



Projecting Ramen Through the Screen: Japan's Cultural Diplomacy on TikTok in the European Public Sphere

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Abstract. This research aims how Japan's cultural diplomacy is manifested through ramen themed content on TikTok and how European audiences respond within the digital public sphere. Utilizing the theory of cultural diplomacy and the concept of soft power, the research positions TikTok as a strategic medium for disseminating Japanese popular culture in an appealing and non-coercive manner. Ramen, as a symbol of Japanese culinary identity, is not merely presented as a passive object of consumption, but as a medium for active cultural exchange. Analysis of ramen related TikTok content reveals that European creators do not simply receive Japanese culture; they also play an active role in reproducing, modifying, and reinterpreting that culinary identity within their local contexts. Such creative responses indicate the success of Japan's cultural diplomacy, wherein international audiences engage actively and integrate foreign culture into their personal and communal expressions. In this context, TikTok functions not only as a tool for cross-cultural communication but also as a new arena where soft power operates through visual aesthetics, algorithmic exposure, and social interaction. The result of this study affirm that cultural diplomacy through digital media not only builds a positive image of the culture-exporting nation but also generates cross cultural creativity that further strengthens Japan's global influence.

Keywords : TikTok, Cultural Diplomacy, Ramen Restaurants, European

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence and growth of ramen restaurants in Europe reflect a broader wave in the global dissemination of Japanese cuisine. Initially, Japanese restaurants on the continent were established primarily to serve Japanese expatriate communities. Over time, however, local populations began to develop an appreciation for Japanese culinary styles and flavors. Since the 1970s particularly in major cities and cultural hubs the popularity of Japanese dining establishments, including those specializing in ramen, has grown significantly (Milligan, 2006). These restaurants have undergone a process of localization, adapting ingredients and flavors to better suit the local palate. This cultural and culinary adaptation has contributed to the widespread acceptance of ramen and other Japanese dishes across Europe.

Overall, the rise of ramen restaurants in Europe reflects the dynamics of culinary globalization, where Japanese cuisine is adapted and integrated into local food cultures.

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I. S. Fitrinitia et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Strategic and Global Studies 2025 (ICSGS 2025)*, Atlantis Highlights in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities 43,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-918-6_46

Ramen establishments have moved beyond serving solely the Japanese diaspora and have become part of a broader culinary trend embraced by European consumers. Through various modifications and innovations, these restaurants tailor their offerings to suit local tastes and preferences.

In this era of digital globalization, geographical boundaries are no longer the primary factor in shaping social spaces. Modern globalization, driven by advances in communication and information technology, has given rise to new social spaces that exist entirely in the virtual realm (Papacharissi, 2013). These spaces are formed through various global digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media, enabling simultaneous and unrestricted cross cultural interactions. Through the virtual world, individuals from different parts of the global can connect, share, and enjoy a variety of cultural forms that were previously local or limited to specific groups.

This virtual social space functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a forum for the exchange of identities, values, and cultural symbols (Miller & Slater, 2020). Every user can act as both a producer and consumer of culture (a prosumer), actively creating and disseminating their cultural representations to a global audience. This situation positions digital platforms as a major force in the spread of global culture and the formation of public opinion across nations. Popular culture, such as food, music, fashion, and lifestyle, now circulates and is reproduced at unprecedented speed and scale.

Within this framework, digital globalization not only accelerates cultural exchange but also fundamentally transforms how culture is received, interpreted, and created by global audiences (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). The virtual social space becomes a place where the boundaries between local and global cultures are increasingly blurred, while also providing opportunities for certain countries to carry out cultural diplomacy in a non-coercive manner to international communities. Japan, for example, utilizes digital platforms to introduce its popular cultural elements such as anime, music, and cuisine to various countries, including Europe (Koichi, 2015). This demonstrates that the new social spaces created by digital globalization not only facilitate communication but also serve as a new foundation for cultural exchange and the expansion of geopolitical influence through soft power.

One of the most striking manifestations of this new social space is the emergence of TikTok as a global digital platform that has become one of the most popular and influential in the world today. Launched internationally in 2018, TikTok quickly transcended demographic and geographic boundaries, becoming a cross-generational space of expression that is highly flexible and adaptive. TikTok is not merely an entertainment app; it has evolved into a form of digital cultural media where trends, opinions, and

identities are created, disseminated, and negotiated directly by users across the globe (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

TikTok's popularity is fueled by its ability to present short form videos that are fast-paced, easily accessible, and highly participatory. Its algorithm, which is highly responsive to user preferences, enables viral content to spread widely across linguistic and cultural borders (Miller & Slater, 2020). This makes TikTok a new arena for global cultural exchange, where local cultural elements such as food, music, and lifestyle can gain international visibility within hours. This phenomenon opens up opportunities for various countries, including Japan, to engage in cultural diplomacy organically without relying on formal diplomatic channels.

Furthermore, TikTok provides a creative space where individuals do not merely consume culture, but also adapt and recreate it in accordance with their local contexts (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Incoming cultural elements are not passively accepted; rather, they are reproduced with diverse styles, humor, narratives, and interpretations making TikTok a site of active, two way cultural exchange. In this sense, TikTok functions as a global cultural infrastructure that connects diverse cultures within a dynamic, open, and algorithm-driven social space.

With its global influence, TikTok has become more than just a social media application. It now serves as a strategic tool for shaping cultural meaning, identity, and as an instrument of soft power in international relations (Cull, 2013). Thus, studying cultural practices on TikTok such as the diffusion of Japanese culinary culture through ramen related content is essential to understanding how culture moves, transforms, and is received in today's increasingly complex yet interconnected digital world.

TikTok has experienced tremendous global growth, although its adoption in foreign policy and cultural diplomacy is still low. Other diplomatic actors have established a presence on the platform due to its ability to create high engagement content, reaching audiences from all walks of life. TikTok is also a setting where algorithmic governance of international geopolitics has been prominent in public debate. The concept concerns how one can organize automated decision-making processes through algorithm design (Fjalhelld et al., 2024). This opens up new dimensions of relevance for digital diplomacy, both in terms of prospective opportunities and critical risks.

The primary function of diplomacy is the implementation of foreign policy primarily through envoys and delegates of other countries. Traditionally, diplomacy is concerned with representation, negotiation and reporting. Adam Watson placed diplomacy as 'the negotiation of political entities recognizing each other's independence (Zubair, 2023). Traditional diplomacy is aimed at gathering information from abroad; analyzing reports

from relevant foreign countries; devising strategies based on that information; and, finally, that traditional diplomacy focuses on interstate relations with little influence on foreign publics.

While diplomacy was traditionally described by Adam Watson as a process involving political entities mutually acknowledging each other's sovereignty, contemporary soft diplomacy often characterized by cultural, informal, and media-based approaches goes beyond mere state recognition. It requires active engagement and acceptance from the audience. European societies, with their robust institutions, critical media awareness, and democratic dialogues, have the ability to selectively respond to cultural diplomacy efforts from other countries, whether these come through entertainment, education, or lifestyle channels.

As a result, Europe functions not only as a recipient of soft power initiatives but also as a cultural gatekeeper, making conscious decisions about whether to adopt external narratives or keep cultural boundaries intact (Melissen, 2005). This capacity to accept, reinterpret, or reject foreign cultural influences ultimately determines the success of soft diplomacy in today's digitally interconnected world.

For many years, European societies have been known for their relatively exclusive cultural tendencies, particularly in preserving national identity, local values, and what they consider to be authentic cultural heritage (Tomlinson, 1999). This exclusivity is reflected in the way Europeans interpret foreign cultures often maintaining a symbolic distance, exercising high selectivity, and showing limited acceptance of external elements that do not align with their own value frameworks. However, the emergence of TikTok as a global digital platform has begun to shift this perspective. With its open, participatory, and algorithm-driven nature, TikTok creates a more fluid cultural space, where the boundaries between "our culture" and "their culture" are becoming increasingly blurred (Trifiro, 2022).

With this context, Tiktok is currently strong enough to be considered as an effective tool preference in carrying out the diplomacy process (Jin, 2024). Through TikTok, it will very easily reach millions of pairs of eyes in Europe and the world in particular to pay deeper attention to Japan, especially to its Ramen culture through phone screens.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research examined how TikTok is used as a strategic platform to disseminate outstanding Chinese culture internationally (Lin & Zuo, 2023). The approach used is a qualitative analysis of Chinese cultural content published on TikTok, focusing on the varied and expressive communication methods used to attract a global audience.

The study also highlights the challenges faced, such as the dominance of Western cultural discourse, restrictions on TikTok access in some countries, and the tendency for content to be rigid and lacking in dynamics in conveying cultural messages.

“From local flavor to global fandom: an exploration of the cultural presentation and attitudes towards using English by Thai content creators on the TikTok platform” is a paper that examines how Thai content creators use English in their TikTok videos to reach a global audience while maintaining their local cultural identity (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). The research approach used is a qualitative method, using TikTok video content analysis and in-depth interviews with several Thai content creators. This study highlights the linguistic and cultural strategies employed by creators to balance presenting "local flavor" with global appeal through the use of English as a digital lingua franca.

Indonesian authors wrote (Alaudin et al., 2025), focusing on how social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become spaces for the expression of cultural identity and a means of promoting cultural heritage for Indonesia's younger generation. This study highlights the role of social media as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy, enabling local culture to be introduced and appreciated not only domestically but also by global audiences, including in Europe. Through algorithms that tailor content based on user interests, TikTok and similar platforms accelerate the widespread and participatory spread of Indonesian popular culture, fostering cross-border cultural dialogue and strengthening local cultural pride.

Fiona and Jessica examine the concept of “sides” as a way communities form and interact on the TikTok platform, focusing on the BookTok community a subculture of literature enthusiasts on TikTok (Maddox & Gill, 2023). The research approach uses a qualitative case study with textual analysis of the culture, technology, interface, and platform-specific language that emerge within the BookTok community. This study highlights how user practices and app features interact to shape TikTok's “sides” as relational, individualistic, and exclusive entities. Users form communities based on shared interests through the use of hashtags, trending audio, and other features that facilitate the dissemination of relevant content, while TikTok also actively curates the user experience through recommendations and search features integrated into the interface.

These four studies have a strong convergence in highlighting TikTok's role as an effective digital platform in the global dissemination of popular culture and cultural diplomacy, particularly through the active engagement of content creators and user communities. The study, "From Local Flavor to Global Fandom," emphasizes how Thai content creators strategically use English to bridge local culture with global audiences,

creating an inclusive and diverse international fandom aligns with the findings of the "Research on International Communication of Outstanding Chinese Culture Based on TikTok," which demonstrates how TikTok enables Chinese culture to spread and be accepted in various countries, including Europe, through varied content and algorithms that adapt to user preferences.

Meanwhile, "The Transformation of Indonesian Culture in the Social Media Era" outlines how social media, including TikTok, acts as a medium for cultural diplomacy, enabling the expression and preservation of Indonesian culture by the younger generation, while simultaneously opening access to Indonesian culture to global audiences, including Europe.

Meanwhile, Assembling "Sides" of TikTok examines how digital communities on TikTok are formed through the interaction of culture, technology, and algorithms. This research highlights the complex social and cultural dynamics behind the spread of popular culture on TikTok, including in European markets increasingly open to digital sub-cultures.

Overall, these four studies affirm that TikTok functions as a soft power medium, enabling participatory and interactive cross-border cultural exchange. Through algorithms that prioritize content personalization and community features, TikTok accelerates cultural globalization by combining local cultural expressions with global appeal, thereby strengthening digital cultural diplomacy and forming inclusive and dynamic fandoms and cultural communities worldwide, including in Europe

3. METHODS AND FRAMEWORKS

This research uses a constructivism approach, with the concepts of Public Diplomacy as an umbrella of Cultural Diplomacy. Public diplomacy is known as a concept that assumes that a positive image of a country can be a very effective tool in achieving national interests (Rachmawati, 2016). Public Diplomacy is an effort made as a bridge between perceptions outside the country and what is happening inside the country (Melissen, 2005).

Ramen restaurants serve as both a symbol of Japan and a conduit for shaping European perceptions of the country. They project a favorable image of Japan that is widely accepted by European communities. The proliferation of ramen establishments across Europe can be attributed in part to the forces of globalization, which foster diplomatic, political, and communicative interactions. This trend has broadened both the theoretical and practical dimensions of diplomacy. Ramen restaurants thus act as both representa-

tives and tangible expressions of Japan's positive image and its localities. Their presence in Europe exemplifies a practical application of diplomatic principles, helping to extend Japan's local influence and support its broader foreign policy objectives (Melissen, 2005). Ultimately, ramen restaurants are a key element of Japan's local soft power, thriving in Europe as instruments of diplomacy with the purpose of strengthening Japan's brand and reputation among European audiences.

The globalized and digitalized world should be a consideration that Japan must adjust so as not to be left behind by the times. Along with the development of technology, diplomacy is also not left behind. Digital technology has had a huge impact on the world of diplomacy. Social media platforms and artificial intelligence to smartphone apps and virtual meetings, have been shown to influence norms, practices, states and international organizations (Bjola & Manor, 2024).

Digitalization offers countries the opportunity to reach audiences across borders without geographical limitations. When a country utilizes digital media to showcase cultural aspects, this practice serves as a clear example of digital as a part cultural diplomacy. Through platforms such as TikTok, ramen can directly introduce as an elements of the culture ranging to a global public. In other words, digital is indirectly a tool for executing cultural diplomacy. Digital for Diplomacy is a part of Cultural Diplomacy that where a product of globalization and as a fruit of the new public diplomacy, it is considered one of the 21st century trends in diplomatic communication (Rashica, 2018).

The importance of digital for diplomacy is based on the use of social media, and the development of social media which is also the basis for strengthening diplomatic relations. Therefore, digital for diplomacy today is very important. Digital for diplomacy is supported by the rise of social media that is easily accessible to the public. Tiktok has emerged in the digital world as an application that supplies short videos with content that is classified into various types of genres and topics.

Tiktok is a digital tool that is very easy to use anytime and anywhere. European people are very easy to access Tiktok and get various information from Tiktok. Especially information about Ramen Restaurants in Europe. Ramen restaurants in Europe will only be famous by the surrounding community if there is no media that spreads the information. Ramen restaurants will become famous if people across European borders know about them. To penetrate across these borders, a media is needed that can be the key to be opened by all European people and can be entered. TikTok is the right tool to open the eyes of European people to the existence of several Ramen Restaurants in Europe (Jin, 2024). Cultural diplomacy, will run well enhanced by digital diplomacy and Tiktok as a tool. So that the way for European people to find out about Japanese

Ramen and expand the cooperation network between Europe and Japan is increasingly wide open.

3.1 Case and Methodology

This study focuses on how TikTok platform as a tool for cultural diplomacy strategy to project Japan cultural image, particularly through the representation of ramen, in the European public sphere. TikTok, as a short-form video-based social media platform with a broad global reach, has become an important arena for countries to disseminate cultural values and strengthen their soft power digitally (Melissen, 2005). Japan, with its rich pop and traditional culture, leverages TikTok to reach European audience that is increasingly digitally connected and responsive to creative and interactive visual content. This study places this phenomenon within the context of modern cultural diplomacy, which combines digital media and online social interactions, and explains how ramen-related content serves as a cultural symbol that can build positive appeal and understanding of Japan in the eyes of the European public.

Furthermore, this research analyzes how TikTok has successfully eroded the exclusive image that Europeans have long held of foreign cultures, particularly Japanese culture. With its accessible, interactive, and participatory content format, TikTok enables Japanese culture to reach various levels of European society without the limitations of elitism or stereotypes that often limit cross-border cultural understanding. This platform opens up space for a wider audience to interact and adopt Japanese cultural elements in a more inclusive and dynamic way, thus changing traditional perceptions and expanding the scope of Japanese cultural diplomacy in Europe.

The data obtained was then analyzed descriptively to understand the patterns, characteristics, and promotional strategies used by content creators. This approach aligns with social media research methods that emphasize the collection of natural data from user activity in a digital context, allowing researchers to deeply explore the meaning and dynamics of social interactions occurring within the social media realm (Borg, 2024).

This study employed a qualitative approach with digital observation of content published on the social media platform TikTok. As a first step, researchers conducted a search using the specific keyword "ramen in Europe" in TikTok's search bar to identify and collect data in the form of promotional videos for ramen restaurants created by content creators in Europe. This approach enabled researchers to obtain authentic and up to date primary data on how ramen restaurants are promoted through short video content on the platform.

The outlined of the research focused on three main aspects: 1) the creator's profile, which includes their identity, background, and role within the digital community; 2) the geographic location of the ramen restaurant that is the subject of the content, which is important for understanding the social and cultural context in which the content is produced and consumed; 3) indications of the restaurant's presence in a specific country, as depicted in the content itself. These indications include the use of local language, visual elements, and cultural symbols that indicate the creator is a resident or at least has strong influence in that region.

This approach aims to establish the authenticity and relevance of the content as a valid cultural representation, while avoiding bias or misattribution that might arise if the content is only analyzed partially. For example, the use of language in a video not only strengthens the claim that the creator is from that region but also provides an authentic communication context that resonates with local audiences. Therefore, this research assesses content not only from an aesthetic or popularity perspective but also from a cultural and geographical validity perspective, which is crucial in the study of digital cultural diplomacy and cultural representation through social media.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Created by a Chinese digital company called Bytedance, after previous success with the Music.ly application (Lopez et al., n.d.) by TikTok Bytedance puts its focus on developing around entertainment with large amounts of visual content. TikTok surpassed 800 million users worldwide, positioning it as the most downloaded app since the first quarter of 2020 (Lopez et al., n.d.).

TikTok forms an audience segmentation in each content (Kaye et al., 2023). So that the content will be more targeted and enter its market. In less than ten years since its launch, TikTok has become one of the most widely used social media platforms in the world. Unlike many other digital apps, which typically focus on specific regions or cultures, TikTok exhibits a truly global nature, both in terms of the distribution of its users and the variety of content it produces.

4.1. Social and Cultural Implications of Using TikTok in Cross-Border Culinary Promotion

This study examines how TikTok, as a social media platform, facilitates the promotion of foreign culinary culture, particularly ramen restaurants, by European users. An analysis of ten TikTok content pieces focused on ramen restaurants in Europe revealed that five creators were from Germany, three from France, and two from Italy. These findings suggest that TikTok enables users from various European countries to actively

promote Japanese culinary culture without being hindered by the cultural exclusivity that may exist within European communities.

The presence of content creators from these different countries reflects how TikTok enables the spread of culinary culture across borders in a more democratic and participatory manner. Through its engaging short-form video format and personalized algorithms, TikTok facilitates the rapid and widespread amplification of culinary trends. This not only expands the market reach of ramen restaurants but also changes the perception of exclusivity inherent in Japanese food in Europe, making it more accessible and enjoyable for the general public.

This phenomenon indicates that TikTok serves not only as an entertainment medium but also as an inclusive platform that fosters cross-border cultural exchange (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Through its personalized algorithm and engaging short-form video format, TikTok provides a platform for content creators to effectively and easily disseminate information and promotions about ramen restaurants to a wide audience. This simultaneously erodes the exclusivity that may be inherent in the consumption and promotion of foreign culture among Europeans.

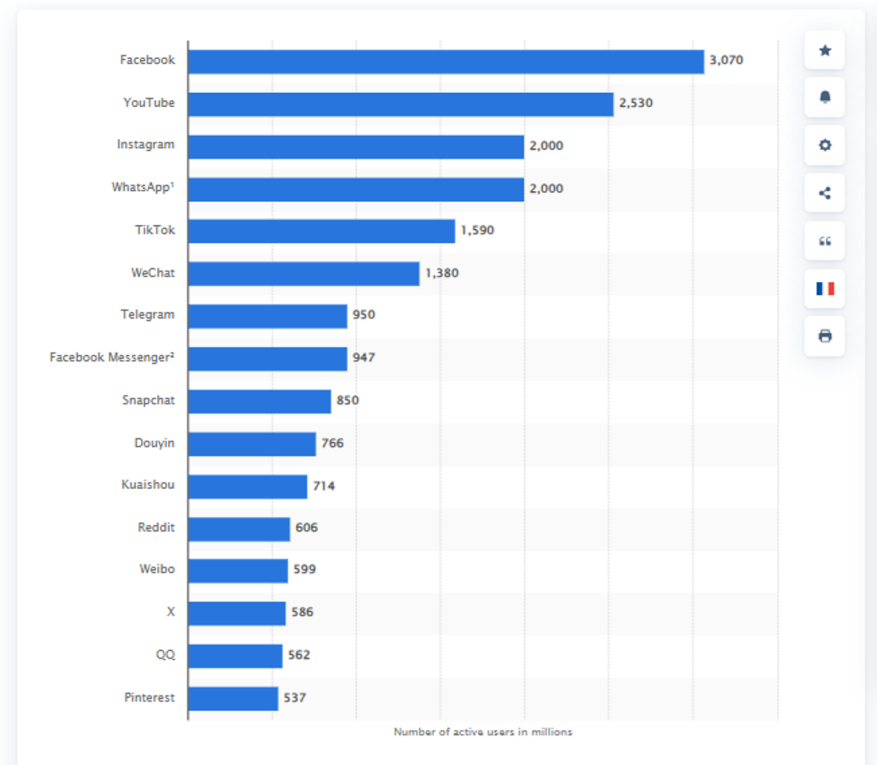
Furthermore, these findings underscore TikTok's role as a social media platform capable of connecting diverse cultural and economic communities, enabling culinary businesses to leverage the digital platform in their marketing strategies. Thus, this study confirms TikTok's role as a tool of soft diplomacy, capable of connecting diverse communities through digital content. TikTok facilitates Europeans' productive use of social media to promote other cultures, strengthen global cultural integration, and open up new opportunities in international culinary marketing. These findings make an important contribution to the study of cross-cultural communication and digital marketing in the social media era.

4.2. Cultural Digitalization in Practice: The Potential of TikTok as a Diplomatic

Globally, TikTok ranks fifth in terms of the total number of users, following platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. However, when evaluated through other key performance metrics such as average screen time, user engagement, and follower growth TikTok demonstrates remarkable dominance. The platform's short-form video format, algorithmic personalization, and high virality contribute to its ability not only to retain users for longer periods but also to rapidly amplify trends and

cultural content (Kaye et al., 2023). This positions TikTok not merely as a social media platform, but as a powerful cultural force with global reach and influence.

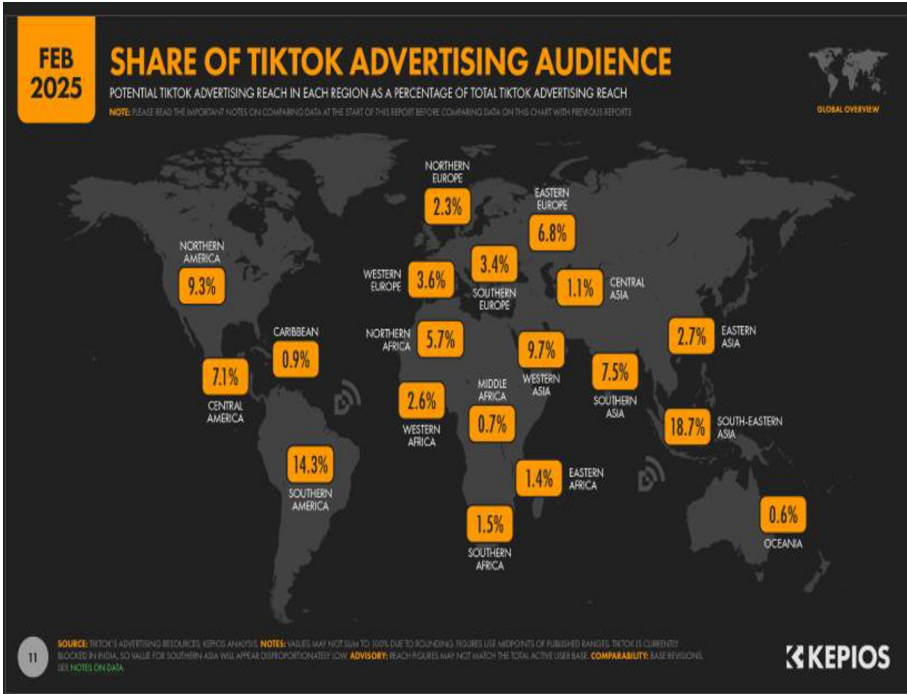
Most popular social networks worldwide as of February 2025, by number of monthly active users (in millions)



Picture 3.1 : *Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of February 2025 from Statista*

([statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users//](https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/))

According to a 2024 report from worldpopulationreview.com , TikTok currently has over 1.5 billion active users across more than 150 countries, spanning nearly every continent, from Asia and Europe to the Americas, to Africa and the Middle East (worldpopulationreview, 2024). The app is available in over 75 languages, and its algorithm adapts content locally without compromising its potential for global virality.

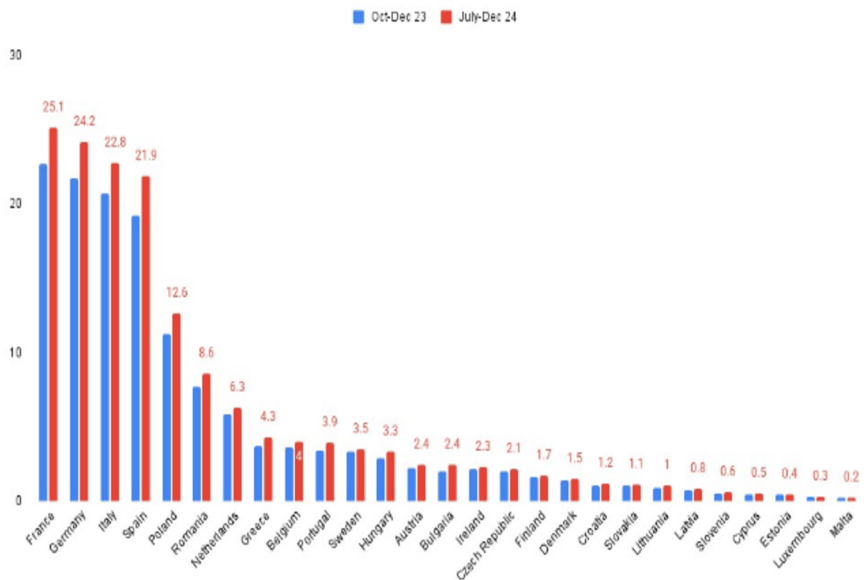


Picture 3.2 : *Share of Tiktok Advertiseng Audience on February 2025 from Kepios (TikTok Users, Stats, Data, Trends, and More — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights)*

This makes TikTok a digital cultural platform that transcends geographic boundaries and identities. TikTok has become a leading digital platform in the global cultural landscape, with its reach across geographic and social boundaries. Despite originating in China, TikTok has successfully penetrated extensive international markets, including Europe. According to global user statistics, approximately 3.6% of TikTok's total users come from European countries, meaning millions of active users in the region. While this percentage is smaller than in Asia or the Americas, this figure demonstrates that TikTok has established a strong presence in a continent known for its strict digital and cultural regulations.

Although TikTok users from Europe only account for around 3.6% of the global user base, their presence is far more significant than mere statistics. Europe, with its strict digital regulations and selective media culture, often presents a challenge for digital platforms from outside the West. However, TikTok's success in penetrating and retaining an audience in this region demonstrates the platform's global power and influence.

TikTok Monthly Active Recipients (m)



Picture 3.2 : European Tiktok Users per Juli- Desember 2024 from Statista

(<https://longportapp.com/en/news/>)

This 3.6% percentage reflects millions of active users from countries like Germany, France, the UK, Spain, and Italy countries with unique media ecosystems and complex cultural consumption traditions. TikTok's success in capturing audiences in this region demonstrates that the platform's algorithm-driven content model, vibrant visual culture, and participatory nature are able to transcend cultural differences and media preferences.

Furthermore, the report above reveal that countries like the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain rank among the top in terms of TikTok downloads and user engagement rates in Europe. These findings reflect the high adoption rate and active participation of Europeans on the platform. In Europe, TikTok is not only used for entertainment but has also evolved into a platform for creative expression and social discussion.

Every TikTok user is free to determine their own involvement on the platform. Those with low levels of engagement can simply act as observers, as long as the app remains on their devices. Furthermore, for active users, the space is wide open for anyone to become a key player and strive to spread their message and make it go viral (Hindarto, 2022).

TikTok is a highly expressive app. Almost the entire process of conveying content involves the user's bodily activity. TikTok users are aware that what they convey through their bodily activity is seen by many, sometimes without them knowing. TikTok users also realize that they build a deep connection with an unseen and unknowable audience (Hindarto, 2022).

TikTok's popularity continues to grow rapidly. By engaging features such as music, video effects, filter stickers, voice changers, dances, and lip-syncing TikTok is considered highly effective in encouraging public participation. The platform is also known for its user-friendly interface (Hindarto, 2022). Although the content presented can sometimes feel highly immersive, TikTok offers fast message dissemination and is capable of maintaining user attention for extended periods of time.

TikTok completely eliminates the need for users to search for specific accounts because they simply scroll continuously through an endless stream of videos. This algorithm-based content recommendation system generates high engagement, as TikTok's algorithm remembers your preferences for certain videos and shows fewer similar contents (Jain & Arakkal, 2022). In essence, TikTok focuses more on keeping you updated with the latest content and automatically directing you there.

TikTok's vast geographical distribution demonstrates not only its technological or business success, but also the creation of a global social space where diverse cultural representations from various countries can be disseminated quickly and widely. Within the framework of cultural diplomacy, this is crucial because when a country's culture appears on TikTok, it targets not only domestic or regional audiences but also a diverse global audience.

Beyond being just an entertainment app, TikTok in Europe also serves as a space for cultural exchange, where foreign cultures including Asian cultures like those of Japan embraced, consumed, and even locally adapted. Therefore, although European users make up a relatively small percentage of the total, the impact is significant, confirming that TikTok is not merely a regional platform but a truly global digital force.

This phenomenon demonstrates that TikTok has become a global digital infrastructure space where soft power, popular culture, and narratives of national identity compete and interact on a global scale. With users spread across nearly every corner of the globe, the platform opens unprecedented opportunities for countries to showcase their cultures informally, creatively, and widely, without having to rely on traditional diplomatic channels.

4.3. TikTok, the Cultural Exclusivity of Europe, and the Dynamics of Soft Power Diplomacy

In intercultural studies, European societies are often described as having a relatively high level of cultural exclusivity, especially in preserving their local heritage and cultural identity boundaries. This exclusivity is evident not only in everyday social practices but also in how Europeans select and interpret foreign cultures (Tomlinson, 1999). However, the emergence of social media platforms like TikTok is beginning to challenge and loosen these boundaries.

As a digital social space, TikTok offers a form of interaction that is markedly different from traditional media. With its algorithm recommending content based on user interests rather than geographic location, TikTok enables the spontaneous and large scale circulation of cross-cultural content within users' digital environments. The platform serves as an open arena for informal cultural exchange, where European audiences particularly younger generations are not only consumers of foreign cultures such as Japanese culture, but also active participants in its creative processes. This condition indicates that cultural exclusivity is increasingly diminishing in today's open and interactive media ecosystem.

Food content such as ramen offers an interesting example of how Japanese culture is not merely accepted but also reinterpreted by European creators through videos, becoming part of their digital identity narratives. This process reflects a voluntary space for the reception of foreign culture, which lies at the core of the concept of soft power (Nye, 2004). Through TikTok, Japan does not engage in cultural diplomacy through official channels; instead, it allows its culture to spread organically, driven by the platform's visual, emotional, and participatory appeal.

Therefore, the use of TikTok in Japan's cultural diplomacy can be seen as part of the expansion of digital cultural diplomacy (Cull, 2013), which relies on the power of narrative, visuals, and user engagement as a form of soft yet significant influence. TikTok serves as a medium of soft power that can weaken cultural resistance and open pathways for more fluid, spontaneous, and diverse cultural exchanges.

5. DISCUSSION

This research highlights the power of TikTok as an effective digital tool for cultural diplomacy, particularly in the context of promoting ramen restaurants in Europe. TikTok serves not only as an entertainment platform but also as a medium that facilitates access to information and inspiration for its users. In this context, TikTok defies the image of exclusivity inherent in European society, which is often perceived as closed to foreign cultural influences. Through its engaging content format and competitive

visual aesthetic, TikTok successfully delivers a culinary promotion experience that is no less engaging than other social media platforms, thereby expanding the reach of Japanese culture in the European digital sphere.

While ramen restaurants can be found on various social platforms, TikTok's advantage lies in its ability to package content in a more creative and engaging way, effectively capturing the attention of audiences. Furthermore, TikTok's personalized algorithm allows this promotional content to spread quickly and reach diverse user groups, strengthening TikTok's position as an agent of change in digital cultural exchange. However, this research also acknowledges the challenges TikTok faces in its development in various regions of the world, including the potential for unidentified cultural resistance specifically in parts of Europe.

Cultural diplomacy refers to the process through which actors be it states, groups, or individuals influence the behavior and perceptions of other entities through peaceful and persuasive communication channels (Melissen, 2005). The success of diplomacy is often measured by observable, even if subtle, changes in social behavior that consequently impact intercultural relations (Nye, 2004). In the contemporary era, a vivid example of cultural diplomacy in action is the widespread emergence of ramen restaurants across European cities, alongside the viral dissemination of ramen-related content produced and shared on digital platforms such as TikTok.

The transformation of European consumer behavior toward Japanese cuisine shifting from unfamiliarity to routine consumption marks a successful and organic form of Japanese cultural diplomacy that is participatory in nature. As ramen restaurants have proliferated throughout European urban centers, what was once an unfamiliar dish has become a preferred culinary choice for many. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to the powerful influence of digital media, particularly TikTok, where visual narratives and viral content have fostered curiosity and acceptance. Notably, much of this ramen-related content is created by European TikTok users themselves, illustrating the internalization and re-contextualization of Japanese culture in the daily lives of European communities.

In today's digital age, cultural diplomacy is no longer the exclusive domain of state actors or formal institutions. Instead, it increasingly unfolds through non-governmental actors such as everyday social media users. The case of ramen restaurants exemplifies how European communities act as agents of cultural diplomacy adopting, redistributing, and reshaping Japanese culture. This horizontal, grassroots form of diplomacy operates organically and independently from official channels, fueled by digital plat-

forms like TikTok, which facilitate rapid, large-scale cultural exchange through interactive, collaborative, and participatory modes of engagement across borders and ethnicities.

The success of this culturally driven phenomenon, enabled by digital connectivity, has generated several positive outcomes, including:

- The expansion of Japanese culinary businesses in the European market, fostering new economic opportunities and cross-cultural entrepreneurship.
- The reduction of stereotypes and racial prejudices against Asians, as sustained exposure to positive and authentic cultural representations cultivates intercultural empathy and understanding.
- The strengthening of social and economic relations between European and Japanese societies, paving the way for broader cooperation through bottom-up cultural connections.

Ultimately, the contemporary digital landscape exemplified by platforms like TikTok serves as an effective social laboratory for cultural diplomacy on a global scale. The proliferation of ramen restaurants and the viral circulation of ramen content on social media underscore that Japan's soft power today extends beyond governmental instruments, becoming a participatory global phenomenon that fosters tangible changes in cross-cultural social dynamics amid cultural globalization.

Furthermore, the study faces limitations in measuring the long-term impact of cultural diplomacy. The analysis typically captures trends, perceptions, or audience responses within a limited timeframe, making it difficult to assess how representations of Japanese culture through TikTok actually influence changes in European public perception or behavior in a sustained manner. This is critical, as the effectiveness of soft power and cultural diplomacy often requires a longer period to manifest at social or policy levels.

Additionally, the research encounters challenges in connecting top-down cultural projections initiated by state institutions with the grassroots dynamics emerging organically within creative communities and fandoms on social media. The effects and cultural resonances promoted by official entities often differ from how they are adapted and interpreted by independent content creators and audiences, thus limiting a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between these actors.

Lastly, there are language, cultural, and contextual barriers, since many TikTok contents are predominantly visual and lack in-depth narrative context. This often leads to difficulties for non-Japanese European audiences to fully comprehend or appreciate the cultural symbolism and nuances intended, resulting in potential misinterpretations or a

failure to fully achieve the intended objectives of Japan's cultural diplomacy through this platform.

Future researchers are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal research design that tracks audience perceptions and behavioral changes over an extended period to better capture the long-term effects of cultural diplomacy through platforms like TikTok. Additionally, employing mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative metrics with in-depth qualitative interviews or ethnographic studies can provide richer insights into the interaction between official cultural projections and grassroots community responses. Researchers should also consider engaging directly with diverse audience segments across different European regions to understand varying interpretations and receptions of cultural content. Furthermore, incorporating cross-cultural communication frameworks and collaborating with bilingual or cultural mediators can help to bridge language and contextual gaps, ensuring more accurate interpretation and analysis of visual and symbolic elements in TikTok content. These strategies would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how digital cultural diplomacy operates in complex, multicultural environments.

6. CONCLUSION

While European culture has historically been known for its tendency to maintain strict boundaries of cultural exclusivity, the digital transformation brought about by platforms like TikTok is beginning to shift this paradigm. TikTok facilitates cross-cultural interactions that are more egalitarian and participatory than traditional media, where users are not merely passive recipients but also creators and disseminators of cultural content. This phenomenon marks a significant shift in cultural diplomacy, where soft power is no longer monopolized solely by official institutions but also by active and creative digital communities. Thus, TikTok is becoming a new arena where foreign cultures, such as Japanese culture, can be accepted and adapted to local European contexts in a more dynamic and inclusive manner.

Furthermore, culinary content like ramen serves not only as a recognizable cultural symbol but also as a narrative medium that allows European content creators to integrate elements of Japanese culture into their own digital identities. This process demonstrates a two-way cultural dialogue, where Japanese culture is not only projected unilaterally but also reinterpreted and recontextualized by European audiences. This reinforces the concept of soft power as the ability to attract and influence through authentic and participatory cultural appeal, rather than through coercion or domination.

Within the framework of digital for cultural diplomacy, TikTok serves as a platform that expands the scope of traditional diplomacy by harnessing the power of visual narratives and intense social interaction. TikTok's algorithm, which prioritizes content personalization, enables the organic and widespread dissemination of Japanese culture, transcending previously impenetrable geographical and social boundaries. Thus, TikTok is not only a tool for cultural promotion but also an agent of social change capable of eroding cultural resistance and opening up opportunities for more fluid and diverse cultural exchange in the European public sphere.

This development confirms that cultural diplomacy through TikTok is a new manifestation of soft power adaptive to the digital era, where cultural strength lies in the ability to interact spontaneously and authentically with global audiences, while simultaneously building cultural bridges that transcend traditional European exclusivity.

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