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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

FORMS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF MAA CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN CONSTRUCTING KENYA'S EXTERNAL IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Student: This study examined the forms of Maa cultural diplomacy employed in Kenya's engagement with foreign publics and assessed its socio-cultural contribution to the construction of Kenya's external image, addressing a gap in International Relations scholarship, where Maa cultural expressions are prominently visible in Kenya's international representation yet remain under-theorized as a distinct instrument of cultural diplomacy.

Methodology: The study adopted a descriptive-exploratory, mixed-methods design, drawing on a sample of 150 respondents, comprising cultural elders, practitioners, government officials, diplomats, and representatives of cultural and tourism organizations, selected through purposive and snowball sampling from a target population of 240. Data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion in Narok County, with quantitative data analyzed descriptively and qualitative data analyzed thematically. **Findings**: Findings revealed that dress and adornment, traditional dances and music, and cultural festivals dominate Kenya's Maa cultural diplomacy practice, while cross-border cultural exchanges and digital or narrative representation remain critically underdeveloped, reflecting a model that privileges visual impact over sustained narrative engagement. Maa cultural diplomacy was found to make a strong socio-cultural contribution to Kenya's external image, with all five measured effect dimensions, visibility, attractiveness, authenticity, uniqueness, and people-to-people engagement, recording means above 4.25, although the comparatively weaker performance of people-to-people engagement revealed a persistent gap between image projection and the cultivation of deep relational ties with foreign publics.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Maa cultural diplomacy constitutes a potent but institutionally underdeveloped pillar of Kenya's soft power architecture, whose visual and symbolic strength has yet to be matched by a deliberate, narrative-driven diplomatic strategy.

Recommendation: The study recommends diversifying Maa cultural diplomacy through cross-border exchange and digital storytelling, and establishing community-led cultural ambassador programs to deepen international engagement beyond material and visual representation.

Keywords*:* *Forms, Socio-Cultural, Contributions, Maa Cultural Diplomacy, Constructing Kenya's, External Image*

BACKGROUND

Power in contemporary international relations is increasingly exercised through attraction rather than coercion. This shift finds its clearest theoretical expression in Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, the capacity of a state to shape the preferences of others through the appeal of its culture, values, and policies rather than military force or economic pressure. Cultural diplomacy operationalizes this idea, deliberately mobilizing heritage, the arts, language, and lifestyle to communicate national identity, cultivate goodwill, and shape how a country is perceived abroad. This pattern is visible across regions. Egypt has long drawn on its Pharaonic heritage, with the Grand Egyptian Museum increasingly read as a strategic heritage-diplomacy instrument marking a shift from passive heritage guardianship to active "heritage power," with the Tutankhamun collection's reunification and display functioning as a reclaiming of narrative sovereignty over Egypt's own history (Ghazy, 2026). This strategy is not merely symbolic: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities data from 2014 to 2021 links museum and exhibition activity to measurable tourism revenue growth (Mostafa, 2023). South Korea's sustained state investment in creative industries and Hallyu over more than two decades has similarly produced measurable gains in its international image and legitimacy (Kim, 2021), while Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup produced measurable short-term image gains that nonetheless required sustained institutional follow-through to convert into durable soft power (El-Dabt et al., 2025).

Across the countries in which the British Council operates, each one percent increase in country coverage between 2000 and 2012 was associated with roughly a 0.66 percent increase in UK inward foreign direct investment, alongside gains in trust and tourist arrivals (University of Edinburgh & British Council, 2017). Similarly, global data spanning 2004 to 2014 shows that Confucius Institute placement systematically correlates with the maximization of China's educational, economic, and political interests, confirming it as a deliberately designed soft power instrument (Huang & Xiang, 2019), with African deployments following dynamics shaped by local partnerships rather than uniform global strategy (Stambach & Kwayu, 2017). African states have increasingly recognized culture as a comparable strategic resource, though not always with the same institutional backing. Nigeria's Nollywood remains a potential rather than a fully realized diplomatic resource, largely because of weak state coordination (Ogunnubi & Isike, 2018), even though its reach is measurable at the audience level: regular Nollywood viewers among surveyed

South African college students reported significantly more positive perceptions of Nigerian culture than non-viewers (Onyenankeya et al., 2017).

Kenya's engagement with culture fits within this broader pattern, but with a distinctive character. Wildlife and heritage have long anchored Kenya's national image, and Maasai (Maa) culture in particular functions as one of the country's most recognizable symbolic assets, routinely featured in tourism marketing, branding campaigns, and international media as visual shorthand for "Kenya" itself. In a survey-based study of 250 tourists each in Kenya and South Africa, destination branding strategies significantly shaped tourists' perceptions, with Maasai imagery standing as one of the branding elements most consistently used in Kenya's marketing architecture. Yet this prominence sits uneasily alongside questions of commodification and agency: Maasai imagery already functions as a recognized, high-value "cultural brand" internationally, a recognition significant enough to have prompted the founding of the Maasai Intellectual Property Initiative (MIPI), formed precisely because that brand value has historically accrued to intermediaries and international companies rather than to the Maa community itself (Brindle & Florman, 2021).

What is notably absent from the Maa case, however, is the institutional coordination characterizing the comparator cases above. Where British Council activity, Confucius Institute placement, and Egyptian heritage-tourism policy all show measurable, trackable links between coordinated cultural investment and diplomatic or economic outcomes (Huang & Xiang, 2019; Mostafa, 2023; University of Edinburgh & British Council, 2017), Maa cultural diplomacy appears prominently and consistently deployed, yet organic and decentralized rather than the product of deliberate state strategy. This points to a deeper theoretical and empirical gap. Despite the intense visual and symbolic presence of Maa culture in how Kenya is represented abroad, there is limited systematic scholarship within International Relations that treats "Maa cultural diplomacy" as a distinct instrument of Kenyan foreign policy, rather than folding it into broad discussions of "Kenyan culture" or general public diplomacy. From a constructivist standpoint, national images are not passive reflections of material capability but are intersubjectively constructed through shared meanings and representations circulated between a state and foreign publics. Understood this way, the specific forms Maa cultural diplomacy takes, its socio-cultural contribution to Kenya's external image, the barriers limiting its effectiveness, and its future prospects remain empirically under-examined and theoretically underdeveloped.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive-exploratory, mixed-methods design, suited to documenting cultural expressions and identity markers while also probing the relatively under-researched link between Maa cultural diplomacy and Kenya's external image. The target population comprised 240 individuals and institutions engaged in Maa cultural production, governance, and diplomacy, including cultural elders, practitioners and performers, officials from the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs and the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, diplomats and cultural attachés, and representatives of cultural and tourism organizations. A sample of 150 respondents was drawn using Yamane's (1967) formula, selected through purposive sampling and supplemented by snowball sampling to reach informally networked cultural custodians and performers not accessible through formal institutional lists. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-scale items measuring the frequency of specific forms of Maa cultural diplomacy and the extent of its socio-cultural contribution to Kenya's external image, complemented by semi-structured interviews with government officials, diplomats, and cultural-organization representatives, and a focus group discussion with Maa elders, youth performers, and artisans in Narok County. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in how Maa cultural forms are deployed and perceived, while qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically. Triangulation across questionnaire, interview, and focus group data reduced the risk of single-story representation. Relevant approvals were sort before commencing the study with all participants provided with informed consent prior to their participation.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

The study participants had varied sociodemographic characteristics. On gender distribution, women comprised 70.1 percent of respondents compared to 28.4 percent male and 1.5 percent who preferred not to disclose their gender. On the gender distribution of participants, those aged 36 to 45 years formed the largest cohort (34.3 percent), followed closely by those aged 26 to 35 years (29.1 percent), with smaller proportions in the 46 to 55 (19.4 percent), 18 to 25 (11.2 percent), and 56-and-above (6.0 percent) brackets. Occupationally, the sample captured a multi-stakeholder

character of Maa cultural diplomacy. Respondents drawn from community, NGO, heritage, and indigenous-rights backgrounds formed the largest group ("other," 46.3 percent), followed by government officials (29.1 percent), academics (11.9 percent), tourism and cultural organization representatives (6.7 percent), and self-identified Maa cultural practitioners (6.0 percent). The substantial presence of both government and academic respondents alongside grassroots and community voices ensured the findings were informed by policy, scholarly, and lived-experience perspectives simultaneously.

Length of involvement with Maa cultural activities further reinforced the depth of the sample's knowledge base. More than a third of respondents (35.8 percent) had been engaged with Maa cultural activities for 20 years or more, indicating a core of respondents with substantial institutional memory and sustained exposure to how Maa culture is mediated and represented externally. The remaining respondents were distributed across shorter engagement bands; 1 to 5 years (23.9 percent), 6 to 10 years (14.2 percent), 11 to 15 years (9.0 percent), and 16 to 20 years (7.5 percent), while 9.7 percent reported no prior involvement, likely reflecting officials or institutional representatives whose engagement is administrative rather than cultural. This is illustrated in table.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	70.1%
	Male	28.4%
	Prefer not to disclose	1.5%
Age Bracket	18–25 years	11.2%
	26–35 years	29.1%
	36–45 years	34.3%
	46–55 years	19.4%
	56 years and above	6.0%
Role/Occupation	Government officials	29.1%
	Academia	11.9%
	Tourism and cultural organizations	6.7%
	Maa cultural practitioners	6.0%
	Others	46.3%
Length of Involvement with Maa Cultural Activities	No involvement	9.7%
	1–5 years	23.9%
	6–10 years	14.2%
	11–15 years	9.0%
	16–20 years	7.5%
	20 years and above	35.8%

Forms of Maa Cultural Diplomacy Employed

Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and mean scores were used to analyses respondents' opinions covering awareness of the forms of Maa cultural diplomacy, frequency of use, and the level of agreement on their deployment in Kenya's international engagement as summarized in table 2. In addition, these were complemented by qualitative responses from key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 2: Forms of Maa Cultural Diplomacy Employed

Statement	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %	Mean	SD
Maa traditional attire is widely used to represent Kenya internationally	72.4	17.2	7.5	3.0	0.0	4.59	0.76
Maa symbols and imagery are used in Kenya's global branding	63.4	27.6	4.5	3.0	1.5	4.49	0.84
Maa culture is promoted through tourism and conservation initiatives	61.9	20.1	13.4	4.5	0.0	4.40	0.88
Maa cultural performances are showcased in international events and exhibitions	57.5	26.1	11.9	3.0	1.5	4.35	0.91
Maa cultural narratives are communicated through international media platforms	30.6	27.6	32.8	6.0	3.0	3.77	1.05
Overall Mean						**4.32**	**0.89**

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

The statement that Maa traditional attire is widely used to represent Kenya internationally recorded the highest mean of 4.59 (SD = 0.76), with a combined 89.6 percent of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing, indicating near-unanimous recognition of dress and adornment as the most prominent instrument of Maa cultural diplomacy. Maa symbols and imagery being used in Kenya's global branding followed with a mean of 4.49 (SD = 0.84) and a combined agreement of 91.0 percent, while the promotion of Maa culture through tourism and conservation initiatives recorded a mean of 4.40 (SD = 0.88) with 82.1 percent in agreement. The showcasing of Maa cultural

performances in international events and exhibitions yielded a mean of 4.35 (SD = 0.91), with 83.6 percent of respondents in agreement.

The statement regarding the communication of Maa cultural narratives through international media platforms recorded the lowest mean of 3.77 (SD = 1.05), with 32.8 percent of respondents remaining neutral and only 58.2 percent expressing agreement, indicating that this dimension of Maa cultural diplomacy is perceived as inconsistently and inadequately executed relative to other forms. The overall mean of 4.32 (SD = 0.89) reflects a strong consensus that Maa cultural expressions are actively deployed as instruments of Kenya's international engagement. However, a critical analytical reading of these findings goes beyond the description of high mean scores. The dominance of visual and material forms, traditional attire (Mean = 4.59), symbols and imagery (Mean = 4.49), and tourism-linked initiatives (Mean = 4.40), reveals that Kenya's cultural diplomacy is heavily reliant on a narrow repertoire of visible cultural symbols.

In addition, qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and focus group discussions provided deeper contextual understanding of the forms of Maa cultural diplomacy employed in Kenya's engagement with foreign publics. A senior government official from the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs observed:

"The Maasai brand is arguably Kenya's most powerful cultural asset in international spaces. Whether it is at tourism expos, diplomatic receptions or conservation forums, Maa attire, beadwork and performances are consistently used to signal Kenya's identity to foreign audiences. This is not always accidental, but it is also not always as strategic as it should be."

This observation reinforces the high mean scores recorded for Maa traditional attire (mean = 4.59) and Maa symbols and imagery in global branding (mean = 4.49) in Table 4.2, affirming that material cultural expressions constitute the most prominently deployed instruments of Maa cultural diplomacy in Kenya's international engagements. A Maa cultural practitioner from a focus group discussion conducted in Narok County similarly noted:

"When Kenya goes to international festivals or when tourists come to our villages, it is our clothing, our dances and our beadwork that they see first. These things carry our identity and they tell the world who we are. But the stories behind these things, the oral traditions and deeper meanings, those are rarely shared because there is no platform that takes them seriously."

This perspective aligns directly with the quantitative finding that Maa cultural narratives communicated through international media platforms recorded the lowest mean of 3.77 (SD = 1.05) and the highest proportion of neutral responses at 32.8 percent, confirming a recognized and persistent gap between the visibility of material cultural forms and the communication of deeper indigenous knowledge and narrative dimensions in Kenya's international cultural engagement.

A representative from a cultural organization during a key informant interview further remarked:

"Maa culture is institutionalized as a visual brand for Kenya but not as a living knowledge system. The attire and dances open doors internationally, but unless we invest in platforms that allow the Maa people to narrate their own stories, the deeper diplomatic value of the culture will remain unrealized."

This observation resonates strongly with the finding that cross-border cultural exchanges and digital media representation recorded the lowest frequency of use in Table 4.2, with means of 2.99 and 3.23 respectively, suggesting that the more discursive, narrative-driven and digitally mediated dimensions of Maa cultural diplomacy remain structurally underdeveloped relative to their diplomatic potential.

Socio-Cultural Contribution of Maa Cultural Diplomacy

Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and mean scores were used to analyse respondents' opinions covering the extent to which Maa cultural diplomacy contributes to Kenya's external image as summarized in table 3. These were then complemented by qualitative responses from key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 3: Effects of Maa Cultural Diplomacy on Kenya's External Image

Statement	VGE %	GE %	ME %	SE %	NA %	Mean	SD
Maa culture enhances Kenya's international visibility	72.4	18.7	7.5	1.5	0.0	4.62	0.69
Maa cultural representation increases Kenya's cultural attractiveness	69.4	21.6	6.0	3.0	0.0	4.57	0.74
Maa cultural diplomacy influences perceptions of Kenya as authentic and unique	69.4	20.1	9.0	1.5	0.0	4.57	0.72
Maa cultural diplomacy contributes to a positive national image	60.4	27.6	7.5	4.5	0.0	4.44	0.82
Maa culture strengthens people-to-people engagement with foreign publics	49.3	34.3	11.9	4.5	0.0	4.28	0.85
Overall Mean						**4.50**	**0.76**

The statement that Maa culture enhances Kenya's international visibility recorded the highest mean of 4.62 (SD = 0.69), with a combined 91.0 percent of respondents indicating agreement to a great or very great extent, reflecting an exceptionally strong consensus regarding the visibility-enhancing function of Maa cultural expressions in international spaces. Maa cultural representation increasing Kenya's cultural attractiveness and Maa cultural diplomacy influencing perceptions of Kenya as authentic and unique both recorded an equally high mean of 4.57, with standard deviations of 0.74 and 0.72 respectively, and combined high ratings of 91.0 percent and 89.6 percent, indicating near-unanimous acknowledgement of the role of Maa culture in constructing Kenya's distinctive international identity.

Maa cultural diplomacy contributing to a positive national image recorded a mean of 4.44 (SD = 0.82), with 88.1 percent of respondents rating this to a great or very great extent, while Maa culture strengthening people-to-people engagement with foreign publics recorded the lowest mean of 4.28 (SD = 0.85), with 83.6 percent of respondents still rating this highly, though with slightly greater variability suggesting divergent views on the interpersonal dimensions of cultural diplomacy. The overall mean of 4.50 (SD = 0.76) reflects a consistently high consensus that Maa cultural diplomacy produces significant and multidimensional positive effects on Kenya's external image. Analytically, these findings extend well beyond statistical description and carry important implications for both theory and policy in the field of cultural diplomacy. Qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and focus group discussions provided deeper contextual

understanding of the effects of Maa cultural diplomacy in shaping and enhancing Kenya's international image. A senior official from the Kenya Tourism Board observed:

"Kenya's external image is inseparably linked to the Maasai. When international visitors, investors or diplomats think of Kenya, the imagery that comes to mind most immediately is the Maa warrior, the beadwork, the red shuka and the vast pastoral landscapes. That is not accidental. It is the product of decades of deliberate and incidental cultural projection that has made Maa culture synonymous with Kenya's identity globally."

This observation strongly corroborates the quantitative finding that Maa culture enhances Kenya's international visibility recorded the highest mean of 4.62, affirming that the visibility-generating function of Maa cultural diplomacy is the most broadly and consistently recognised effect among stakeholders across all respondent categories. A cultural diplomat and academic respondent participating in a key informant interview further remarked:

"There is substantial evidence that the Maasai brand improves Kenya's cultural attractiveness as a destination, a partner and a nation. When Kenya participates in international cultural festivals or diplomatic forums and Maa cultural elements are present, the country is perceived as distinctive, authentic and culturally rich. That perception translates directly into soft power capital, even when it is not formally called cultural diplomacy."

This perspective aligns with the quantitative finding that Maa cultural representation increases Kenya's cultural attractiveness recorded a mean of 4.57 with 91.0 percent of respondents affirming this effect, supporting the position that cultural attractiveness constitutes one of the most significant and measurable outcomes of Maa cultural diplomacy in Kenya's international engagement. A community elder from a focus group discussion in Kajiado County added:

"Our culture has taken Kenya's name to places that government alone cannot reach. When our young people perform at international events or when our beadwork appears in global exhibitions, people ask about Kenya. They want to visit, they want to learn and they want to engage. That is what our culture does for this country, it opens doors that diplomacy alone cannot open."

This observation resonates with the finding that Maa culture strengthening people-to-people engagement with foreign publics recorded the lowest mean among the five items at 4.28, yet still achieved 83.6 percent agreement, indicating that while the interpersonal and grassroots dimensions

of Maa cultural diplomacy are broadly acknowledged, they are perceived as less consistently realised compared to the image and visibility effects that operate at the institutional and symbolic level.

DISCUSSION

Dress and adornment was the most widely recognized form at 81.3 percent. Traditional dances and music followed at 79.9 percent, and cultural festivals and exhibitions at 71.6 percent. These three forms dominated Kenya's Maa cultural diplomacy practice. Cross-border cultural exchanges recorded the lowest awareness at 31.3 percent, while media and digital representation recorded 26.9 percent. In terms of frequency, dress and adornment recorded the highest mean of 4.37, while cross-border exchanges recorded the lowest at 2.99. The overall agreement means of 4.32 confirmed broad deployment of Maa cultural expressions internationally. However, communication of Maa cultural narratives through international media recorded the lowest mean of 3.77, revealing a critical gap between material cultural visibility and narrative depth. This pattern aligns with what Nye (2004) describes as the 'attraction' dimension of soft power, wherein visually distinctive and symbolically rich cultural assets generate immediate international recognition.

From a Soft Power Theory perspective (Nye, 2004), the most durable and diplomatically potent forms of soft power are those that engage foreign audiences not merely at the level of aesthetic attraction but through deeper value-sharing, narrative exchange and intercultural understanding. The structural underutilisation of international media platforms (Mean = 3.77) and cross-border exchanges suggests that Kenya's Maa cultural diplomacy has yet to evolve from a visual branding exercise into a fully-fledged, narrative-driven diplomatic instrument. This gap is analytically significant: The Maa community possesses a rich reservoir of oral traditions, ecological knowledge and social philosophy, including concepts such as Enkiama (community welfare) and the Maa relationship with the land, that remain largely absent from Kenya's international cultural communications.

Constructivism further illuminates this finding by highlighting that national identities and international images are socially constructed through sustained interaction and shared meaning-making (Wendt, 1999). Kenya's overreliance on a single indigenous cultural group, the Maasai,

for its primary cultural diplomacy identity carries a specific constructivist risk: it risks reducing Kenya's nationally complex, ethnically diverse identity to a singular and potentially stereotyped cultural representation. Ahumada and Polanco (2023) document this dynamic in the context of Kenya's Olympic delegation attire, noting that while Maasai-inspired clothing powerfully communicates cultural heritage, it simultaneously consolidates a reductive visual shorthand for Kenyan identity that may crowd out the diplomatic contributions of Kenya's other 43 indigenous communities.

Qualitative findings confirmed that while Maa attire and performances open diplomatic doors, the deeper indigenous knowledge and oral traditions behind these expressions are rarely communicated to foreign audiences. This triangulation supports Nye (2004), who argues that the most effective forms of cultural diplomacy are those that are visually distinctive, symbolically rich and immediately recognisable to international audiences, characteristics that are inherently embodied in Maa material culture and that account for its dominance in Kenya's external image construction. The finding that cultural narratives and digital platforms are structurally underutilized further resonates with Mutunga (2017), who observes that indigenous African cultural diplomacy tends to privilege performative and material expressions over discursive and digital forms, thereby constraining the depth, authenticity and global reach of cultural communication in contemporary international environments.

Additionally, the high levels of awareness and agreement recorded across all respondent categories align with Gachihi (2019), who notes that Kenya's sustained exposure of Maa cultural symbols through tourism, conservation initiatives and international media has cultivated broad institutional recognition of Maa culture as a central and enduring pillar of Kenya's soft power architecture, even as critical gaps in narrative agency and digital outreach remain to be strategically addressed. This imbalance constitutes both a governance challenge and a strategic opportunity. The challenge lies in the risk of cultural commodification and representational reductionism identified by Botha (2020), wherein the reduction of a living culture to a set of marketable visual symbols erodes its authenticity and diplomatic credibility over time.

The overall mean of 4.50 (SD = 0.76) reflects a consistently high consensus that Maa cultural diplomacy produces significant and multidimensional positive effects on Kenya's external image. Analytically, these findings extend well beyond statistical description and carry important

implications for both theory and policy in the field of cultural diplomacy. From a Soft Power Theory perspective (Nye, 2004), the dominant effects, visibility (4.62), attractiveness (4.57), and authenticity (4.57), correspond precisely to Nye's tripartite model of cultural soft power, which posits that cultural assets generate international influence by attracting, impressing and persuading foreign audiences rather than by coercing them. The fact that all five effect dimensions recorded means exceeding 4.25 provides empirical validation, within the Kenyan context, of the theoretical proposition that indigenous cultural expressions constitute potent and measurable generators of soft power capital.

From a Constructivist standpoint (Wendt, 1999), the high consensus around authenticity and uniqueness as effects of Maa cultural diplomacy is theoretically significant. Constructivism holds that national identities are not fixed essences but are actively constructed through repeated international interaction and the mutual attribution of meaning. The finding that 89.6 percent of respondents affirm Maa cultural diplomacy's role in shaping perceptions of Kenya as authentic and unique demonstrates that Kenya's Maa cultural assets are successfully performing an identity-construction function in international spaces, reinforcing a durable image of Kenya as a culturally sovereign, ecologically distinctive and historically rooted nation.

However, a critical analysis of these findings also reveals a governance paradox. While the effects of Maa cultural diplomacy on Kenya's external image are empirically strong, the mechanisms through which these effects are achieved remain institutionally fragile. As the challenges data (Section 4.4.3) will demonstrate, these positive effects are generated largely despite, rather than because of, coherent institutional governance. Kenya lacks a dedicated Maa cultural diplomacy policy framework, intellectual property protections for Maa cultural expressions remain inadequate, and community participation in cultural governance is structurally limited.

This creates what might be termed a 'soft power paradox': the cultural asset is diplomatically potent, but the institutional architecture for protecting, governing and strategically deploying it is underdeveloped. This paradox is particularly evident in the relatively lower mean recorded for people-to-people engagement (4.28), suggesting that while Kenya's Maa cultural diplomacy successfully projects a powerful national image, it has yet to translate this visibility into deep, sustained and mutually enriching intercultural relationships with foreign publics, precisely the type of engagement that Nye (2011) identifies as the hallmark of durable soft power.

Compared to the findings of Zaugg and Nishimura (2015) on Kenya's participation in the 2013 Venice Biennale, which highlighted weak institutional support and inadequate funding as barriers to effective cultural diplomacy, the present study's findings suggest that the positive effects of Maa cultural diplomacy on Kenya's external image have been achieved primarily through the inherent cultural richness and international recognisability of Maa expressions rather than through deliberate and adequately resourced institutional strategy. This divergence from contexts such as China's state-led cultural diplomacy (Zhang, 2010), where comparable effects are achieved through systematic government investment and coordinated institutional governance, underscores the need for Kenya to transition from an incidental to a deliberate and structured approach to Maa cultural diplomacy if the full diplomatic potential of these effects is to be realised and sustained.

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a compelling and well-grounded basis for assessing the effects of Maa cultural diplomacy on Kenya's external image. Both data sources consistently affirm that Maa cultural expressions generate significant positive effects across all five dimensions examined, with visibility, attractiveness and authenticity emerging as the strongest and most universally recognised outcomes. This triangulation supports Nye (2004), who argues that cultural soft power is most effectively exercised through assets that are visually compelling, symbolically distinctive and emotionally resonant with international audiences, precisely the characteristics that render Maa cultural expressions so potent as instruments of Kenya's external image construction.

The finding that all five effect statements recorded means above 4.25 further aligns with Wendt (1999), who posits that cultural identities and shared meanings constructed through sustained international interaction generate durable and mutually reinforcing perceptions of national character that constitute a form of relational soft power extending well beyond formal diplomatic channels. Additionally, the strong consensus regarding authenticity and uniqueness as effects of Maa cultural diplomacy resonates with Gachihi (2019), who observes that indigenous cultural expressions carry an inherent credibility and distinctiveness that differentiates them from manufactured national brands, thereby enhancing their effectiveness as instruments of international image construction and positioning Kenya as a culturally sovereign and globally distinctive nation.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the forms and socio-cultural contributions of Maa cultural diplomacy in constructing Kenya's external image. With respect to the forms of Maa cultural diplomacy, the study found that dress and adornment, traditional dances and music, and cultural festivals dominate current practice, while cross-border exchanges and digital or narrative representation remain critically underdeveloped, pointing to a model that prioritizes visual impact over sustained narrative engagement with foreign publics. With respect to its socio-cultural contribution, Maa cultural diplomacy was found to make a strong contribution to Kenya's external image, with all five measured dimensions recording means above 4.25, although the comparatively weaker performance of people-to-people engagement revealed a persistent gap between surface-level image projection and the cultivation of deeper relational ties with foreign audiences. Taken together, these findings suggest that while Maa cultural diplomacy is prominently and effectively deployed as a visual and symbolic resource, its full potential to build durable, relationship-based soft power for Kenya remains only partially realised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations would bridge the identified gaps;

i. Diversify Maa cultural diplomacy beyond dress, dance and festivals by developing cross-border cultural exchange and digital or narrative-based representation programmes.
ii. Establish community-led Maa cultural ambassador programmes to directly narrate heritage internationally, strengthening the comparatively weak people-to-people engagement dimension.
iii. Develop a digital Maa cultural heritage programme documenting oral traditions and narratives to convert visual attraction into deeper relational ties.
iv. Future studies should examine international audience reception of Maa cultural forms to test the supply-demand gap in current diplomacy practice.

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