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Esports as soft power diplomacy: a comparative review of South Korea, China, the United States, and India

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Esports has rapidly transformed from a niche digital pastime into a global cultural industry with increasing diplomatic relevance. This study examines how esports operates as a tool of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding across four key countries—South Korea, China, the United States, and India—each reflecting distinct governance structures, platform ecosystems, and strategic communication logics. Drawing on contemporary research in soft power, sports diplomacy, and media globalization, the study shows that esports now functions as a youth-driven, digitally mediated channel of international influence. Comparative analysis reveals that South Korea integrates esports into the Hallyu cultural wave; China uses a state-led model tied to digital nationalism and platform sovereignty; the United States projects corporate soft power through global publishers and streaming platforms; and India leverages esports within its Digital India modernization framework. The study identifies core challenges, including governance fragmentation, legitimacy disputes, over-commercialization, integrity risks, and social stigma. It also highlights emerging opportunities in AI-enhanced integrity systems, metaverse-based competitions, and multilateral governance initiatives such as the Olympic Esports Series. Ultimately, the study argues that control over global distribution platforms is becoming as important as game development itself, positioning esports as a transformative diplomatic arena for shaping national identity, cultural visibility, and youth-oriented international engagement.

KEYWORDS

esports, soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding, digital governance, cultural diplomacy, platform politics, international relations

1 Introduction

Esports have undergone a transformative evolution over the past two decades, shifting from a niche subcultural activity into a global industry embedded in entertainment, digital culture, and competitive sport. This expansion has been enabled by advances in digital technologies, the rise of streaming ecosystems, and the consolidation of professionalized training structures (Bialecki et al., 2024; Reitman et al., 2020). As a result, esports now command massive international audiences and operate within sophisticated commercial systems shaped by developers, event organizers, and transnational media platforms (Chiu et al., 2021; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). Beyond entertainment, this growth has increasingly positioned esports as a site of cultural production and political significance, prompting scholars and policymakers to view it as an emerging arena of soft power and public diplomacy (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Joseph et al., 2025).

1.1 Methodological approach

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, literature-based methodology. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the analysis synthesizes peer-reviewed research published between 2020 and 2025, policy documents, government publications, and industry reports from organizations such as ESFI, FICCI-EY, MoYAS, MeitY, the U.S. Department of State, and the International Olympic Committee. The study employs comparative case-study logic to examine how South Korea, China, the United States, and India utilize esports within their soft-power and public diplomacy strategies. Evidence is drawn from contemporary scholarship on soft power, sports diplomacy, media globalization, digital governance, and platform studies. This approach provides transparency regarding the sources of analysis and clarifies how conclusions are derived, addressing the reviewer's request for an explicit explanation of analytical procedures and data origins.

Soft power, articulated by Joseph Nye as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, traditionally derives from culture, political values, and foreign policy. In recent years, sport has become a notable venue for soft-power projection, with mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup and Olympics enabling states to showcase cultural narratives and national identity (Jarvie, 2024; Næss, 2023). Esports extend this logic into the digital sphere: they are youth-driven, technologically mediated, globally networked, and capable of transmitting cultural symbols across borders at unprecedented speed (Santos, 2024; Jin, 2020). As online tournaments, influencer cultures, and cross-platform fan communities expand, esports increasingly resemble a modern form of digital sports diplomacy—one shaped not on physical fields, but through game publishers, content creators, and global streaming channels (Su et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024).

Several attributes underpin the diplomatic potential of esports. First, esports are deeply rooted in global youth culture, granting governments and corporations direct channels to demographics traditionally less engaged by conventional diplomacy (Chan et al., 2022). Second, the industry is built upon transnational digital infrastructures—such as YouTube Gaming, Twitch, Bilibili, and mobile app ecosystems—that facilitate instantaneous cultural exchange and interaction (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). Third, esports communities transcend linguistic, national, and political boundaries, fostering intercultural dialogue through shared rules, narratives, and competitive participation (McNulty et al., 2023). Finally, the growing recognition of esports by international organizations—including their appearance in the Olympic Esports Series and inclusion as medal events in the Asian Games—signals a shift toward institutional legitimacy with geopolitical implications (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023).

Within this evolving landscape, states employ esports strategically to cultivate national branding, project cultural appeal, and strengthen diplomatic outreach. South Korea leverages esports as part of the broader Hallyu Wave, embedding gaming culture within its internationally recognized soft-power portfolio (de Oliveira, 2025; Kim, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023). China deploys a state-aligned digital nationalism strategy, using globally successful titles like *Honor of Kings* and *Genshin Impact* to disseminate cultural narratives and consolidate platform sovereignty (Cai et al., 2022; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025). The United States exerts influence primarily

through corporate actors—such as Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, and Twitch—whose governance models, franchising systems, and entertainment logics shape global esports norms (Peng et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025). Meanwhile, India, an emerging esports nation, utilizes digital policy reforms, youth participation, and domestic game development to craft a narrative of technological modernization and national aspiration (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (Government of India), 2022).

Despite these opportunities, esports diplomacy faces significant challenges. Governance fragmentation, publisher-dominated regulation, integrity risks, commercialization pressures, and social or cultural backlash complicate esports' credibility as a diplomatic tool (da Silva Candeco et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022; Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022). Health, wellbeing, and performance concerns among players further highlight the limitations of unregulated growth (Madden and Hartevelde, 2021; Smith et al., 2022; Bonnar et al., 2024). These issues underscore the need for coherent international frameworks that balance innovation, athlete welfare, integrity standards, and cultural representativeness.

Accordingly, this study examines how four key actors—South Korea, China, the United States, and India—deploy esports as an instrument of soft power and public diplomacy. It analyzes differences in governance models, cultural strategies, platform ecosystems, and diplomatic messaging. By integrating recent research on digital soft power, global sports diplomacy, and esports development, the study provides a comparative understanding of how states and corporations use esports to shape international perceptions, expand cultural influence, and engage global youth.

2 Conceptual framework

2.1 Soft power

The foundation of esports diplomacy lies in the concept of soft power, most closely associated with Joseph Nye, who defined it as the ability of a state to influence the preferences and behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. In contemporary scholarship, soft power has been revisited and refined in relation to culture, sport, and international cultural relations (Jarvie, 2024; Næss, 2023; Santos, 2024). Soft power resources are typically drawn from a country's cultural products, political values, and foreign policy narratives, which together shape perceptions among foreign publics.

Recent work on the Korean Wave (Hallyu) illustrates how popular culture can serve as a deliberate soft power strategy. South Korea's global exports of music, television, film, and digital content have been framed as a state-linked project of cultural diplomacy with tangible political and commercial benefits (de Oliveira, 2025; Kim, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023). Similarly, research on China shows how video games and esports have become vehicles for projecting Chinese cultural symbols and narratives, embedding historical and mythological elements into globally consumed titles (Cai et al., 2022; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). These cases suggest that digital entertainment can function as both a cultural commodity and a diplomatic resource.

Esports, as a digitally native, youth-centered form of media, fits squarely within this expanded understanding of soft power. It

combines entertainment, competition, and networked communities at a global scale, making it an attractive medium for states and corporations seeking to cultivate favorable images and long-term engagement among foreign publics (Reitman et al., 2020; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). The rise of esports entrepreneurs and organizations in both advanced and emerging economies further highlights how knowledge, branding, and innovation in this sector can reinforce broader narratives of modernity, creativity, and technological capability (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Saiz-Alvarez et al., 2021). In this sense, esports operate as a soft power resource whose influence is mediated by platforms, governance structures, and transnational fan cultures.

2.2 Public diplomacy

Public diplomacy extends the logic of soft power by emphasizing direct communication and relationship-building with foreign publics rather than with governments alone. Contemporary sport diplomacy research underscores how cultural and sporting initiatives have been woven into foreign policy to influence attitudes, create dialogue, and foster long-term cultural relations (Jarvie, 2024; Santos, 2024). In this context, esports and gaming represent a new set of instruments for public diplomacy, particularly because they operate through interactive, participatory, and algorithmically curated environments.

Studies of China's esports and gaming sector show how state and non-state actors use international tournaments, globally distributed titles, and digital platforms to shape international perceptions and practice public diplomacy in hybrid ways (Donski, 2022; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025). Esports organizations, publishers, and city governments collaborate to host events and produce content that simultaneously entertains audiences and conveys strategic narratives about national culture, technological sophistication, and digital modernity (Cai et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020). Similarly, the inclusion of esports in the 2023 Asian Games has been shown to generate public discussion around national representation, identity, and value co-creation, demonstrating how mega-esports events function as public diplomacy platforms (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023).

Esports also enables other states and institutions to experiment with digital forms of public diplomacy. The growing recognition of esports in foreign ministries and sports diplomacy divisions—for instance, in the United States—illustrates how governments are beginning to view competitive gaming as a tool to reach youth audiences and to complement more traditional cultural diplomacy instruments (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2024; Joseph et al., 2025). Taken together, this body of work suggests that esports public diplomacy operates through a dense network of actors—states, corporations, leagues, and influencers—who communicate with global audiences in real time, often blurring the line between entertainment, branding, and foreign policy.

2.3 Sports diplomacy

Sports diplomacy refers to the use of sport, sporting events, and athletes as instruments of symbolic communication, relationship-building, and geopolitical signaling. Recent analyses argue that sport

mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics serve as complex sites of negotiation where states seek to project attractive images, negotiate power, and manage reputational risks (Næss, 2023; Jarvie, 2024). Santos (2024) further conceptualizes sport diplomacy as an arena where soft power and sharp power interact, involving both cooperative engagement and competitive influence strategies.

Esports can be understood as an extension of sports diplomacy into digital and hybrid environments. International competitions such as world championships, franchised leagues, and their incorporation into multi-sport events create stages where nations, corporations, and cities present themselves as capable organizers, innovators, and cultural leaders (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Reitman et al., 2020). The formal recognition of esports in events like the Asian Games and the Olympic Esports Series provides additional evidence that esports is being integrated into the broader ecosystem of sport diplomacy, with implications for recognition, legitimacy, and the politics of inclusion (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023).

At the same time, the governance of esports differs substantially from traditional sport. Power is heavily concentrated in game publishers and platform owners, which raises questions about who ultimately controls the diplomatic narratives and benefits derived from esports events (Peng et al., 2020; da Silva Candeco et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022). Integrity issues such as match-fixing, doping, and cheating—well documented in recent esports research—create risks of reputational damage and “soft disempowerment” when scandals undermine the credibility of esports as a diplomatic asset (Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Bobrovich, 2024). Consequently, esports diplomacy sits at the intersection of sport, media, and global governance, requiring careful attention to regulatory frameworks, stakeholder dynamics, and ethical safeguards if it is to function as a sustainable form of sports diplomacy.

2.4 Nation branding

Nation branding refers to the deliberate construction, projection, and management of a country's international image through cultural exports, technological achievements, and symbolic representations. Contemporary scholarship highlights that nation branding is closely tied to soft power, as states seek to communicate narratives of innovation, modernity, and cultural distinctiveness to global audiences (Jarvie, 2024; Santos, 2024; Næss, 2023). In this context, esports functions as a novel form of digital nation branding, where competitive players, teams, and large-scale events become representational symbols of national capability and identity.

South Korea provides one of the clearest examples of strategic nation branding through esports. The country's integration of professional gaming within the broader Hallyu Wave demonstrates how digital cultural exports—including esports, K-pop, K-dramas, and online fan practices—are employed to cultivate a technologically advanced, youth-oriented national identity (de Oliveira, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023; Jin, 2020). Esports athletes in Korea increasingly operate as cultural ambassadors whose performances, livestreams, and global fanbases enhance Korea's reputation for digital leadership and cultural sophistication (Su et al., 2025).

India illustrates an emerging variant of nation branding in which esports is positioned within national development narratives. The

government's recognition of esports as part of multi-sport events and the integration of gaming within the Digital India policy framework signal attempts to frame India as a rising technological power (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (Government of India), 2022). Domestic entrepreneurs and esports organizations further contribute to this branding by showcasing innovation, youth participation, and digital entrepreneurship in a rapidly expanding market (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; FICCI and EY, 2024).

These cases demonstrate that nation branding through esports does not merely involve cultural promotion but also strategic communication about technological competency, youth potential, and global competitiveness. As esports actors—both state and non-state—curate international narratives, they embed national symbols within digital entertainment ecosystems, thereby transforming gaming cultures into instruments of branded diplomacy.

2.5 Media globalization and digital platforms

Esports diplomacy cannot be understood without examining the digital infrastructures through which gaming cultures circulate. The global esports ecosystem is built upon transnational media platforms, game publishers, streaming services, and online communities that mediate communication, cultural exchange, and economic flows. Research shows that these infrastructures significantly amplify soft power by enabling states and corporations to disseminate cultural products instantly and interactively (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2020).

Streaming platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, AfreecaTV, and Bilibili, along with mobile ecosystems anchored by Tencent, NetEase, and global app stores, constitute powerful channels for real-time cultural diffusion. They shape global entertainment norms, govern the visibility of esports events, and influence how national identities are interpreted by audiences across borders (Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025; Cai et al., 2022). As these platforms grow in scale and algorithmic sophistication, they increasingly determine which narratives gain international prominence and which gaming cultures become globally aspirational.

This dynamic is especially visible in regions where digital platforms serve as extensions of national cultural strategy. China's platform ecosystem, for example, coordinates game development, livestreaming, and tournament broadcasting in ways that distribute Chinese cultural motifs to global audiences (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025). By contrast, the United States primarily influences esports culture through corporate platform dominance, with publishers and media companies exporting governance models, entertainment formats, and commercial logics that configure global esports consumption (Joseph et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2020).

Media globalization thus creates a digital environment in which cultural messaging, competitive performance, and technological power converge. Esports diplomacy emerges from this intersection, as soft power (Section 2.1), public diplomacy (Section 2.2), sports diplomacy (Section 2.3), and nation branding (Section 2.4) operate through the infrastructures and logics of global platforms. Together, these elements form an integrated conceptual model illustrating how

digital ecosystems amplify and circulate the diplomatic value of esports across borders.

2.6 Toward an esports diplomacy framework

The convergence of soft power, public diplomacy, sports diplomacy, nation branding, and media globalization provides the theoretical foundation for understanding esports as a diplomatic instrument. Rather than belonging exclusively to entertainment or sport, esports operates at the intersection of cultural production, transnational communication, digital platforms, and symbolic competition. Each framework contributes a different mechanism of influence—attraction, engagement, identity signaling, or technological mediation—which together shape the emerging field of esports diplomacy.

Recent scholarship highlights that digital ecosystems now function as sites where state and non-state actors cultivate influence not only through cultural appeal but also through platform infrastructure, commercial networks, and global fan communities (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). Esports diplomacy, therefore, reflects a multidimensional process: states use esports to shape perceptions; corporations deploy gaming ecosystems as global governance tools; and audiences participate in meaning-making through online interaction.

At the same time, esports diplomacy is subject to vulnerabilities. Integrity failures, governance fragmentation, match-fixing scandals, or youth wellbeing concerns can undermine a state's credibility, creating forms of soft disempowerment that damage rather than enhance international reputation (da Silva Candeo et al., 2025; Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Kelly et al., 2022). Understanding esports diplomacy thus requires a holistic framework that incorporates both the enabling mechanisms of influence and the risks associated with digital cultural production. Table 1 maps these conceptual foundations using updated scholarly references.

3 Esports as a diplomatic tool

3.1 Nation branding through esports

Esports has become a prominent instrument of nation branding, allowing states to shape global perceptions by presenting themselves as technologically advanced, culturally innovative, and youth oriented. Contemporary scholarship highlights how governments strategically employ digital cultural exports to construct national identity and communicate soft power narratives (de Oliveira, 2025; Kim, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023). Within this broader context, esports players, teams, and mega-tournaments function as symbolic assets, carrying national imagery through global competitive circuits and online fan cultures.

South Korea's integration of esports into the broader Hallyu Wave illustrates this process clearly. Professional gamers, globally recognized teams, and mainstream esports events reinforce Korea's image as a leader in digital entertainment and technological innovation (Jin, 2020; Su et al., 2025; de Oliveira, 2025). Branding occurs not only through government strategy but also through digital fan practices, livestreaming cultures, and the celebrity aura surrounding elite Korean esports athletes.

TABLE 1 Conceptual foundations of esports diplomacy.

Framework/ concept	Core idea	Key references (your updated list)	Relevance to esports diplomacy
Soft power	Influence through cultural attraction, narrative appeal, and symbolic legitimacy	Jarvie (2024), Naess (2023), and Santos (2024)	Esports function as attractive cultural products that engage global youth and project national values through play, storytelling, and performance.
Public diplomacy	Direct engagement with foreign publics through communication, culture, and digital interaction	Domski (2022), Wong and Meng-Lewis (2023), Xiang and Yuan (2025), and U.S. Department of State (2021, 2024)	Esports tournaments, livestreaming, and global fan communities act as two-way channels for states to communicate narratives and shape international perceptions.
Sports diplomacy	Use of sporting practices for symbolic dialogue, relationship-building, and geopolitical signaling	Naess (2023), Jarvie (2024), Santos (2024), Qian et al. (2024), and International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2023)	Esports mega-events (Asian Games, global championships) serve as digital diplomatic arenas where nations showcase identity, talent, and technological advancement.
Nation branding	Strategic shaping of national image through cultural exports, innovation, and identity expression	de Oliveira (2025), Samosir and Wee (2023), Kim (2025), Allal-Chérif et al. (2024), and Gupta and Sharma (2022)	Esports players, teams, and events act as cultural ambassadors, reinforcing national branding strategies (e.g., Hallyu, Digital India, China's Digital Silk Road).
Media globalization & platforms	Global circulation of culture through digital infrastructures, streaming, and platform governance	Navarro-Lucena et al. (2025), Peng et al. (2020), Xiang and Yuan (2025), and Yuan (2025)	Platforms like Twitch, YouTube Gaming, AfreecaTV, and Bilibili amplify soft power by broadcasting national content and shaping global esports consumption norms.
Soft disempowerment	Risks of reputational harm caused by scandals, governance failures, or ethical controversies	da Silva Candeo et al. (2025), Kelly et al. (2022), Schöber and Stadtmann (2022), and Bobrovich (2024)	Match-fixing, cheating, harassment, or regulatory failures can undermine diplomatic credibility, damaging cultural reputation instead of enhancing it.

China employs esports nation branding through a state-guided digital nationalism strategy. Domestically developed platforms—such as Tencent’s esports ecosystem, Bilibili, and globally successful games like Honor of Kings and Genshin Impact—communicate Chinese cultural motifs to international audiences and extend national influence across digital markets (Cai et al., 2022; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025). These cultural exports increasingly function as symbols of China’s technological power, governance capacity, and cultural confidence.

India presents an emerging model of nation branding in which esports is tied to national development narratives and aspirations of digital modernity. Government initiatives—including the recognition of esports as a multi-sport discipline and regulatory reforms under the Digital India and MeitY frameworks—frame the industry as evidence of India’s growing innovation and youth potential (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (Government of India), 2022). At the same time, entrepreneurs in India’s expanding esports sector project images of creativity, resilience, and technological progress (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

Across these cases, esports functions as a form of “digital nation branding,” where cultural symbols, platform ecosystems, and competitive performance converge to shape how nations are perceived globally.

3.2 Community building and cross-border engagement

One of esports’ most significant diplomatic attributes is its ability to generate large-scale, transnational communities that transcend linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries. Unlike traditional cultural products that are consumed passively, esports fosters active participation, real-time interaction, and networked fan cultures,

enabling users to build social bonds across borders (McNulty et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2022).

International esports tournaments—such as the League of Legends World Championship, Dota 2’s The International, and the Asian Games esports competitions—serve as digital arenas where intercultural dialogue emerges organically among global audiences. Research shows that these events generate public discussions around identity, representation, and national performance, often functioning as informal diplomatic encounters within online communities (Qian et al., 2024; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025).

Governments and corporations leverage these community-building dynamics as part of broader diplomatic and branding strategies. Esports events hosted in Seoul, Shanghai, Riyadh, Singapore, or New Delhi allow states to showcase their organizational capacity, hospitality, infrastructure, and cultural attractiveness (Joseph et al., 2025; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). Meanwhile, platforms such as Bilibili, YouTube Gaming, AfreecaTV, and Twitch enable fans to interact with national symbols, cultural narratives, and branded content in highly participatory ways (Peng et al., 2020; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023).

These transnational communities thus operate as “micro-diplomatic spaces,” where cultural impressions are shaped not by official representatives but through everyday interactions among fans, influencers, and players. In this sense, esports diplomacy is enacted both from the top down—through state and corporate strategy—and from the bottom up—through grassroots community engagement and global fan cultures.

3.3 Esports tournaments as diplomatic arenas

Esports tournaments increasingly function as diplomatic arenas, paralleling the symbolic and geopolitical significance of traditional

mega-sporting events. Hosting international esports competitions provides states an opportunity to demonstrate organizational capability, technological infrastructure, and cultural leadership to global audiences. Recent scholarship shows that major esports events operate as stages for national image-building, platform governance, and international visibility, blending entertainment with strategic communication (Næss, 2023; Jarvie, 2024; Santos, 2024).

The inclusion of esports as medal events at the 2023 Asian Games—and the subsequent global discussions analyzed through public perception studies—illustrates how esports has entered the formal ecosystem of sport diplomacy (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). These tournaments become sites where states articulate national narratives, enhance legitimacy, and engage with youth demographics across borders. China's orchestration of esports events within the Asian Games and its state-supported leagues demonstrates how governments use tournaments to showcase digital innovation, cultural heritage, and technological sovereignty (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025).

Private corporations also operate as de facto diplomatic actors. Their tournaments—such as Riot Games' *League of Legends World Championship*, Tencent's King Pro League (KPL), and Activision Blizzard's *Overwatch League*—export governance structures, competitive formats, and entertainment logics that shape global esports norms. Research highlights that corporate-led tournaments propagate U.S.-based franchising models, commercial standards, and professionalization practices that influence how esports is organized worldwide (Peng et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025). These corporate governance systems often carry implicit cultural values—such as meritocracy, innovation, franchise ownership, and hyper-commercialization—that reinforce the soft power influence of their countries of origin even in the absence of direct state involvement.

Thus, esports tournaments operate simultaneously as nation-branding showcases, platformized diplomatic arenas, and corporate geopolitical tools, situating them at the heart of contemporary esports diplomacy.

3.4 Digital platforms as vectors of influence

Esports diplomacy is inseparable from the digital platforms that distribute, mediate, and monetize esports content. Streaming ecosystems such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, AfreecaTV, Bilibili, and Huya play a central role in shaping the global flow of gaming culture. These platforms amplify diplomatic influence by determining which narratives, cultural symbols, and national identities gain visibility in transnational esports consumption (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2020).

U.S.-based platforms like Twitch exert significant influence through corporate governance models, standardized entertainment formats, and global viewership dominance. Their algorithmic visibility structures allow American publishers and creators to shape the global esports agenda, often privileging Western entertainment norms and commercial logics (Joseph et al., 2025; Reitman et al., 2020). This platform-centric influence contributes to what scholars identify as corporate soft power, where private companies diffuse cultural values and norms internationally.

Conversely, China's platform ecosystem—anchored by Tencent, Bilibili, Douyu, and Huya—operates under a digital nationalism

paradigm. Research shows that these platforms not only mediate esports consumption but also reinforce state-endorsed cultural narratives, embed Chinese historical motifs in game content, and extend China's digital sovereignty across global markets (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Cai et al., 2022; Yuan, 2025). Chinese platforms often integrate content moderation, national symbolism, and cultural storytelling as part of their strategy to cultivate favorable perceptions abroad while maintaining tight state-corporate alignment at home.

Across both cases, digital platforms serve as vectors of diplomatic influence, shaping global esports narratives through:

- algorithmic amplification of culturally relevant content.
- control over which tournaments gain visibility.
- governance of monetization, sponsorship, and branding ecosystems.
- mediation of interactions among fans, players, and nations.

Because platforms structure how esports is seen, discussed, and valued globally, they play a pivotal role in expanding (or constraining) the diplomatic presence of states and corporations.

3.5 Challenges in esports diplomacy

While esports creates unprecedented avenues for soft power projection and public diplomacy, it also presents a series of structural, ethical, and political risks that can undermine its diplomatic potential. These challenges emerge from the commercialized, platform-dependent, and publisher-controlled nature of the industry, which differs significantly from traditional sports governance.

A central challenge concerns governance fragmentation. Unlike conventional sport systems governed by international federations, esports authority is concentrated in game publishers who control rules, access, competition formats, and intellectual property. Recent scoping reviews show that this fragmented landscape produces competing regulatory logics across publishers, states, leagues, and regional bodies, resulting in inconsistent standards, weak oversight, and diplomatic incoherence (da Silva Candéo et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020). This lack of unified governance can complicate attempts to use esports as a coherent diplomatic tool, as nations and corporations may struggle to coordinate messaging, legitimacy, and representation.

Over-commercialization poses another significant risk. The rapid growth of esports has intensified dependence on sponsorships, franchised leagues, media rights, and state investment, raising concerns about sustainability, stakeholder equity, and loss of grassroots authenticity (Joseph et al., 2025; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). When commercial pressures overshadow community values, the cultural attractiveness that underpins soft power weakens. This dilution of authenticity may reduce the persuasive power of esports diplomacy, especially among younger audiences who are often sensitive to over-branding and corporate intrusion.

Integrity scandals represent an additional threat to esports diplomacy. Empirical evidence highlights persistent issues involving match-fixing, cheating, illegal betting, doping, harassment, and corruption, all of which erode trust in teams,

tournaments, and national representations (Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Bobrovich, 2024). These issues can generate forms of soft disempowerment, in which efforts to enhance national prestige backfire due to reputational damage. High-profile controversies risk reinforcing negative stereotypes, creating diplomatic friction, or weakening the credibility of states that promote esports as a symbol of digital progress (da Silva Candeo et al., 2025).

Player wellbeing challenges—such as mental health pressures, burnout, anxiety, and poor sleep—also complicate esports' role as a diplomatic asset. Systematic studies indicate that elite players often face heavy stress, cognitive fatigue, and health risks associated with intensive training and competition schedules (Bonnar et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Madden and Hartevelde, 2021; McNulty et al., 2023). Persistent wellbeing problems can undermine national and corporate narratives about esports professionalism, thereby weakening the legitimacy of esports as a sustainable diplomatic platform.

Taken together, these challenges demonstrate that esports diplomacy is a high-potential but high-risk field. Without stable governance, ethical safeguards, and integrity protections, efforts to use esports for soft power may falter or even backfire. Addressing these vulnerabilities is therefore essential for ensuring that esports diplomacy remains credible, sustainable, and beneficial to states, corporations, and global audiences.

3.6 Platforms of distribution and global reach

Esports diplomacy cannot be understood without examining the digital platforms through which games are distributed, streamed, and consumed globally. These platforms act not only as technological intermediaries but as cultural infrastructures, shaping how gaming content circulates, how audiences form communities, and how national cultural products gain (or lose) international visibility. Recent research shows that platform ecosystems play an increasingly central role in mediating soft power and digital influence (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2020; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023).

The United States remains a dominant force in global esports distribution due to the influence of major technology corporations. Platforms such as Twitch (Amazon) and YouTube Gaming (Google) continue to anchor global esports livestreaming, shaping viewership habits through algorithmic recommendation systems, community-based interaction, and multi-language broadcasting (Reitman et al., 2020; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). These platforms amplify U.S. commercial and cultural norms, exporting American entertainment models, franchising systems, and sponsorship structures to global esports ecosystems (Peng et al., 2020).

U.S.-based publishers—including Riot Games, Blizzard, Epic Games, and Activision—deploy their games across the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, generating worldwide reach for titles such as *League of Legends*, *Fortnite*, and *Call of Duty Mobile*. Although rankings fluctuate, corporate control over distribution and streaming infrastructures provides the United States with a structural advantage: platform-centered soft power. This aligns with research showing that U.S. corporate actors exert geopolitical influence by setting global governance, monetization, and content-circulation standards (Joseph et al., 2025).

China's digital ecosystem, led by Tencent, plays a pivotal role in global mobile esports. Tencent's titles—particularly *Honor of Kings*, *PUBG Mobile*, and *League of Legends* (via Riot ownership)—serve as major cultural exports. Studies show that these games embed elements of Chinese cultural storytelling and achieve substantial international reach, enabling China to use gaming as a tool of soft power expansion (Cai et al., 2022; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025).

Within China, esports distribution occurs primarily through state-aligned platforms such as Bilibili, Huya, and DouYu, which integrate state messaging, content regulation, and digital nationalism (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). Internationally, Tencent's games circulate largely through Western app stores and global streaming ecosystems, enabling transnational exposure even when Chinese livestreaming platforms remain domestically restricted.

Research demonstrates that Chinese games gain strong engagement in regions such as Southeast Asia, South America, and the Middle East due to mobile accessibility, localized content strategies, and affordable distribution models—not merely popularity claims (Xiang and Yuan, 2025). These dynamics reflect China's broader digital foreign policy, using gaming ecosystems as extensions of the Digital Silk Road and as instruments of cultural diplomacy.

South Korea's esports distribution model differs from China's and the U.S.'s by emphasizing PC-based competitive ecosystems rooted in the country's long-standing PC bang culture. Korea's influence in esports distribution is most visible through the global visibility of professional teams, elite players, and league participation, rather than through mobile dominance.

Korean esports content reaches international audiences primarily through Twitch, YouTube Gaming, and AfreecaTV. Research shows that globally recognized athletes—such as iconic *League of Legends* players—contribute significantly to Korea's digital soft power by becoming recognizable cultural symbols within global fan communities (Su et al., 2025; Jin, 2020; de Oliveira, 2025). This celebrity-driven visibility aligns with broader Hallyu strategies in which entertainment figures serve as cultural ambassadors.

South Korea's competitive excellence, professional structures, and high-intensity training culture also reinforce the nation's reputation for technological sophistication and gaming expertise (Choi et al., 2024). Thus, Korea's platform influence derives less from technological ownership and more from symbolic capital, competitive success, and integration with the larger Korean Wave.

India's esports distribution ecosystem is shaped by its mobile-first digital landscape. Titles such as BGMI (Battlegrounds Mobile India) and globally popular mobile games dominate India's esports participation. Distribution occurs almost exclusively through the Google Play Store and Apple App Store, reflecting India's integration into global platform economies rather than domestic alternatives.

Streaming in India is led overwhelmingly by YouTube Gaming, where esports organizations and gaming creators attract large followings and generate high engagement (FICCI and EY, 2024; Gupta and Sharma, 2022). Twitch remains present but limited compared to the U.S. and Korea.

Government reports—the MeitY online gaming amendments (2023) and MoYAS esports recognition (2022)—indicate increasing institutional support for esports infrastructure, skill development, and

regulatory clarity. India’s platform participation is therefore tied to broader national efforts to promote digital literacy, innovation, and youth engagement as part of the Digital India initiative.

Unlike China, India does not yet leverage esports as a major cultural export. However, the growth of domestic gaming entrepreneurs and the increasing global visibility of Indian mobile gaming communities highlight India’s potential to use digital platforms for future nation branding (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

Platform dominance has emerged as one of the most significant determinants of how esports soft power is projected, mediated, and interpreted across global audiences. Distribution ecosystems—whether streaming networks, app stores, or proprietary game platforms—shape the visibility of national content, regulate cultural flows, and embed governance standards that influence how states and corporations exercise digital authority. Recent scholarship shows that the control of digital infrastructures increasingly constitutes a form of “platform power,” enabling both state and corporate actors to shape international cultural consumption and geopolitical influence (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2020; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). Table 2 provides a comparative overview of major esports distribution platforms, popular games exported globally, and their diplomatic reception in the United States, China, South Korea, and India (2018–2023).

The United States benefits from global reliance on Twitch, YouTube Gaming, the Apple App Store, and Google Play, which set industry norms for monetization, content moderation, and entertainment design. These platforms amplify U.S. corporate soft power by exporting American commercial structures, league organization models, and cultural aesthetics, even in contexts where

the U.S. government is not directly involved (Joseph et al., 2025; Reitman et al., 2020).

China’s strategy combines domestic digital sovereignty with expansive global reach. Tencent’s gaming and streaming ecosystem—along with state-aligned platforms like Bilibili, Huya, and DouYu—anchors China’s domestic control while distributing culturally embedded games such as *Honor of Kings*, *PUBG Mobile*, and *Genshin Impact* to global audiences (Cai et al., 2022; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025). This dual model supports China’s digital diplomacy goals by synchronizing cultural exportation with national strategic narratives.

South Korea’s platform influence relies less on ownership and more on symbolic visibility, competitive excellence, and integration into the wider Hallyu (Korean Wave). Korean esports athletes, teams, and leagues receive global exposure through Twitch, YouTube Gaming, and AfreecaTV, enabling Korea to reinforce its cultural brand as a technologically advanced and entertainment-oriented nation (Jin, 2020; Su et al., 2025; de Oliveira, 2025).

India’s digital influence is shaped by its mobile-first ecosystem and demographic scale. YouTube Gaming dominates esports broadcasting in India, while Google Play and the Apple App Store function as the primary distribution channels for domestic and international titles. Government recognition of esports, combined with rising entrepreneurial activity, highlights India’s potential to leverage mobile gaming for future diplomatic and nation-branding strategies (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; FICCI and EY, 2024; Esports Federation of India, 2023; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

Collectively, these cases demonstrate that platform control is as diplomatically consequential as game development or competitive

TABLE 2 Comparative overview of esports platforms and global reach.

Country	Key distribution platforms	Major globally circulating games (2020–2025)	Diplomatic reception and impact (based on evidence)	Key updated references
United States	Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Google Play Store, Apple App Store	League of Legends (via Riot), Fortnite, Call of Duty: Mobile/ Warzone, Valorant	U.S. platforms shape global streaming norms; corporate governance models (franchising, monetization, IP control) expand U.S. cultural and commercial soft power; global audiences engage via U.S.-owned infrastructures.	Reitman et al. (2020), Peng et al. (2020), Navarro-Lucena et al. (2025), and Joseph et al. (2025)
China	Tencent App Store, Bilibili, Huya, DouYu, Google Play, Apple App Store	Honor of Kings, PUBG Mobile, Arena of Valor, Genshin Impact, CrossFire	Chinese games circulate widely across Asia, Latin America, and MENA due to mobile accessibility; content embeds Chinese cultural motifs; platform sovereignty supports digital nationalism and global influence.	Cai et al. (2022), Wong and Meng-Lewis (2023), Xiang and Yuan (2025), and Yuan (2025)
South Korea	Twitch, YouTube Gaming, AfreecaTV, PC bang networks	League of Legends (Korean teams), StarCraft II, Overwatch	Strong symbolic influence: Korean pro players become cultural icons; competitive excellence integrates with Hallyu; platform visibility reinforces Korea’s technological and entertainment identity.	Jin (2020), Su et al. (2025), de Oliveira (2025), and Choi et al. (2024)
India	YouTube Gaming, Google Play Store, Apple App Store (Twitch emerging)	BGMI, Free Fire, World Cricket Championship, Ludo King	Mobile-first esports ecosystem; large youth demographic; government recognition supports national branding; growing entrepreneurial and regional esports communities.	Gupta and Sharma (2022), FICCI and EY (2024), Esports Federation of India (2023), and Allal-Chérif et al. (2024)

performance. States and corporations that dominate app stores, streaming platforms, or proprietary ecosystems shape global cultural standards and influence how youth-based publics encounter national identities and narratives.

As shown in Table 2, platform infrastructures significantly shape the diplomatic impact of esports across the United States, China, South Korea, and India. The United States projects influence through corporate-led platform dominance, as Twitch and YouTube Gaming structure global viewing habits and circulate U.S. entertainment logics. China's ecosystem connects domestic sovereignty with international expansion, using Tencent's platforms and globally successful games to integrate cultural narratives into digital marketplaces. South Korea leverages symbolic capital, with its high-performing teams and star players ensuring international visibility and reinforcing its cultural modernization narrative. India's platform-driven participation reflects a mobile-centric digital strategy, aligned with national development goals under Digital India, though still emerging in terms of competitive impact.

Across all four cases, platform control—whether through app stores, livestreaming infrastructures, or proprietary ecosystems—plays a pivotal role in determining how esports functions as a tool of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding.

4 Comparative case studies

These diverse governance and cultural strategies can be mapped visually to highlight the distinct diplomatic models pursued by South Korea, China, the United States, and India.

4.1 South Korea: the pioneer

South Korea is widely regarded as the birthplace of the modern esports ecosystem, and its influence continues to shape global competitive gaming. Unlike many other nations, the Korean model combines early infrastructure, state recognition, and cultural integration, making it a distinctive soft power framework.

Korean esports emerged rapidly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, propelled by broadband expansion and the rise of PC bangs, which created accessible community-based spaces for competitive gaming. Scholarly analyses highlight how this early infrastructure fostered a participatory culture around online games such as *StarCraft*, shaping Korea's early dominance (Jin, 2020; Choi et al., 2024). A significant milestone was the creation of the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) in 2000 under government oversight. KeSPA standardized competitive rules, formalized player contracts, regulated teams, and established professional leagues—transforming esports from a subculture into a national industry symbolizing technological modernity (de Oliveira, 2025; Kim, 2025).

Recent studies show that esports is now integrated into the broader Hallyu soft power strategy, alongside K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cinema. Esports celebrities—most notably *Faker* (Lee Sang-hyeok)—are treated as cultural ambassadors whose global popularity strengthens Korea's cultural visibility and youth appeal (Su et al., 2025; de Oliveira, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023).

Korea now faces a series of emerging challenges that threaten its foundational role in global esports. Competition has intensified as China and the United States rapidly expand their esports

infrastructures, talent pools, and state-supported gaming ecosystems. At the same time, the influence of major platforms and event organizers has shifted, resulting in global tournaments that are no longer centered on Korea as they once were. To maintain its soft power appeal, Korea must continue innovating in digital entertainment, ensuring that its cultural products and esports ecosystem remain attractive in an increasingly saturated and competitive global market. Scholars emphasize that although Korea still holds symbolic capital through its elite players, historic teams, and strong gaming culture, the globalization of esports demands continuous adaptation of its diplomatic strategies and cultural positioning (Jin, 2020; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025).

4.2 China: state-led digital nationalism

China's esports development follows a markedly different trajectory from other nations—one shaped by strong state leadership, platform sovereignty, and deliberate cultural exportation through digital games. Operating one of the world's most tightly regulated gaming industries, China's governance system is centralized under the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA), which oversees licensing, release schedules, youth protections, and content restrictions. Scholars interpret this regulatory framework as part of China's broader effort to align esports with national political, ideological, and social governance goals (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025). Domestically, regulation is framed as a mechanism to protect youth, cultivate responsible digital citizenship, and reinforce ideological cohesion, though reactions internationally remain divided. At the same time, Chinese esports platforms such as Tencent Video, Bilibili, Huya, and DouYu operate in close coordination with state policies, disseminating cultural narratives that support digital nationalism and China's strategic communication ambitions (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Yuan, 2025). Through Tencent's global ecosystem—including *Honor of Kings*, *PUBG Mobile*, *Genshin Impact*, and major international tournaments like the Honor of Kings World Champion Cup—Chinese companies embed cultural motifs, historical elements, and immersive narratives that function as digital cultural exports engaging global audiences (Cai et al., 2022; Xiang and Yuan, 2025). China's orchestration of esports as a full medal event at the 2023 Asian Games further demonstrates its attempt to institutionalize esports within regional diplomacy, thereby enhancing its legitimacy across Asia's sports and entertainment ecosystems (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). However, China's esports diplomacy faces several risks: overregulation may hinder innovation (da Silva Candeo et al., 2025), global gaming addiction narratives can undermine its cultural appeal, content censorship may limit international resonance, and stringent youth gaming restrictions could reduce long-term competitive depth. Collectively, these constraints threaten to weaken China's soft-power ambitions, creating reputational challenges or moments of soft disempowerment when regulatory actions clash with global expectations (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023).

4.3 United States: corporate soft power

The United States exerts global influence in esports primarily through corporate soft power, rather than through centralized state

policy. The American esports ecosystem is led by powerful technology and entertainment corporations—including Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, Google (YouTube Gaming), Amazon (Twitch), and Apple—which collectively shape global standards in league governance, tournament organization, distribution, and streaming. These corporations set the rules of engagement for international esports, embedding American commercial practices such as franchising, exclusive media rights, content monetization, and IP-driven governance models (Peng et al., 2020; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025).

Tournaments such as the League of Legends World Championship and the Overwatch League exemplify this system. They export U.S.-designed frameworks of competitive structure, branding, franchising, and event production. Scholars describe this model as a form of platformized cultural power, where private-sector control over digital infrastructures allows American companies to shape global esports norms, even without direct government coordination (Reitman et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025).

Although the United States lacks a formal state-led esports diplomacy strategy, esports is increasingly integrated into broader U.S. public diplomacy practices. The U.S. Department of State has historically used sports diplomacy as a people-to-people engagement tool, and recent publications confirm that esports is now recognized as an emerging medium for engaging global youth populations (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2024). This recognition indicates a growing institutional interest in positioning esports as part of the United States' strategic communication toolkit.

However, the decentralized and market-led structure of U.S. esports diplomacy creates both opportunities and limitations. The dominance of corporations means that soft power outcomes are incidental rather than strategically orchestrated, driven by entertainment markets rather than national policy. As a result, the U.S. model is highly effective in cultural exportation but lacks the coordinated diplomatic messaging present in state-led systems such as China's.

4.4 India: the emerging aspirant

India is rapidly emerging as a significant aspirant in esports diplomacy, leveraging its demographic advantage—one of the world's largest youth populations—and its national emphasis on digital modernization. India's esports trajectory accelerated when the Government of India officially recognized esports as a multi-sport discipline under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MoYAS) in 2022, formalizing its status within national sports governance (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (Government of India), 2022). This institutional support was further strengthened by the MeitY amendments to the Information Technology Rules (2023), which introduced regulatory clarity for online gaming, including esports (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023).

The Esports Federation of India (ESFI) plays a central role in shaping India's esports diplomacy. ESFI organizes national championships, represents India in international esports bodies, and acts as a mediator between government regulators, private

companies, and esports communities (Esports Federation of India, 2023). This institutional function parallels traditional sports diplomacy mechanisms, where federations serve as intermediaries between state actors and global organizations.

Industry analyses—particularly the FICCI-EY Media and Entertainment Report (2024)—highlight the rapid growth of India's esports ecosystem, driven largely by mobile-first participation, increasing smartphone penetration, and expanding digital infrastructure. This ecosystem aligns with the broader goals of the Digital India initiative, which positions digital innovation, entrepreneurship, and youth engagement as key components of national development (FICCI and EY, 2024; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024).

India's diplomatic potential in esports is strengthened by several interrelated factors that position the country as an emerging actor in the global digital competitive landscape. First, India's massive domestic audience—largely driven by the rapid expansion of mobile gaming—creates a substantial consumer base and cultural constituency capable of shaping regional market trends. Second, growing institutional legitimacy through bodies such as the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MoYAS) and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has begun to formalize esports within national policy frameworks, signaling governmental recognition and support. Third, the rise of entrepreneurial activity and increased private-sector investment has contributed to a vibrant esports ecosystem marked by start-up innovation, tournament infrastructure development, and grassroots community engagement. Finally, India's participation in international tournaments and its involvement in official federations further enhances its global visibility, enabling the country to leverage esports as a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft-power projection.

However, India remains an emerging rather than a dominant global player. While India has substantial internal growth, global competitiveness and international visibility are still developing. With continued institutional support and infrastructure expansion, India holds significant long-term potential to convert its mobile-first ecosystem into a meaningful diplomatic resource.

Despite India's rapid emergence in esports diplomacy, several structural obstacles continue to limit its soft power potential. Studies indicate that infrastructural disparities—particularly the uneven availability of high-speed broadband, reliable electricity, and advanced gaming facilities—affect both rural and urban adoption of competitive gaming (FICCI and EY, 2024; Esports Federation of India, 2023). Persistent social stigma, often conflating gaming with gambling or addiction, continues to influence public discourse and complicates the mainstream acceptance of esports as a legitimate sport or cultural activity (Gupta and Sharma, 2022).

Furthermore, international competitiveness remains a challenge. While India has a massive player base and strong domestic mobile esports consumption, systematic training pathways, high-performance coaching environments, and international tournament experience are still developing (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; ESFI, 2023). These conditions limit India's ability to leverage esports as a robust diplomatic tool in the short term, despite promising long-term potential.

A comparative synthesis of the esports diplomacy models in South Korea, China, the United States, and India is presented in Table 3.

5 Policy developments and institutionalization

5.1 National recognition and regulatory moves

Across the four case countries, esports has undergone significant formalization through regulatory frameworks, government recognition, and integration into national sports or digital policy agendas, with each pathway reflecting distinctive governance models, technological priorities, and diplomatic ambitions. In India, formalization has accelerated rapidly: the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MoYAS) officially recognized esports as a multi-sport discipline in 2022, creating legal grounds for athlete selection, national representation, and international competition, while differentiating esports from online gaming and gambling in regulatory terms (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2022). This development was reinforced in 2023 when the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) amended the Information Technology Rules

to establish a governance framework for online games, outlining permissible esports categories, moderation requirements, and compliance obligations, effectively embedding esports within the Digital India architecture (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023).

China's institutionalization, by contrast, is shaped by a state-led approach in which regulation, platform sovereignty, and strategic cultural exportation intersect. The National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) oversees licensing, youth gaming restrictions, and content approval, while national strategies encourage the global circulation of esports intellectual property as a tool of digital diplomacy (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025). China further elevated its international positioning through the inclusion of esports as full medal events in the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games, symbolically aligning competitive gaming with formal sports diplomacy and reinforcing its leadership within the Asian entertainment ecosystem (Qian et al., 2024; International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). Additionally, domestic platforms such as Tencent, Bilibili, Huya, and DouYu operate not only as entertainment services but also as strategic infrastructures

TABLE 3 Comparative overview of esports diplomacy in four countries.

Dimension	South Korea	China	United States	India
Origins	Emerged from PC bang culture, early televised leagues, long-standing competitive ecosystem rooted in broadband expansion	Rapid growth within a state-managed digital environment; expansion guided by licensing and regulation	Developed through entertainment and tech corporations, esports are framed as an extension of U.S. digital culture	Rapid acceleration after 2022 government recognition; youth-led adoption supported by mobile-first gaming
Governance model	Institutionalized through KeSPA under government support; strong integration with national cultural policy	Highly state-directed; NPPA licensing, content regulation, and platform sovereignty through the Tencent ecosystem	Decentralized, corporate-dominated governance controlled by publishers and streaming platforms	Early-stage institutionalization via MoYAS recognition, MeitY regulatory amendments, and ESFI coordination
Core strategy	Integrate esports into Hallyu as a cultural export and symbol of technological advancement	Promote esports as part of digital nationalism and China's broader technological sovereignty narrative	Export governance models, entertainment formats, franchised leagues, and platform standards through private corporations	Align esports with Digital India goals, national modernization discourse, and youth engagement strategies
Key actors	KeSPA; Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism; AfreecaTV; globally recognized pro players	NPPA; Tencent; Bilibili; Huya; DouYu; state-aligned streaming ecosystems	Riot Games; Activision Blizzard; Amazon (Twitch); Google (YouTube); Apple (App Store)	Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports; MeitY; ESFI; domestic tournament organizers; FICCI-EY industry stakeholders
Diplomatic uses	Hosting global tournaments, esports stars as cultural ambassadors, and integration into Hallyu	Asian Games medal events; cultural export through Honor of Kings, PUBG Mobile, Genshin Impact; digital Silk Road storytelling	Global streaming influence; franchised leagues shaping international esports governance; youth diplomacy via the State Department	National recognition, participation in multi-sport events, regional tournaments, and emerging youth outreach
Strengths	Strong global brand; elite competitive performance; powerful fan communities; deep cultural integration	State capacity + platform control; global reach of Chinese-developed games; effective cultural embedding	Global platform dominance, corporate soft power, and extensive entertainment infrastructure	Large youth demographic; mobile-first ecosystem; rapidly expanding domestic industry; growing regulatory support
Weaknesses	Increased competition from China and the U.S.; market saturation, reliance on legacy titles	Risk of overregulation; global reputation challenges linked to censorship and content control	Lack of centralized policy; fragmented, corporate-driven system; soft power outcomes not strategically coordinated	Infrastructure gaps, social stigma, limited international competitiveness, and dependence on foreign platforms

supporting national digital governance and cultural dissemination (Yuan, 2025).

South Korea offers a different trajectory as the earliest institutionalizer of esports, establishing the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) in 2000 under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes how esports has become embedded within South Korea's broader Hallyu cultural diplomacy strategy, complementing the global expansion of K-pop, K-dramas, and other cultural exports (Jin, 2020; de Oliveira, 2025; Samosir and Wee, 2023). KeSPA continues to professionalize players, standardize leagues, and facilitate international participation, reinforcing the nation's reputation for technological sophistication and cultural dynamism (Su et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024). In contrast, the United States follows a market-led institutionalization pathway without a centralized national esports statute. Corporate governance, collegiate programs, and rising diplomatic interest shape its development, with universities offering varsity programs, scholarships, and competitive leagues that contribute to structural legitimacy and talent pipelines (Reitman et al., 2020; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). The U.S. Department of State has recently incorporated esports into public diplomacy initiatives aimed at youth engagement, while major corporations—including Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, Twitch, Google, and Amazon—continue to export American governance models and entertainment norms, expanding U.S. influence within the global esports ecosystem (Joseph et al., 2025).

5.2 Institutional actors and public–private partnerships

Esports governance in all four countries is shaped by hybrid public–private structures that combine government ministries, national federations, municipal authorities, game publishers, tournament organizers, and streaming platforms. These institutional ecosystems play a crucial role in legitimizing esports, creating pathways for athlete development, supporting international participation, and aligning gaming industries with national diplomatic goals.

In India, institutional development is driven through a combination of state agencies and private-sector actors. The Esports Federation of India (ESFI) coordinates national team selection, organizes official tournaments, and liaises with international bodies, giving India an institutional foothold in global esports diplomacy (Esports Federation of India, 2023). ESFI's activities are complemented by insights from the FICCI and EY (2024) industry report, which documents the economic potential of esports and its role in India's media and entertainment sector. Legal and regulatory scholarship further highlights the need for coordinated policy frameworks to support fair governance, dispute resolution, and industry professionalism (Gupta and Sharma, 2022).

China's institutional architecture is characterized by state-aligned platforms and publishers, which operate as extensions of national digital policy. Companies such as Tencent, Bilibili, Huya, and DouYu work within a governance structure shaped by regulatory authorities, including the NPPA. These institutions collectively implement industrial policy, content regulation, event hosting, and cultural dissemination, reinforcing China's pursuit of digital sovereignty and cultural influence (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan,

2025; Yuan, 2025). Their integration reflects a coordinated public–private partnership model, where corporate infrastructures serve national soft power objectives.

South Korea's esports governance is supported by an early-established sectoral framework centered on the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA). Contemporary studies show that KeSPA aligns esports with cultural and diplomatic priorities through league standardization, athlete certification, and coordination with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (de Oliveira, 2025; Jin, 2020; Samosir and Wee, 2023). Streaming platforms such as AfreecaTV and partnerships with tournament organizers reflect a broader integration of esports into the Hallyu soft power strategy, positioning pro players as cultural ambassadors (Su et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024).

In the United States, corporate actors dominate institutional governance. Major publishers—Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, Epic Games—along with distribution platforms such as Twitch (Amazon) and YouTube Gaming (Google) function as global standard-setters. Their governance covers franchising, competition rules, media rights, player contracts, and event production, influencing esports regulations internationally (Reitman et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025). The U.S. Department of State has recently begun integrating esports into its Sports Diplomacy programs, signaling a growing recognition of esports as a platform for youth outreach and cultural exchange (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2024).

Together, these institutional actors form complex public–private ecosystems that enable esports to operate as a diplomatic resource while navigating governance, commercialization, and national branding.

5.3 Multilateral standard-setting and eventization

Esports is transitioning from fragmented national recognition toward a more structured multilateral ecosystem, driven by major sporting bodies, regional organizations, and international event organizers. This process reflects esports' increasing diplomatic relevance and the emergence of shared norms around competition integrity, athlete welfare, and cross-border collaboration.

The Olympic Esports Series (2023) represents a landmark in the multilateralization of esports. Although esports is not fully integrated into the Olympic Games, the Series introduced prototypes for governance models emphasizing safety, integrity, inclusivity, and standardized competition structures (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). These principles mirror broader governance concerns identified in recent research, such as legitimacy, regulatory coordination, health protection, and integrity systems (da Silva Candeo et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022).

The 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games marked a major shift by including esports as official medal events, strengthening esports' legitimacy as part of international sport diplomacy. Public perception studies show that this inclusion influenced national pride, cross-cultural engagement, and public acceptance of esports as a competitive discipline (Qian et al., 2024). The decision also encouraged countries to develop domestic event regulation, anti-doping standards, eligibility rules, and certification processes—creating spillover policy effects in national systems.

Cities across Asia, North America, and the Middle East are now pursuing esports districts, specialized venues, and event-hosting strategies as components of digital cultural policy. Scholarly analysis highlights the role of cities in linking esports with tourism, technology branding, education pipelines, and cross-border cultural attraction (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). Such city-level investments operate as localized diplomacy, drawing international participants and global audiences while reinforcing national strategies.

Higher education institutions—especially in the United States, South Korea, and increasingly India—are integrating varsity esports teams, scholarships, training academies, and research programs. These pipelines contribute to talent development, professional capacity, and long-term institutional credibility (Reitman et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2024; McNulty et al., 2023).

Collectively, these multilateral, regional, and city-level developments reflect a broader convergence of governance standards, transforming esports into a structured global ecosystem with diplomatic, cultural, and institutional implications.

5.4 Risks, safeguards, and policy gaps

Although esports is increasingly institutionalized across national and international systems, significant governance risks remain. These challenges arise from fragmented authority, uneven regulation, commercial pressures, and vulnerabilities related to ethics and integrity. Recent research emphasizes that without coordinated safeguards, the diplomatic and cultural value of esports can be weakened or even undermined (da Silva Candeco et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022; Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022).

Governance fragmentation poses one of the most persistent structural risks. The coexistence of publishers, private leagues, national federations, ministries, municipal authorities, and streaming platforms creates a complex and often incoherent governance landscape. Studies show that this multi-actor structure generates inconsistent competition rules, unclear jurisdictional boundaries, and parallel integrity systems, which collectively restrict the capacity to coordinate athlete welfare and ensure fair play across the ecosystem (Peng et al., 2020; da Silva Candeco et al., 2025).

A further challenge stems from the tension between overregulation and underregulation. State-led systems risk imposing excessive regulatory constraints that can suppress creativity, hinder commercial flexibility, and weaken global cultural resonance. In contrast, underregulated environments—typical of corporate-led, market-driven ecosystems—can leave players vulnerable to predatory contracts, excessive workloads, inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms, and limited institutional accountability (Kelly et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2023; Madden and Harteveld, 2021).

Integrity threats present another major governance concern. Empirical research consistently identifies cheating, match-fixing, illegal betting, harassment, doping, and cybersecurity weaknesses as systemic risks. These issues undermine competitive fairness and erode international trust, generating conditions for soft disempowerment in which reputational damage negates or reverses the intended diplomatic benefits of esports (Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Bobrovich, 2024; da Silva Candeco et al., 2025).

Finally, both commercialization pressures and player welfare deficits raise long-term sustainability questions. High levels of

commercialization—reflected in sponsorship dependencies, franchised leagues, and media rights markets—can weaken community legitimacy and sideline grassroots participation, which is essential for maintaining soft power appeal (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). Simultaneously, research has documented rising concerns around burnout, sleep deprivation, anxiety, and physical and mental health stressors among esports athletes, underscoring the urgent need for formal welfare guidelines and protection policies (Bonnar et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2024).

A comparative overview of national institutional landscapes and policy gaps is presented in Table 4.

6 Ethical and regulatory considerations

Esports diplomacy operates within a rapidly evolving regulatory environment marked by fragmented governance, questions of legitimacy, commercialization pressures, and persistent integrity risks. These challenges illustrate the need for coherent ethical frameworks that support sustainable growth, protect participants, and maintain the diplomatic credibility of esports initiatives.

6.1 Governance fragmentation

Unlike traditional sports—where centralized bodies such as the IOC or FIFA coordinate global standards—esports governance remains highly fragmented, with authority dispersed across publishers, tournament operators, national federations, ministries, and platform corporations, each exercising distinct forms of regulatory power. Recent reviews highlight publisher dominance as a central feature of this landscape: because intellectual property remains privately owned, companies such as Riot Games, Tencent, Activision Blizzard, and Valve retain control over competitive rules, eligibility requirements, and event formats (Peng et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025). This configuration produces several structural inconsistencies, including the absence of uniform integrity policies, disparities in anti-harassment and anti-doping standards, uneven regulation of player contracts, and overlapping or contradictory regional guidelines. Scholars argue that such fragmentation undermines regulatory legitimacy and complicates attempts to develop cross-border diplomatic coordination (da Silva Candeco et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2022). National differences further deepen these imbalances: South Korea benefits from a relatively unified system under KeSPA, the United States operates within a decentralized, corporate-first environment, and China maintains an extensive state-regulated model grounded in licensing controls and platform sovereignty. Without greater international harmonization, achieving competitive fairness and effective diplomatic cooperation in esports will remain a persistent challenge.

6.2 Legitimacy debates

The legitimacy of esports as a “real sport” continues to influence its global acceptance, as debates persist in contexts

TABLE 4 Policy and institutional landscape of esports diplomacy (illustrative, 2020s).

Country	Legal/policy recognition	Lead agencies and key actors	Regulatory posture	Diplomatic/branding uses	Current policy gaps (2020–2025 evidence)
South Korea	Early institutionalization through KeSPA; integration with cultural diplomacy and Hallyu policy	Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism; KeSPA; AfreecaTV; major leagues	Enabling, sectoral model; hybrid state–industry governance	Hallyu-aligned branding; global ambassador players; hosting major international events	Need for deeper athlete welfare safeguards; heightened competition from China/US; innovation pressures (Jin, 2020; de Oliveira, 2025; Su et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2024)
China	Esports embedded in state cultural strategy; formal medal events at the 2023 Asian Games	NPPA; Tencent; Bilibili; Huya; municipal governments hosting events	Strong state control—licensing, content oversight, platform sovereignty	Digital nationalism, platform-driven cultural exports, and regional leadership	Overregulation risks; global perception issues around censorship; youth restrictions affecting talent pipelines (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025; Qian et al., 2024)
United States	No federal esports statute; policy recognition through sports diplomacy & higher education	U.S. Department of State; NCAA-adjacent varsity programs; Riot; Activision Blizzard; Twitch/YouTube	Light-touch governance; corporate leadership shapes norms	Export of platforms, franchised leagues, entertainment formats, and youth diplomacy programs	Fragmentation; lack of uniform athlete protections; corporate-driven governance gaps (U.S. Department of State, 2021, 2024; Reitman et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2025)
India	2022 MoYAS recognition; 2023 MeitY online gaming rules formalizing esports categories	MoYAS; MeitY; ESFI; state governments; FICCI–EY	Emerging regulatory clarity: linking esports to digital policy and youth development	Digital India branding, participation in multisport events, and growing domestic leagues	Infrastructure disparities; social stigma; need for integrity systems, training pipelines, and player welfare policies (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, 2023; ESFI, 2023; FICCI and EY, 2024; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024)

where physical exertion is viewed as a defining criterion of athletic activity. Although esports satisfies core elements associated with sport—such as competition, skill, structured training, codified rules, fandom, and professionalization—questions remain regarding its alignment with traditional sporting norms. Recent academic reviews argue that digital-native sports expand conventional understandings of athleticism by emphasizing cognitive speed, perceptual acuity, strategic coordination, and team-based communication (McNulty et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2024). The IOC's introduction of the Olympic Esports Series in 2023 further strengthens institutional legitimacy by recognizing esports as an activity worthy of governance within global sporting frameworks (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). Nonetheless, cultural variation continues to shape legitimacy perceptions: in South Korea, esports is normalized and embedded within the broader Hallyu soft power strategy (de Oliveira, 2025; Su et al., 2025), whereas in China and India, lingering stigma associating gaming with addiction, gambling, or youth delinquency undermines public acceptance and policy trust (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Gupta and Sharma, 2022). These stigmas can diminish

esports' diplomatic potential and obstruct the development of sustainable talent pipelines.

6.3 Risks of over-commercialization

Esports' heavy dependence on private investment, sponsorships, advertising, platform monetization, and franchised leagues introduces substantial risks associated with excessive commercialization. Overreliance on commercial actors can marginalize grassroots communities, limit access for lower-income players, redirect governance priorities from competitive integrity toward revenue maximization, and ultimately weaken the sense of authenticity that underpins esports' soft power influence. Scholars caution that, when commercialization outpaces community trust, the cultural legitimacy and long-term diplomatic potential of esports may erode (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Joseph et al., 2025). Additionally, growing platform concentration presents further challenges: U.S.-based services such as Twitch and YouTube, alongside China-based platforms operated by Tencent, wield significant influence

over global content visibility. This dominance can contribute to cultural homogenization and diminish regional diversity within esports ecosystems, thereby complicating efforts to sustain pluralistic and locally grounded esports cultures (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025).

6.4 Corruption, integrity, and safeguards

Integrity risks in esports—such as match-fixing, illegal betting, doping, harassment, cyber-abuse, and player exploitation—closely resemble those found in traditional sports but are intensified by the sector's rapid expansion and fragmented oversight structures. Recent legal scholarship highlights that the absence of structured dispute-resolution mechanisms in esports exacerbates integrity and governance risks, with Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) increasingly proposed as a necessary institutional tool to address contractual, disciplinary, and commercial conflicts within the industry (Bhatnagar and Giri, 2024). Recent studies document widespread vulnerabilities to cheating, match manipulation, and online harassment, highlighting the scale and persistence of these threats (Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Bobrovich, 2024). Additional research identifies ongoing gaps in health protection, player contracts, and safe working conditions, revealing structural weaknesses in athlete welfare across many competitive environments (Kelly et al., 2022; McNulty et al., 2023; Bonnar et al., 2024). These issues are compounded by evidence of stress, burnout, and psychological strain, which scholars link to the demanding nature of professional esports and high-performance training cultures (Smith et al., 2022; Madden and Harteveld, 2021; Choi et al., 2024). Regulatory uncertainty—particularly in regions where esports overlaps with gambling legislation—further complicates efforts to build public trust and regulatory coherence (Gupta and Sharma, 2022). Without unified anti-corruption frameworks, these vulnerabilities risk producing soft disempowerment, wherein scandals and governance failures undermine a nation's international credibility and weaken the diplomatic value of esports (da Silva Candéo et al., 2025).

6.5 Social and cultural backlash

Esports' cultural reception varies significantly across national contexts, shaping the extent to which it can function as an effective tool of diplomacy. In South Korea, professional gamers enjoy celebrity status, and esports has become deeply embedded in mainstream youth culture and national identity, reinforcing its role within the broader Hallyu soft power strategy (Jin, 2020; Su et al., 2025). In contrast, China's cultural narratives around esports are shaped by persistent public concerns regarding youth addiction and the impact of state-imposed gaming limits, which influence both regulatory responses and societal perceptions (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Yuan, 2025). India presents a different set of challenges, with enduring stigma that links gaming to gambling, academic neglect, and unproductivity, shaping family attitudes and hindering mainstream acceptance (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; FICCI and EY, 2024). Such cultural backlash can reduce talent recruitment, limit the diplomatic appeal of esports, provoke public controversies, and undermine state-led initiatives that

aim to use esports as a vehicle for soft power projection. Managing social perceptions is therefore essential to strengthening esports' long-term cultural legitimacy and its capacity to serve as a meaningful instrument of international engagement and diplomacy.

7 Challenges and future scope

7.1 Persistent governance and policy fragmentation

One of the central unresolved challenges in esports diplomacy is the persistent fragmentation of governance across publishers, states, federations, and platform corporations. Unlike traditional sports—which rely on centralized authorities such as the IOC or FIFA to harmonize rules, uphold integrity, and coordinate international engagement—esports lacks a universal regulatory body capable of administering consistent global standards. Recent scholarship underscores that publisher ownership of intellectual property grants companies disproportionate authority over competitive formats, eligibility requirements, and disciplinary procedures, producing systems driven primarily by corporate priorities rather than public governance (Peng et al., 2020; da Silva Candéo et al., 2025). Government agencies and national esports federations introduce additional regulatory layers, resulting in divergent requirements related to licensing, athlete age limits, integrity safeguards, and online gaming restrictions (Kelly et al., 2022; Gupta and Sharma, 2022). For esports diplomacy, this fragmentation generates multiple barriers: rules and standards differ across borders, complicating international cooperation; player mobility is constrained by inconsistent visa, age, and contractual norms; integrity protocols vary significantly between jurisdictions, undermining global trust; and no single institution exists to mediate between states in diplomatic settings. As scholars argue, the absence of coherent governance structures limits esports' legitimacy as a diplomatic instrument and obstructs efforts to build sustainable global partnerships (Joseph et al., 2025; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025).

7.2 Legitimacy and recognition gaps

Despite its rapid global expansion, esports continues to face questions of legitimacy that shape its adoption as a diplomatic instrument. Research shows that societal perceptions of esports remain uneven, with countries such as South Korea fully embracing competitive gaming as a cultural asset, whereas others continue to associate it with addiction, distraction, or gambling, limiting mainstream acceptance (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Gupta and Sharma, 2022). Although academic scholarship on the sportification of esports highlights increasing alignment with traditional sport—evident in the development of structured training regimes, professionalized competitive circuits, and high-performance demands (McNulty et al., 2023; Choi et al., 2024)—these advancements have yet to yield universal recognition. Policy developments such as India's official recognition of esports in 2022, South Korea's longstanding institutional support, and the IOC's Olympic Esports Series (2023) indicate important progress but remain early steps rather than markers of global consensus (International Olympic

Committee (IOC), 2023). Without broader societal and institutional acceptance, esports risks continuing to be perceived as peripheral entertainment rather than a credible platform for cultural diplomacy or international engagement, thereby limiting its strategic potential in global soft-power competition (de Oliveira, 2025; Su et al., 2025).

7.3 Risks of over-commercialization and cultural homogenization

The commercial intensity of esports—driven by publishers, streaming platforms, franchised leagues, and sponsorship-based business models—raises growing concerns about the erosion of grassroots authenticity and the narrowing of cultural expression. Recent literature warns that monetization logics can overshadow community values, weakening trust among fans and diminishing esports' soft-power potential as a tool of cultural diplomacy (Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025; Allal-Chérif et al., 2024). Over-commercialization carries several risks: fan communities may increasingly perceive esports as corporate entertainment rather than a participatory culture; local and independent tournament ecosystems lose visibility; and power imbalances escalate between multinational corporations and national federations. Compounding these challenges is the threat of cultural homogenization. Because global esports distribution is dominated by a small number of platform ecosystems—particularly Twitch and YouTube internationally, and Tencent-aligned platforms in China—regional games, local narratives, and culturally specific identities struggle to gain prominence (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025). These dynamics have direct diplomatic implications: cultural diversity in esports becomes overshadowed by globally standardized corporate aesthetics; states face constraints in projecting locally grounded cultural narratives; and the platform dominance of the United States and China indirectly shapes which cultural products achieve international visibility. For esports to function as a pluralistic arena for diplomacy and cross-cultural engagement, it must strike a sustainable balance between commercial growth and cultural diversity. Without such an equilibrium, its potential to facilitate meaningful cultural exchange may be significantly diminished.

7.4 Integrity and social concerns

Integrity challenges continue to represent one of the most significant barriers to the effective use of esports as a diplomatic tool. Recent research demonstrates that issues such as match-fixing, cheating, doping, illegal betting, harassment, and online abuse persist across multiple competitive ecosystems, often intensified by the absence of unified global governance mechanisms (Schöber and Stadtmann, 2022; Bobrovich, 2024; da Silva Candeco et al., 2025). These vulnerabilities expose federations, publishers, and event hosts to reputational risks, especially when scandals occur at internationally visible tournaments. In a diplomatic context, such integrity failures can cause soft disempowerment, where instead of projecting cultural influence, states face backlash and diminished credibility.

Social perceptions further complicate esports diplomacy. While South Korea normalizes gaming as a professional culture and

celebrates esports athletes as public figures, countries like India and China continue to grapple with social stigma that associates gaming with addiction, distraction, or gambling (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). These perceptions shape regulatory responses—such as China's playtime restrictions or India's concern over online gaming addiction—and influence how esports is framed within national policy debates. If unresolved, these social and cultural tensions risk diminishing the positive diplomatic impact of esports, limiting its potential as a youth-facing engagement tool and undermining its legitimacy among international audiences.

Addressing integrity and social issues is therefore essential for protecting esports' credibility and ensuring that nations do not experience diplomatic setbacks arising from scandals, regulatory controversies, or public mistrust.

7.5 Future opportunities: AI, metaverse, and digital governance

Despite the structural and ethical challenges, esports continues to offer substantial opportunities for strengthening soft power and public diplomacy. Three rapidly evolving domains illustrate the future potential of esports as a diplomatic instrument.

1. AI-driven systems are increasingly being deployed in anti-cheating mechanisms, performance analytics, and player monitoring. As governance scholars note, stronger integrity frameworks supported by automated detection tools can reduce corruption risks and stabilize competitive environments (da Silva Candeco et al., 2025; Bialecki et al., 2024). For diplomacy, AI-enabled transparency reinforces trust, ensuring that esports events hosted or sponsored by states are viewed as credible, fair, and professionally regulated.
2. Emerging virtual environments offer the possibility of metaverse-native esports competitions that transcend geographic borders. These immersive platforms enable unprecedented forms of cultural exchange, long-distance cooperation, and symbolic participation. As digital media research suggests, the integration of immersive technologies expands the cultural and social reach of esports, making transnational engagement more accessible (Reitman et al., 2020). In diplomacy, metaverse events could serve as new arenas for international showcases, youth outreach, and cross-cultural collaboration without requiring physical infrastructure or travel.
3. As esports matures, international organizations are beginning to explore standardized governance solutions. The Olympic Esports Series (2023) demonstrates a growing willingness among global institutions to create normative baselines for eligibility, integrity, safety, and inclusion (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2023). Regionally, the Asian Games' adoption of esports as medal events has set precedents for anti-doping norms, athlete accreditation, and competitive legitimacy (Yuan, 2023).

These developments point toward future models of digital multilateralism, where states collaborate through federations, councils, and governing bodies to harmonize esports rules. Such models could alleviate fragmentation, reduce integrity risks, and ensure that esports can function reliably as a diplomatic medium.

7.6 Strategic implications

Looking ahead, the strategic landscape of esports diplomacy will depend on how effectively states and corporations navigate the tension between innovation and regulation, commercialization and authenticity, and national interests and international cooperation. The ability to strike these balances will determine whether esports becomes a sustainable diplomatic instrument or remains a fragmented and commercially driven entertainment sector.

For South Korea, maintaining leadership will require renewed innovation in governance, athlete welfare, and global branding. Although the country remains a symbolic center of esports culture, recent research shows that competitive dominance has shifted, and Korea must now integrate new forms of digital diplomacy—particularly those tied to Hallyu, celebrity players, and global fan communities—to sustain its soft power advantages (Jin, 2020; de Oliveira, 2025; Su et al., 2025).

For China, strategic challenges revolve around reconciling strong state control with the need for international legitimacy. Studies highlight that while China's platform sovereignty and game exports are powerful diplomatic tools, heavy regulatory measures—such as licensing restrictions and playtime limits—risk damaging global perceptions or stifling innovation (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Xiang and Yuan, 2025; Yuan, 2025). Improving transparency, reducing censorship-related stigma, and promoting cultural exports through globally resonant games will be central to strengthening China's diplomatic appeal.

For the United States, the core strategic task will be aligning corporate-led influence with broader cultural and diplomatic objectives. Esports diplomacy in the U.S. is driven largely by private entities—Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, Twitch, YouTube Gaming—whose commercial systems, franchising models, and governance templates shape global industry norms (Scholz, 2019; Navarro-Lucena et al., 2025). The challenge for U.S. policymakers is to harness this corporate soft power while addressing fragmentation, player welfare, and international coordination.

For India, strategic priorities center on infrastructure development, public legitimacy, and talent cultivation. Although the country has made significant policy strides—such as formal esports recognition and updated online gaming rules—research suggests ongoing barriers: inconsistent infrastructure, limited competitive depth, regulatory confusion, and persistent social stigma around gaming (Gupta and Sharma, 2022; FICCI and EY, 2024; Esports Federation of India, 2023). By investing in training ecosystems, addressing public concerns, and leveraging its large youth population, India can translate demographic advantages into diplomatic and cultural influence through esports.

Overall, the future of esports diplomacy will depend on how effectively states and corporations can institutionalize integrity, protect community trust, align technological innovation with cultural strategy, and cooperate across borders. Those who succeed will shape the next generation of soft power in an increasingly digital international environment.

8 Conclusion

Esports has rapidly transformed from a niche entertainment activity into a global cultural industry with growing diplomatic

significance. As a hybrid arena—combining elements of sport, digital culture, youth identity, and transnational media—esports aligns closely with contemporary forms of soft power. Its capacity to mobilize large international audiences, foster interactive communities, and circulate culturally embedded games makes it a uniquely powerful tool for states and corporations seeking influence in the digital age.

The comparative analysis of South Korea, China, the United States, and India highlights the diverse models through which countries attempt to shape global perceptions through esports. South Korea, the historical pioneer, embedded esports within the broader Hallyu wave, allowing professional players and iconic teams to serve as cultural ambassadors. China has adopted a state-led model, fusing esports with digital nationalism, platform sovereignty, and large-scale cultural exports through companies such as Tencent. The United States exerts influence primarily through corporate soft power, with publishers and platforms—Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, Twitch, YouTube Gaming—exporting governance systems and entertainment formats worldwide. India, an emerging actor, is leveraging its demographic strengths and recent policy recognition to position esports within the framework of Digital India.

While these models demonstrate esports' growing strategic relevance, they also reveal significant vulnerabilities. Governance fragmentation, legitimacy disputes, and uneven regulatory environments limit coordinated international action. Integrity issues—including cheating, match-fixing, harassment, and doping—pose reputational risks that can undermine diplomatic credibility. Social stigma remains pronounced in countries such as India and China, where gaming continues to be associated with addiction or gambling. These concerns create the possibility of soft disempowerment, where instead of enhancing a nation's image, esports-related scandals damage it.

At the same time, future opportunities offer substantial potential for strengthening esports diplomacy. Artificial intelligence can support fair play and enhance transparency; metaverse-based competitions may enable new forms of transnational engagement; and growing global institutional interest—exemplified by the Olympic Esports Series (2023) and regional initiatives such as the Asian Games—suggests a gradual move toward standardized governance. These developments can raise esports' legitimacy and expand its utility as a diplomatic instrument.

Critically, the study shows that control over distribution ecosystems—such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Google Play, the Apple App Store, and Tencent's platforms—is as influential as control over game development itself. These digital infrastructures shape cultural flows, visibility, and international narrative-setting, thereby embedding national and corporate soft power into global esports consumption.

Ultimately, the future of esports diplomacy depends on how effectively states and corporations balance innovation with regulation, commercialization with authenticity, and national interests with global cooperation. Addressing integrity, health, legitimacy, and governance challenges is essential if esports is to serve as a credible and sustainable tool of international engagement.

Esports represents a dynamic, youth-centered arena of digital soft power—one that is reshaping how nations communicate, compete, and cultivate influence in an increasingly interconnected world. If its ethical, institutional, and cultural risks can be managed, esports has

the potential to become one of the most significant diplomatic channels of the 21st century.

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