77.

classifications[5]. Together, these three frameworks provide the theoretical architecture for the present study. Despite the growing scholarly attention to digital diplomacy and online political communication, a significant gap remains in the literature. Most existing studies have approached the relationship between digital platforms and international influence from political science or media studies perspectives, focusing on strategic communication or public diplomacy as policy instruments[6].

The sociological dimensions of this relationship, specifically the ways in which digital platforms function as social structures that actively produce symbolic power and reproduce relations of influence within the digital public sphere, have received comparatively little systematic attention. This study seeks to address that gap by proposing a sociologically grounded analytical framework for understanding digital soft power as a structured, multi-platform process of the production of symbolic influence that bridges digital sociology and international relations scholarship in ways that existing approaches have yet to fully explore. To this end, the present article examines how digital platforms operate as instruments of soft power production and international image construction, drawing on a qualitative content analysis of digital material published across Instagram, YouTube, and the official website of TRT World, a Turkish state-affiliated international broadcasting organization. By analyzing the framing strategies and symbolic patterns embedded in this content, the study aims to identify the discursive and symbolic mechanisms through which digital soft power is produced, organized, and sustained within a networked multi-platform communication architecture, and to interpret these mechanisms through the sociological frameworks of Castells, Bourdieu, and Nye.

The study makes three principal contributions. Theoretically, it advances the concept of digital soft power by reconceptualizing it as a dynamic process of symbolic production rather than a fixed cultural resource. Methodologically, it proposes a replicable comparative content analysis framework applicable across different organizational and national contexts. Empirically, it provides concrete evidence of how framing strategies are hierarchically organized and functionally differentiated across platforms in ways that produce cumulative symbolic influence. The article is structured as follows. Section 1 reviews the relevant theoretical literature covering soft power, symbolic power, country image, and the role of digital platforms in international relations. Section 2 presents the methodology, including the research design, sampling strategy, coding framework, and analytical procedure. Section 3 introduces the study population and presents the unit of analysis alongside the quantitative results. Section 4 develops the findings across five analytical dimensions. Section 5 situates the findings within the broader theoretical literature and outlines the study's contributions. Section 6 presents the conclusion and directions for future research.

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 50-67; Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.

6 Mark Leonard, Catherine Stead, and Conrad Smewing, *Public Diplomacy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002); Eytan Gilboa, «Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy», *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616/1 (2008), 55-77.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Symbolic Power as a Dimension of International Influence

Where soft power locates influence in attraction, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power draws attention to something deeper: the social processes through which meanings and perceptions are constructed in the first place. For Bourdieu, symbolic power is the capacity to impose systems of classification and representation that structure how the social world is seen and understood. It does not work through open coercion. Instead, it operates through the recognition of certain discourses and actors as authoritative within a given social field, a process that is often invisible precisely because it feels natural. Language sits at the center of this framework. Political discourse, in Bourdieu's account, is not simply a means of communication; it is a mechanism that actively organizes social reality by defining categories, framing issues, and establishing the standards by which situations and actors are evaluated[7].

This capacity rests on accumulated symbolic capital: credibility, prestige, and recognition that allow particular actors to shape what counts as a legitimate interpretation. Over time, power becomes embedded in everyday classifications and begins to appear self-evident, which is precisely how it reproduces asymmetrical relations without drawing attention to itself[8]. This distinguishes symbolic power from soft power in an important way. Soft power is typically understood as a strategic resource deliberately mobilized to generate attraction. By contrast, symbolic power does not necessarily depend on deliberate persuasion. It can work through routinized practices, institutionalized narratives, and widely accepted terminologies that quietly structure perception. Its effects become apparent when actors begin to adopt particular conceptual frameworks or representations as natural points of reference in international discourse. Understood in this way, influence in international relations reaches beyond persuasion; it extends to the shaping of the symbolic environments within which preferences and images are formed.

1.2. Soft Power and Country Image

The image a country projects to the world is not a trivial matter. At its core, country image refers to the set of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that individuals hold about a nation[9] . These impressions operate on multiple levels, encompassing both individual and collective evaluations, as well as the distinction between how a country is perceived by foreign publics and how it perceives itself. As a concept, country image is multidimensionally shaped by political relations, historical experiences, media representations, and personal encounters with a country and its people. Across tourism, marketing, and international

7 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 163-172.

8 Eagleton-Pierce, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization*, 18-19.

9 Howard Barich - Philip Kotler, «A Framework For Marketing İmage Management», *Sloan Management Review* 32/2 (1991), 95.

relations scholarship, it is broadly treated as a composite evaluation of place attributes. Drawing on the Theory of Reasoned Action, scholars have distinguished between two dimensions that together constitute country image: a cognitive component, consisting of beliefs about national characteristics, and an affective component, reflecting emotional responses toward the country[10].

These two dimensions do not operate in isolation; they jointly shape behavioral intentions and political attitudes in ways that have real consequences for international relations. It is within this context that country image becomes directly relevant to soft power. In international relations scholarship, country image is closely tied to public diplomacy and nation branding—deliberate strategies aimed at shaping how a state is perceived abroad. A favorable image can open doors: it may enhance political engagement, strengthen economic competitiveness, and facilitate international cooperation. The affective dimension of country image, most plainly expressed as attraction, lies at the heart of what Nye understood as soft power. Yet translating a favorable image into measurable political outcomes is far from straightforward, and empirically capturing the impact of public diplomacy on awareness, attitudes, and behavior remains a persistent methodological challenge[11]. Country image, then, functions simultaneously as a resource and as an outcome within soft power dynamics, mediating the process through which attraction becomes political influence.

1.3. Digital Platforms as Tools of Symbolic Power

The rise of digital communication technologies has quietly but substantially changed the conditions under which symbolic power operates. Social media platforms now enable states and non-state actors alike to disseminate narratives, engage foreign publics, and shape perceptions at a fraction of the cost that traditional diplomacy would require. In this respect, digital platforms do not simply supplement public diplomacy; they extend its communicative reach by enabling forms of engagement that are direct, interactive, and continuous. What makes digital platforms distinctive is not just their scale, but their architecture. Unlike traditional media, which positioned audiences as passive consumers, digital platforms allow users to produce and circulate content within networked environments as much as they consume it[12].

Through visual messaging, algorithmic amplification, and peer-to-peer interaction, symbolic content can spread with a speed and reach that earlier communication technologies could not match[13]. This matters theoretically as well. As Luhmann observed, the media

10 Martin Fishbein - Icek Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 11-12.

11 Gilboa, «Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy», 56-57.

12 Christoph Lueg, Michael Pfarrer, and Jeremy Short, «Social Media And Organizational İdentity», *Journal of Management Studies* 43/5 (2006).

13 Claudia Fortuna, «Digital Diplomacy And Social Media: The Role Of Digital Communication İn Diplomatic Practice», *Mediazioni* 22 (2017), 4-5.

does not simply transmit information; it structures how reality is interpreted. In digital contexts, that structuring function has become simultaneously more decentralized and more heavily mediated by the logics built into platform architectures. For states, this creates both opportunity and risk. Digital platforms offer arenas in which soft power can be actively projected through influencing international debate, framing political issues, and managing national reputation[14]. At the same time, these environments are prone to polarization and the rapid spread of misinformation, complicating any straightforward exercise of symbolic influence. The formation and transformation of country image, then, increasingly plays out within digital spaces—contested, dynamic arenas where symbolic influence is never simply imposed but continuously negotiated.

1.4. Digital Transformation and the Reconfiguration of International Relations

Digital technologies are doing more than changing how states communicate; they are reshaping the structural dynamics of international relations itself. For much of the discipline's history, technological systems were treated as external to political theory rather than constitutive of it. That assumption has become increasingly difficult to sustain. A growing body of scholarship now demonstrates that digital platforms reach into security, economic governance, diplomacy, and transnational activism in ways that demand theoretical attention[15]. Understanding digital international relations means grappling with the interaction between technological infrastructures and established power structures. Digitalization does not simply move traditional actors into online spaces and leave everything else unchanged. It reconfigures agency, alters patterns of conflict and cooperation, and gives rise to hybrid governance arrangements that sit uneasily within conventional frameworks[16].

Networked connectivity has not flattened hierarchy; if anything, power increasingly derives from control over the infrastructural nodes that regulate the flow of information and economic activity. As Farrell and Newman argue, states positioned at strategic junctions within these networks can leverage digital interdependence as an instrument of monitoring, restriction, and policy influence. Digital platforms have also expanded the symbolic dimensions of international politics in ways that are harder to map but no less consequential. Governments now employ social media, data practices, and online engagement strategies to shape global narratives and manage how they are perceived abroad. Underlying these practices is a recognition that digital environments constitute transnational communicative spaces, arenas in which political meanings are actively produced and circulated[17].

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14 Svetlana S. Bodrunova - Anna A. Litvinenko, «New Media And Political Protest: The Formation of a Public Counter-Sphere in Russia, 2008-2012».

15 Johan Eriksson - Giampiero Giacomello, *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3-5.

16 Brian Hocking vd., *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the 21st Century* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2016), 12-14.

17 Castells, «The New Public Sphere «, 84-85.

Digital transformation, then, is not simply a story about technological change. It is a story about the reconfiguration of influence itself, one in which structural power and symbolic processes have become increasingly intertwined in contemporary global politics.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design informed by sociological approaches to digital communication and symbolic power. The research is grounded in the assumption that digital platforms are not merely technological channels for information dissemination, but social arenas in which meanings, identities, and political narratives are produced, negotiated, and legitimized. From this perspective, the study investigates how TRT World strategically employs digital platforms to construct representations of Türkiye, communicate foreign policy narratives, and shape international public discourse.

To achieve this objective, the study employs qualitative content analysis supported by systematic descriptive coding. This approach is particularly suitable for examining the latent meanings, discursive structures, and symbolic representations embedded in digital media content. Rather than focusing solely on the frequency of specific themes, it enables an in-depth interpretation of how political, humanitarian, and cultural narratives are constructed and integrated within a broader communication strategy.

The analytical framework draws primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, which conceptualizes media discourse as a mechanism through which meanings, classifications, and legitimate representations are produced and reproduced. This is complemented by Manuel Castells' theory of the network society, which explains how digital communication networks reshape the production and circulation of symbolic influence, and by Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which provides an additional lens for understanding how attraction and international image operate within contemporary digital diplomacy. Accordingly, the study does not examine digital platforms as technological objects in themselves; rather, it analyzes how TRT World strategically utilizes multiple digital platforms to construct symbolic narratives, communicate political meanings, and reinforce Türkiye's international image within the contemporary digital public sphere. This research design aligns the theoretical framework, research questions, and analytical procedures within a coherent sociological perspective on digital communication and symbolic power.

2.2. Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study is to examine how TRT World strategically utilizes digital platforms to construct symbolic representations of Türkiye, communicate foreign policy narratives, and shape international public discourse within the contemporary digital communication environment. Rather than treating digital platforms as neutral technological channels, the study conceptualizes them as interconnected communicative spaces through which symbolic power is produced, negotiated, and disseminated across transnational audiences.

These objectives are guided by the following research questions:

Main Research Question:

- How does TRT World strategically utilize digital platforms to construct symbolic representations, communicate foreign policy narratives, and shape international public discourse?

Sub-questions:

- What are the dominant framing strategies employed across TRT World's digital platforms?

- How are political, humanitarian, and cultural narratives integrated within TRT World's digital communication strategy?

- How do different digital platforms contribute to the construction and dissemination of symbolic representations of Türkiye?

- In what ways does TRT World's digital content contribute to the production of symbolic power within the contemporary international public sphere?

- How can the observed communication strategies be interpreted through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, Castells' theory of the network society, and Nye's concept of soft power?

2.3. Case Selection

This study adopts a single-case study design, selecting TRT World as an analytically significant case for examining the strategic use of digital platforms in the production of symbolic power and the communication of international political narratives. Within qualitative case study research, a single case is considered appropriate when it represents an information-rich example capable of generating theoretical insights into a broader social phenomenon.

TRT World was selected for four principal reasons. First, it is Türkiye's official international public broadcaster, established to communicate news and current affairs to global audiences in English through multiple digital platforms, constituting an important institutional actor in Türkiye's international communication strategy. Second, TRT World maintains an integrated and active presence across several digital communication environments, including its official website, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). This multi-platform presence enables the organization to disseminate political narratives, humanitarian messages, and representations of national identity through diverse communication formats while addressing different audience segments. Third, TRT World regularly covers major international political developments, humanitarian crises, diplomatic initiatives, and global events, providing an appropriate empirical setting for examining how symbolic meanings and representations are strategically constructed and communicated within contemporary international media environments.

Finally, TRT World represents an analytically relevant case because its communication strategy extends beyond the transmission of news. Through the systematic selection, framing, and presentation of international events, the organization actively constructs narratives, promotes particular interpretations of political developments, and contributes to the symbolic representation of Türkiye within the global public sphere. These characteristics make TRT World a theoretically and empirically suitable case through which to investigate the relationship between symbolic power, digital communication, and international image construction.

2.4. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Data were collected from the official digital communication channels of TRT World over a clearly defined three-month period extending from 1 January 2026 to 31 March 2026. This timeframe was deliberately selected because it represents a continuous period characterized by intensive international political and humanitarian developments that received sustained editorial attention from TRT World, providing a rich empirical context for examining how symbolic narratives are strategically constructed and communicated through digital media. Selecting a bounded timeframe served two methodological purposes.

First, it ensured consistency in editorial policy by limiting the analysis to a relatively stable communication period, thereby reducing potential variations associated with long-term institutional or strategic changes. Second, it enhanced the comparability of content across the selected digital platforms, allowing the study to examine different communication formats within the same geopolitical and editorial context.

The study employed purposive sampling, a widely accepted strategy in qualitative research for selecting information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful theoretical insights. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, purposive sampling enables researchers to identify content that is directly relevant to the research objectives and theoretical framework.

To strengthen the analytical robustness of the study and provide a broader empirical basis for interpretation, the dataset was expanded to 50 units of analysis, distributed across the three selected platforms as follows:

- Instagram: 20 posts

- YouTube: 15 videos

- Official Website: 15 articles

The allocation reflects differences in publishing intensity across the platforms during the study period. Instagram generated a higher volume of visual and interactive content, while YouTube and the official website published fewer but generally longer and more comprehensive communication units. The sample distribution was therefore designed to capture these platform-specific communication patterns while maintaining analytical balance.

Each sampled unit was required to satisfy the following inclusion criteria:

- The content had to be published through an official TRT World digital platform

- The content had to address issues related to international politics, foreign policy, humanitarian affairs, or international events.

- The content had to contain identifiable textual, visual, or audiovisual material suitable for qualitative content analysis.

- The content had to remain publicly available throughout the data collection period.

- Duplicate publications, reposted materials, promotional announcements, purely technical updates, and content lacking substantive political or symbolic relevance were excluded from the sample.

The expanded dataset provides a broader and more representative empirical foundation than the preliminary dataset originally compiled during the exploratory phase of the research. Although the study remains qualitative in nature and does not seek statistical generalization, increasing the number of analyzed units enhances the diversity of communicative contexts, strengthens the credibility of the findings, and allows for a more comprehensive interpretation of TRT World's strategic communication practices across multiple digital environments.

Platform Selection

TRT World maintains an active presence across multiple digital platforms, including its official website, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). This study deliberately focused on Instagram, YouTube, and the official website, as these three platforms collectively represent the organization's principal channels for publishing rich multimedia content and visually structured communication intended for international audiences. Each platform represents a distinct mode of digital communication.

The official website serves as the primary institutional news hub, providing comprehensive reports and editorial content in their most complete textual form. YouTube hosts long-form audiovisual content, including documentaries, interviews, and news packages, enabling detailed narrative construction through the integration of language, visual imagery, and symbolic representation. Instagram functions as the primary visual social media platform, enabling the rapid circulation of symbolic content through reels, images, and infographics while encouraging audience engagement.

Facebook and X were excluded because a preliminary examination revealed that a considerable proportion of their content consisted of reposted material or shortened versions of content already published on the selected platforms, which would have introduced substantial duplication without providing proportionately new analytical insights. Restricting the analysis to these three platforms therefore allowed the study to examine complementary yet distinct forms of digital communication—textual, audiovisual, and visual—while

minimizing duplication and ensuring meaningful comparison across different modes of symbolic representation.

2.5. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the analysis was confined to a single organization, TRT World, and the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all state-affiliated international media organizations. Second, the study examined content published exclusively on three digital platforms; while these represent TRT World's principal communication channels, the exclusion of Facebook and X may limit the breadth of the analysis. Third, the study focused on media content rather than audience reception, meaning the findings explain how symbolic narratives are constructed but do not measure how international audiences interpret or respond to these messages. Fourth, although the sample was expanded to fifty units to enhance empirical breadth, the study remains qualitative in nature and its findings should be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Despite these limitations, the study provides a theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous framework for examining the strategic use of digital platforms in the construction of symbolic power and international image, which may serve as a foundation for future comparative research.

2.6. Analytical Categories and Coding Framework

A structured coding framework was developed before data collection to ensure methodological transparency and analytical consistency. The coding scheme was theory-driven, with all analytical categories established in advance based on the conceptual foundations of symbolic power, framing theory, international communication, and digital diplomacy. This deductive approach minimizes researcher subjectivity and enhances replicability. The framework draws primarily on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, framing theory, and the literature on digital diplomacy and international broadcasting. Each category was operationalized through explicit coding indicators, including recurring themes, linguistic expressions, visual representations, and discursive patterns. Where a single communication unit contained multiple symbolic meanings, more than one category could be assigned provided the operational indicators were satisfied.

The coding framework consisted of five analytical categories as follows:

- ***Political framing*** refers to content primarily presenting political actors, diplomatic initiatives, international conflicts, governmental decisions, or foreign policy developments. Coding indicators included references to governments, diplomats, or international organizations; coverage of wars, conflicts, elections, negotiations, or sanctions; and narratives emphasizing political legitimacy, sovereignty, or international cooperation. Representative keywords included: government, diplomacy, foreign policy, conflict, negotiations, ceasefire, sanctions, elections, security, summit, NATO, and United Nations.

- ***Humanitarian framing*** refers to content emphasizing human suffering, humanitarian assistance, social solidarity, refugee protection, disaster response, or moral responsibility toward affected populations. Coding indicators included civilian casualties, humanitarian crises, references to refugees or displaced persons, and appeals to compassion, solidarity, or human dignity. Representative keywords included: humanitarian aid, civilians, refugees, children, hospitals, relief, displacement, victims, medical support, and solidarity.

- ***Cultural framing*** refers to representations emphasizing cultural identity, historical heritage, religious traditions, national values, artistic expression, or civilizational symbols. Coding indicators included historical monuments, religious celebrations, traditional customs, arts, architecture, cuisine, and references to shared historical memory or national identity. Representative keywords included: culture, heritage, civilization, identity, history, tradition, religion, festival, language, and cultural diplomacy.

- ***Positive image construction*** refers to communication intended to strengthen the international reputation of Türkiye or TRT World by emphasizing competence, credibility, responsibility, cooperation, innovation, humanitarian commitment, or diplomatic leadership. Coding indicators included positive evaluations of institutional performance, successful diplomatic initiatives, international partnerships, and peace-building efforts. Representative keywords included: leadership, cooperation, partnership, innovation, development, responsibility, credibility, peace, trust, and global engagement. Coding was based on the overall representational orientation rather than isolated positive expressions.

- ***International audience targeting*** refers to communication explicitly designed for transnational rather than exclusively domestic audiences. Coding indicators included English-language communication, references to multiple countries or international organizations, cross-border perspectives, and explanatory narratives intended for audiences unfamiliar with local political contexts. Representative keywords included global, international, worldwide, foreign audiences, international community, cross-border, and global affairs.

The coding manual was applied uniformly across all fifty units, with each examined independently according to the same operational definitions and decision rules, ensuring methodological consistency and facilitating future replication.

Table1. Operational Coding Framework for Content Analysis

Analytical Category	Theoretical Foundation	Operational Definition	Coding Indicators	Examples of Keywords / Discursive Patterns
Political Framing	Bourdieu (2007); Entman (1993); Nye (2004)	Content primarily concerned with political actors, foreign policy, international conflicts, diplomatic initiatives, or geopolitical developments.	Governments, political leaders, international organizations, diplomacy, conflicts, elections, negotiations, sanctions, peace agreements, strategic partnerships.	Government, diplomacy, foreign policy, conflict, negotiations, ceasefire, NATO, United Nations, parliament, summit, minister, president, international law, security, strategic cooperation.
Humanitarian Framing	Bourdieu (2007); Chouliaraki (2006)	Content emphasizing humanitarian values, civilian suffering, relief efforts, solidarity, humanitarian responsibility, or ethical concerns.	Humanitarian aid, refugees, displaced people, civilians, humanitarian organizations, hospitals, disaster relief, reconstruction, food assistance, medical support.	Humanitarian aid, civilians, refugees, children, victims, hospitals, relief operations, food assistance, solidarity, humanitarian crisis, humanitarian response, human dignity.
Cultural Framing	Hall (1997); Bourdieu (2007)	Content highlighting cultural identity, historical heritage, traditions, religion, language, arts, or national civilization.	Historical monuments, museums, cultural festivals, religion, traditions, architecture, heritage sites, tourism, arts, language, national identity.	Heritage, civilization, culture, history, identity, religion, architecture, museum, tradition, cultural diplomacy, tourism, national values.
Positive Image Construction	Nye (2004); Anholt (2007)	Content portraying Türkiye or TRT World positively by emphasizing credibility, responsibility, leadership, cooperation, innovation, or humanitarian commitment.	Diplomatic achievements, successful initiatives, international partnerships, technological progress, humanitarian leadership, peace-building activities.	Leadership, cooperation, partnership, innovation, credibility, peace, trust, development, responsibility, success, international engagement, global cooperation.
International Audience Orientation	Castells (2008); Melissen (2005)	Content explicitly designed for international rather than domestic audiences through language, issue selection, and global framing.	English-language communication, international affairs, global events, references to multiple countries, international organizations, comparative international perspectives.	Global, international community, worldwide, international relations, cross-border, foreign audiences, global affairs, international organizations, transnational communication.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analytical process followed a systematic six-stage procedure to ensure methodological consistency and transparency.

- Stage One; Data Collection: Fifty analytical units were manually retrieved from TRT World's official Instagram, YouTube, and website during the predefined study period and archived to preserve their original content.

- Stage Two; Data Preparation: All materials were organized into a unified coding database, with each unit assigned a unique identification number indicating its platform, publication date, and content type.

- Stage Three; Initial Coding: Each unit was independently examined using the operational coding manual, with more than one code assignable where multiple symbolic meanings were identified.

- Stage Four; Cross-Checking and Coding Verification: Coding decisions were systematically compared, and any interpretive differences were resolved through consultation of the coding manual until consensus was reached.

- Stage Five; Quantitative Analysis: The frequency and percentage of each analytical category were calculated to identify dominant framing patterns across the three platforms.

- Stage Six; Qualitative Interpretation: Framing patterns were interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of symbolic power, network society, and soft power, moving beyond description toward an explanation of how TRT World's digital communication contributes to the construction of symbolic influence and international image.

2.7. Reliability

The coding process was guided by a standardized manual containing explicit operational definitions, coding indicators, decision rules, and representative keywords for each analytical category. The use of predefined criteria minimized subjective interpretation and ensured that all units were evaluated according to identical analytical standards. To strengthen coding reliability, the analysis was conducted independently by two researchers who jointly reviewed the manual and applied it to a pilot subset before commencing the full analysis. Following independent coding, results were systematically compared, and any interpretive differences were resolved through collaborative re-examination of the original units using the predefined operational definitions until consensus was reached, thereby reducing subjective bias and ensuring consistent application of the coding framework across all fifty analytical units.

2.8. Validity

Coding followed a standardized manual with explicit operational definitions, indicators, and decision rules for each category. Content validity was ensured by grounding all

analytical categories—political, humanitarian, and cultural framing; positive image construction; and international audience orientation—in the established literature on symbolic power, framing theory, digital diplomacy, and country image. Construct validity was reinforced through consistent alignment between the theoretical framework (Bourdieu, Castells, Nye), research questions, and analytical categories. Methodological validity was strengthened by triangulating findings across three platforms representing distinct formats (visual, audiovisual, textual), reducing platform-specific bias. Documentation of case selection, sampling, and coding procedures further ensures replicability.

2.9. Ethical Considerations

This study relied exclusively on publicly available digital content from TRT World's official communication platforms and did not involve human participants, personal data, or direct interaction with individuals; formal ethical approval was therefore not required. All material was analyzed within its original context, focusing on patterns of representation and framing rather than on the intentions or characteristics of individual journalists. The research design, sampling, coding framework, and interpretive process are documented in sufficient detail to ensure transparency, replicability, and academic rigor.

3. Study Analysis

3.1. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual digital content item published through TRT World's official accounts, treated independently regardless of platform or format (one Instagram post/reel, one YouTube video, one website article per unit). A total of 50 units were examined: 20 Instagram posts, 15 YouTube videos, and 15 website articles, each coded using the same framework to ensure methodological consistency. This content-level unit was chosen to capture how symbolic meanings, political narratives, and representational strategies are embedded within individual communication products, enabling systematic cross-platform comparison while preserving each artifact's contextual integrity. Each unit was analyzed in its entirety: Instagram content through visuals and captions, YouTube through video, narration, titles, descriptions, and on-screen text, and website articles through headlines, body text, images, and embedded multimedia. This uniform approach across platforms facilitated direct comparison of framing strategies and symbolic representations while maintaining analytical consistency.

3.2. General Quantitative Analysis

This section presents the findings of the content analysis conducted across TRT World's three official digital platforms. The results are organized around the distribution of the sample, the overall prevalence of analytical categories, and the relationships among political, humanitarian, and cultural framing strategies across platforms.

Table 2. Distribution of the Sample Across Digital Platforms

Platform	Number of Units	Percentages
Instagram	20	40%
Youtube	15	30%
Official Website	15	30%
Total	50	100%

The sample distribution across the three platforms reflects differences in the intensity and format of content production. Instagram's larger share corresponds to its heavier reliance on short-form visual and interactive content, consistent with the platform's communicative logic. YouTube and the official website were represented in equal proportion, enabling a balanced comparison between audiovisual storytelling and text-based institutional reporting.

Table 3. Distribution of the Sample Across Digital Platforms

Analytical Category	Frequency	Percentages
Political Framing	39	78%
Humanitarian Framing	31	62%
Cultural Framing	13	26%
Positive Representation	23	46%
International Audience Orientation	50	100%

The findings indicate that political framing was the most prevalent category, present in 78% of the analyzed units. Humanitarian framing was also strongly represented, particularly in content addressing Gaza, Palestine, Lebanon, migration, and civilian suffering. Cultural framing appeared more selectively, accounting for 26% of the sample. Notably, international audience orientation was present across all units, confirming TRT World's consistent global communicative orientation.

Table 4. Distribution of the Analytic Categories by Platforms

Platform	Political	Humanitarian	Cultural	Positive Representaion	International Audience
Instagram (n=20)	12	9	9	20	20
Youtube (n=15)	15	12	3	3	15

Official Website (n=15)	12	10	1	0	15
Total (n=50)	39	31	13	23	50

Table 4 demonstrates clear platform differentiation. YouTube exhibits the strongest political orientation, with political framing present in all analyzed videos. The website similarly functions primarily as a political and humanitarian reporting space. Instagram, by contrast, distinguishes itself by combining political news with cultural, symbolic, and visually positive representations.

Table 5. Political Framing by Platforms

Platform	Political Present	Political Absent	Percentage Present
Instagram	12	8	60%
Youtube	15	0	100%
Website	12	3	80%
Total	39	11	78%

Political framing dominates the dataset, particularly on YouTube and the official website, suggesting that TRT World employs its digital platforms not merely to circulate information but to structure international events through political and geopolitical interpretive frameworks.

Table 6. Humanitarian Framing by Platforms

Platform	Humanitarian Present	Humanitarian Absent	Percentage Present
Instagram	9	11	45%
Youtube	12	3	80%
Website	10	5	66.7%
Total	31	19	62%

Humanitarian framing appeared in 62% of the sample, indicating that TRT World frequently embeds political events within narratives of civilian suffering, moral responsibility, displacement, and humanitarian crisis. YouTube exhibited the strongest humanitarian presence, which can be attributed to audiovisual storytelling's capacity to convey suffering through emotional and visual means.

Table 7. Cultural Framing by Platforms

Platform	Cultural Present	Cultural Absent	Percentage Present
Instagram	9	11	45%
Youtube	3	12	20%
Website	1	14	6.7%
Total	31	37	26%

Cultural framing was the least frequent category overall, appearing most prominently on Instagram, where religious symbols, cultural celebrations, historical references, and visual representations of identity were more visible. This suggests that cultural symbolism functions selectively rather than as a central narrative structure.

Table 8. Positive Representaion by Platforms

Platform	P.R Present	P.R Absent	Percentage Present
Instagram	20	0	100%
Youtube	3	12	20%
Website	0	15	0%
Total	23	27	46%

Positive representation was most evident on Instagram. This does not imply that all content was emotionally positive; rather, it indicates that Instagram frequently portrayed TRT World as a globally engaged, visually active, and symbolically responsive media actor. The website, by contrast, maintained a more formal news-reporting style with limited explicit positive representation.

Table 9. International Audience Orientation by Platforms

Platform	I.A.O Present	I.A.O Absent	Percentage Present
Instagram	20	0	100%
Youtube	15	0	100%
Website	15	0	100%
Total	50	0	100%

International audience orientation was present in all analyzed units, confirming that TRT World's digital communication is consistently directed toward transnational audiences through English-language content, global issue selection, and references to international actors, conflicts, institutions, and publics.

Table 10. Relationship Between Political and Humanitarian Framing

Political Framing	Humanitarian Present	Humanitarian Absent	Total
Present	26	13	39
Absent	5	6	11
Total	31	19	50

The relationship between political and humanitarian framing is significant for understanding TRT World's symbolic communication strategy, as most humanitarian narratives appeared within politically framed content. This suggests that humanitarian discourse is not separate from political communication but functions as a moral and symbolic layer reinforcing the interpretation of international conflicts.

Table 11. Relationship Between Political and Cultural Framing

Political Framing	Cultural Present	Cultural Absent	Total
Present	6	33	39
Absent	7	4	11
Total	13	37	50

Cultural framing appeared both within and outside political narratives; however, its relatively limited frequency indicates that culture is used selectively, mainly to deepen symbolic meaning, highlight identity, or contextualize broader political and humanitarian narratives.

3.3. Interpretation of Findings

The results point to a digital communication strategy centered on a dominant political frame, with humanitarian and cultural elements layered on top. Political framing appeared in 78% of the analyzed units, which confirms that TRT World organizes international events mainly through geopolitical, diplomatic, and conflict-related narratives. Humanitarian framing, present in 62% of the sample, shows that political events are often told through their human cost civilian suffering, displacement, death, trauma, moral responsibility.

This is especially clear in the Gaza-related content, where political conflict is narrated through the lens of civilian suffering and violations of humanitarian norms. Cultural framing was less common, appearing in only 26% of the units, and concentrated mostly on Instagram. This points to culture functioning not as a dominant frame but as a selective resource—something drawn on to reinforce identity, memory, religion, and intercultural

recognition when needed. The platforms also diverge from one another. Instagram comes across as the most symbolically diverse space, mixing visual storytelling with cultural references and positive representation. YouTube leans heavily towards political and humanitarian framing in its audiovisual content, while the official website reads as the most formal of the three, focused on political and humanitarian reporting with little room for cultural or positive framing.

Read through Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, these patterns suggest TRT World is doing more than passing along information. It is actively shaping how international events are understood, choosing which frames to use, which moral meanings to foreground, and how global issues are sorted into political, humanitarian, and cultural categories. Its digital platforms, in this sense, work as symbolic spaces where international events are classified, represented, and made meaningful for a global audience.

3.4. Contribution of the Study to the Literature

This study contributes to the existing literature at the intersection of international relations, public diplomacy, and digital sociology in three principal respects. Theoretically, it contributes to the concept of digital symbolic power by examining, through the case of TRT World, how Türkiye's international image is constructed not as a fixed national attribute but as a symbolic process actively produced through the coordinated deployment of framing strategies across networked digital platforms. In doing so, the study brings Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power and Castells' theory of the network society into dialogue with Nye's notion of soft power, offering a more structurally grounded account of how Türkiye's attraction-based international influence is constructed and sustained within digital environments.

Methodologically, the study proposes a comparative multi-platform content analysis framework that combines systematic quantitative coding with qualitative framing interpretation across three distinct platform types: Instagram, YouTube, and the official website. This approach moves beyond single-platform or purely quantitative analyses by attending to both the frequency and the structural logic of framing patterns, as well as the functional relationships between platforms within TRT World's broader communication architecture. The framework is designed to be adaptable to other state-affiliated media outlets, national cases, and time periods, offering future researchers a replicable tool for the comparative study of digital soft power production. Empirically, the findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship that treats digital platforms as active sites of symbolic power production rather than neutral communication infrastructures. By showing, in concrete terms, how TRT World organizes political, humanitarian, and cultural narratives hierarchically and deploys them differentially across platforms, the study offers empirical grounding for understanding how Türkiye's foreign policy narratives and international image are constructed within the contemporary digital public sphere.

Conclusion

Rather than functioning solely as an information provider, TRT World operates as a symbolic actor that constructs specific interpretations of international events through political, humanitarian, and cultural framing. This finding supports Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, which holds that media institutions exercise influence not primarily through coercion but by producing legitimate meanings that audiences gradually come to recognize as socially credible. The predominance of political framing (78%) indicates that TRT World consistently situates international developments within broader geopolitical narratives. Rather than reporting isolated events, the platform organizes conflicts, diplomatic relations, and international crises into coherent interpretive structures.

This process reflects symbolic power insofar as media organizations participate in defining which actors appear legitimate, which events warrant attention, and which interpretations become dominant within public discourse. Humanitarian framing, present in 62% of the analyzed units, further reinforces this symbolic function. The frequent representation of civilian suffering, displacement, humanitarian crises, and moral responsibility demonstrates that political communication is simultaneously constructed through ethical and emotional narratives. Humanitarian discourse thus functions as a mechanism for reinforcing political legitimacy rather than as an independent communicative category—a pattern particularly evident in TRT World's extensive coverage of Gaza, where humanitarian representations accompany political explanations of the conflict.

The relatively limited presence of cultural framing (26%) does not diminish its significance. Rather, cultural representations function strategically to reinforce identity, historical memory, religious symbolism, and intercultural understanding. This suggests that culture operates primarily as a symbolic resource supporting broader political narratives rather than as an independent communicative objective—a tendency that Instagram illustrates through visual storytelling that combines political events with symbolic representations of culture and identity. Platform differences further reveal distinct communicative functions within TRT World's digital ecosystem. Instagram emphasizes symbolic visualization, emotional engagement, and cultural representation through highly visual content; YouTube offers more detailed political and humanitarian narratives through longer, documentary-style storytelling; and the official website serves as the institution's formal news platform, prioritizing factual reporting and political interpretation while maintaining journalistic credibility.

These differences indicate that symbolic power is not exercised uniformly across platforms but is adapted to the communicative characteristics of each digital environment. These observations are also consistent with Castells' theory of the network society, which holds that power increasingly operates through communication networks capable of organizing information flows and shaping public perception across national boundaries. TRT World's integrated use of Instagram, YouTube, and its official website illustrates how digital

media organizations construct interconnected communication networks that reach global audiences through multiple formats while sustaining a coherent institutional narrative. Furthermore, the universal presence of international audience orientation across all analyzed units confirms TRT World's strategic positioning as a global news organization rather than a domestically oriented broadcaster.

The consistent use of English-language communication, international political issues, and globally recognizable humanitarian narratives enables the platform to participate in transnational public discourse, supporting the argument that digital media organizations increasingly compete for symbolic legitimacy within global communication networks rather than within national media systems alone. Overall, the findings indicate that TRT World's digital platforms function as mechanisms of symbolic power by selecting, organizing, and legitimizing particular interpretations of international reality. Political, humanitarian, and cultural frames collectively shape audience perceptions while reinforcing institutional credibility. Digital platforms should therefore be understood not merely as channels of information distribution but as sociological spaces in which symbolic meanings, political legitimacy, and international public narratives are continuously produced and negotiated.

Future Recommendations

1. Expanding Qualitative Analysis of Digital Platforms: Future studies should extend their scope to include a wider and more diverse range of digital platforms, including less prominent social media channels, to better understand how narratives are tailored and how symbolic influence is distributed across emerging forms of digital soft power.

2. Incorporating Diverse Geographical and Cultural Contexts: Broadening the comparative scope of research to include different countries and institutions would allow for a richer understanding of how cultural and social factors shape international audience responses to digital soft power strategies.

3. Analyzing Digital Audience Dynamics: There is a clear need for studies that examine how audiences receive political, humanitarian, and cultural discourse across digital platforms, and how levels of engagement and influence vary. Such research would support the development of more effective communication policies.

4. Developing Sociological Frameworks for Modeling Digital Power: The findings of this study can contribute to building theoretical models that address meaning management and multi-platform narrative strategies, linking them to broader shifts in power and identity within the international network society.

5. Integrating Continuous Digital Media Monitoring into Public Policy: Establishing ongoing monitoring mechanisms for digital media would help identify emerging trends and challenges in the use of digital soft power and inform the development of media and digital diplomacy policies that take into account the long-term effects of symbolic influence.

In conclusion, this study highlights a fundamental shift in the nature of international influence in the digital age. Power is increasingly measured by the ability to shape meaning, distribute symbols, and reproduce legitimacy through a multi-media networked communication structure, rather than by material or military resources alone. This provides an important theoretical and practical foundation for researchers and policymakers working in the fields of international relations and digital diplomacy.

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