



## *Education, Youth, and Soft Power: Exploring Pakistan's Emerging Influence through Human Capital Development*

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### Abstract

The present study investigated the importance of education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy, and academic exchange programs for the growth of Pakistan's soft power in the field of human capital development. The study was conducted to explore the contribution of these two theories, namely: Soft Power Theory and Human Capital Theory in the terms of strengthening Pakistan's influence and position in the world. The research method employed was quantitative research with cross-sectional survey design. A questionnaire was used to gather the data from 300 undergraduate and postgraduate students in public and private universities of Pakistan. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were used to analyze the collected data in SPSS program. The results showed that education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy and academic exchange programs had positive and significant impact on the soft power development of Pakistan. Youth engagement was the most powerful predictor. The findings underscore the need for investment in human capital, strengthen educational cooperation, and increase international academic engagement to boost Pakistan's global reputation and competitiveness. The study contributes to the literature on soft power by providing empirical evidence from the Pakistani context.

**Keywords:** Soft Power, Human Capital Development, Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy, Academic Exchange Programs, Pakistan.



## Introduction

### Background of the Study

In today's international relations, the concept of "soft power" has become increasingly significant, influencing the strategies and methods states use to gain influence and improve their international image (Devi et al., 2025). Soft power is about attracting, persuading, and making others like a country's culture, values and institutions, as opposed to hard power (military and economic power) (Nye, 2021). With an increasingly connected world, education and human capital development have emerged as a vital part of a country's soft power, which is realized through knowledge creation, innovation, and development of globally competent citizens (Gauttam et al., 2023; Butt et al., 2024). In this regard, countries are putting money into their educational systems and youth development programs to secure their economic growth, but also their image and competitiveness on the international stage (Ali et al., 2024; Munir & Zaidi, 2023).

Human capital is defined as one of the nation's strategic resources that affects the economic productivity, social development and power of a nation. Especially, highly educated populations improve a country's innovation, research, and technological development potential, which can make it more attractive to the world for partnership and investment (Tan, 2025). In this regard, education is a key tool to develop qualified humans that can make a contribution to the development of the country and interact with the world. Further, educational attainment and knowledge production have emerged as important factors determining international perceptions of countries, including their reputations and soft power potential of countries (Ullah et al., 2025).

Pakistan has huge demographic strengths which can be used to boost its soft power by investing in human capital development. Pakistan is one of the most populous countries in the world and the youth constitute about 64 percent of the Pakistani population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This population structure offers ample possibilities to invest in education and skills development to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, and global engagement (Ali 2023; Hafeez & Fasih 2018). There are positive signs of improvement in literacy rates and enrolment in higher education, while, however, issues regarding educational quality and accessibility, as well as resource allocation, remain a constraint towards the realization of the human capital potential in Pakistan (Pakistan Institute of Education, 2024; Sain & Babiera, 2023).

### Education and Soft Power

In recent years, education has come to represent an impactful tool of persuasion, providing countries with the means to build enduring international partnerships and build their prestige on the world stage (Devi et al., 2025). Higher education institutions are especially crucial for producing soft power by generating knowledge, fostering research and research interactions, and attracting international students and scholars (Gauttam et al, 2023; Butt et al, 2024). The universities are the settings for intellectual exchange, cultural interaction and scientific collaboration and help to make a nation visible and prestigious internationally. If a country has a good education system, then the country gets more recognition in the world and institutions of the country become centres of excellence and bring in talent from across the world (Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

Moreover, the process of internationalization of higher education has opened avenues for countries to exert influence through excellence in teaching and research (Rao, 2025). When universities can do high-quality research and participate in global knowledge



networks, it supports the national credibility and international perception of the country (Tan, 2025; Butt et al., 2024). Educational development, therefore, has been a crucial element of soft power policies across many countries.

### **Youth as Agents of National Influence**

Youth are a powerful force for national change and social change. They have played an important role in civic involvement, business creation, technological innovation, and leadership development, which in turn has helped in the development of the country and the country's engagement in the external world (Munir & Zaidi, 2023). Young people are increasingly becoming national representatives of identity and innovation in the context of new digital technologies and globalization, as they interact in global educational, professional, and social networks.

The large youth population in Pakistan is a challenge as well as an opportunity. Quality education, skills development and opportunities to participate can help young people to be engines of economic development and help to promote the country's international image (Ali, 2023). Participating in entrepreneurial activities, technological innovations and civic engagement can help improve Pakistan's reputation as a vibrant and progressive society that can make a positive impact in the world of development (Javed, 2020).

### **Educational Diplomacy and Academic Exchanges**

Educational diplomacy has emerged as an effective tool to promote international cooperation and understanding among states. Student exchanges, faculty exchanges, research cooperation and joint education programs offer possibilities of establishing enduring relations beyond politics and economics. Such exchanges can contribute to the exchange of knowledge, promote intercultural dialogue, and strengthen diplomatic ties with other nations (Gauttam et al., 2023; Butt et al., 2024).

Academic exchanges in particular, are used to build soft power by introducing foreign students and academics to the education, culture and values of a country. These experiences are felt in the formation of long-term relationships and goodwill that further enhances cooperation between the two countries and multilateral cooperation. The increased participation in international educational partnerships and mobility is positive development for Pakistan as it boosts its overall engagement and profile in the international academic realm (Nitza-Makowska, 2021; Butt et al., 2024).

### **Problem Statement**

While soft power tools are becoming more significant in international relations, the importance of education, youth development, and Pakistan's emerging global voice is yet to be recognized by the academic community (Butt et al., 2024). Previous studies on the soft power prominence of Pakistan have prioritized political, economic, and security dimensions while overlooking the role of soft power in human capital development (Ali et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the relationship between educational upliftment, youth empowerment and educational diplomacy to build international perception of Pakistan is yet to be understood (Ali, 2023; Munir & Zaidi, 2023; Nitza-Makowska, 2021). This research gap requires a detailed analysis of the role of education and youth in enhancing the soft power and influence of Pakistan in the world.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the role of education and youth engagement in strengthening Pakistan's soft power and international influence.



2. To explore the potential of educational diplomacy and academic exchanges in enhancing Pakistan's global standing.

### Research Questions

**RQ1:** How do education and youth engagement contribute to Pakistan's soft power development?

**RQ2:** What role do educational diplomacy and academic exchange programs play in improving Pakistan's international image and influence?

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to the growing body of literature on soft power by examining the role of education and youth development in shaping Pakistan's international influence (Butt et al., 2024; Ali, 2023). It offers a framework to understand the role of human capital investments in building the national image, increasing international cooperation, and improving global competitiveness (Ali et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). The study also provides practical policy suggestions to education institutions, development practitioners, and policy makers to leverage education and youth engagement as soft power tools (Munir & Zaidi, 2023; Bukhari et al., 2025). The study sheds light on the connections between human capital development and international influence, thus enriching the debate on sustainable national development and the role of education in modern diplomacy (Nitza-Makowska, 2021; Rafiq-Uz-Zaman, 2025).

### Literature Review

#### Understanding Soft Power

In today's international relations the term soft power has gained a lot of importance because in the modern world non-coercive means of influence are becoming more and more essential. Soft power is different from hard power, which is the military and economic power of a country, it is the power to attract, persuade and legitimise others' preferences and actions. In recent years, education, innovation and the production of knowledge have become part of the sources of soft power in addition to culture and political values (Snow, 2016; Rao, 2025). In today's global context, where knowledge-based economies play a growing role in the world, human capital development and educational institutions are becoming relevant actors in national soft power strategies (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021). The role of education and youth development in building the national presence and engagement in the global arena is gaining greater focus and importance in Pakistan (Ali, 2023).

Over the past few years, education has become an increasingly important soft power asset due to its cultural exchange, intellectual co-operation and the building of relationships in the long term between nations. Gauttam et al. (2023) suggest that educational institutions are one of the ways that countries make their values, excellence in learning and contribution to the intellectual world visible to the international community. Higher education institutions in countries can gain soft power benefits by attracting international students, boosting international networks and improving the countries' reputation through higher education. Educational diplomacy and international academic partnerships have become important tools for countries to build international goodwill and influence (Butt et al., 2024).

#### Human Capital Development and National Competitiveness

According to Human Capital Theory, education and skills development play vital roles in increasing the productivity of individuals and the performance of a nation's economy. In



today's knowledge-based economy, human capital ranks alongside other factors as a significant contributor to competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable development. Countries build their knowledge base, technical skills and professional competencies which allow them to increase productivity, attract foreign investment and build their international profile (Lentjushenkova, 2021). The importance of skill development and education reform in the context of national competitiveness and human capital improvement has gained many more feathers in the cap of its significance in developing countries such as Pakistan (Ali et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025).

Recent studies highlight the role of education as one of the most efficient means to build human capital in terms of improving cognitive performance, technological adaptation and innovation (O'Farrell & Liu, 2020). A country's investment in education is directly related to its level of economic growth and international competitiveness. Thus, education has not only emerged as a development priority, but as a strategic tool to strengthen the influence of the nation in the international system. Recent findings indicate that education policies and youth development programmes have played an important role in national development and international competitiveness (Munir & Zaidi, 2023; Bukhari et al., 2025).

#### **Education as a Tool of Soft Power**

The link between education and soft power has assumed greater importance in the international policy and academic debates. HEIs play a national role through the production of research, creation of innovation, and recruitment of talent from abroad. Universities are vital instruments that can help spread academic cooperation and cultural exchange across a multitude of people and communities (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

The concept of knowledge diplomacy also underscores the importance of education in promoting international relations. Knowledge diplomacy is a tool of higher education, research cooperation and intellectual exchange that can be used for solving common global challenges and enhancing mutual understanding among countries (Knight, 2022). When universities are part of global educational networks, they can play a role in scientific development and also in increasing their countries' international visibility and credibility (Butt et al., 2024).

Further, national prestige has come to be measured by international university rankings, research productivity and academic reputation. Nation-states that have world-renowned learning institutions are seen as more innovative and progressive, and intellectually influential, thus enhancing their soft power capacity (Tan, 2025; Ullah et al., 2025).

#### **Youth Engagement and Soft Power**

Young people are an important part of the human resource pool, and are an important factor in the development of a nation as well as its influence in the international arena. The digitalization of technologies and global communication networks have created new opportunities in the economic, social and political sphere for the youth. Youth play a role in the process of entrepreneurship, innovation, civic engagement, and leadership, in the development of the country as well as in building its reputation abroad (Ali, 2023; Javed, 2020).

Youth involvement has been shown to promote unity, democratic governance, economic dynamism, and more generally, inclusive development (United Nations Development



Programme [UNDP] 2022; Munir and Zaidi, 2023). Young people also often serve as unofficial representatives of their countries via international education programmes, culture exchange and through professional networks. They excel in science, technology, sports and entrepreneurship, which often enhances their image in the international arena and boosts national soft power.

This huge youth population is a strategic asset which can be utilized effectively to increase the international competitiveness and influence in the developing countries like Pakistan. However, realizing this potential requires sustained investments in education, skills development, and youth empowerment initiatives (Hafeez & Fasih, 2018; Ali et al., 2024).

### **Educational Diplomacy**

The development of educational diplomacy has become a significant aspect of modern diplomacy, highlighting the role of education in promoting international understanding and cooperation. Educational diplomacy differs from diplomatic work, which is mostly centered on politics, by emphasizing the exchange of people rather than people-to-people interactions through academic partnerships, research cooperation and educational exchanges.

Educational cooperation fosters trust, respect and long-term cooperation between the participating countries. International academic collaborations enable the dissemination of knowledge and expertise and can play a role in geopolitical goals (De Wit and Altbach, 2020). International education programs are an effective way for countries to build their international image and foster goodwill among foreign actors (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

One of the most extensively used tools of educational diplomacy is a scholarship program. Enabling international students to learn in the country opens opportunities to build long-lasting relationships, both interpersonal and institutional, that can go beyond the end of academic programs. These efforts play a major role in contributing to the national image building and in diplomatic engagement (Butt et al., 2024).

### **Academic Exchange Programs**

Academic exchange programs are one of the best instruments available for advancing educational diplomacy and soft power. Student mobility programs offer opportunities for students to experience other cultures, educational systems, and social settings, thus helping to develop intercultural understanding and international cooperation. Studies have shown that students who go on international exchange gain positive perceptions of the host countries and have long-term professional and personal relationships with them (OECD, 2023; Butt et al., 2024).

Faculty exchange programmes also facilitate the transfer of knowledge, research cooperation and academic capacity building. International mobility allows academics to have access to new methodologies, technological resources and professional networks, which improve the performance of their institutions and engagement with the world. These partnerships are further reinforced by collaborative research projects that help solve common problems and enable the advancement of science beyond borders (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

### **Education, Youth, and Nation Branding**

Nation Branding is a process whereby nations try to influence overseas perceptions and build their international reputations in an intentional manner. Education and youth



development have become the central focus of this process, as it is indicative of a country's innovation, progress and human development. Education systems and skilled young workforce are beneficial in making countries look good in the eyes of the world by showcasing the national capabilities and talent (Ali, 2023; Ullah et al., 2025).

Often international recognition will be given to the educational outcomes, the excellence in research and the innovative activities of young people and this will help to make a country more attractive to investors, visitors, scholars and development partners. Thus, education and youth empowerment have become an integral part of the modern day nation-branding efforts (Anholt, 2020; Munir & Zaidi, 2023).

### **Pakistan's Educational Diplomacy and Soft Power Efforts**

In the last 20 years, Pakistan has taken several initiatives to boost higher education and human resources development. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) has been very instrumental in creating opportunities for research productivity, faculty development, collaboration with other nations, and scholarship. Overall, these changes have helped to enhance research productivity, institutional quality, and international engagement (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2024; Bukhari et al., 2025).

International Scholarships and Faculty Development Programs of the HEC, have allowed academic mobility and enhanced international visibility of Pakistani scholars. Furthermore, the higher education sector has gained visibility in Pakistan with efforts to internationalize Pakistani universities including research cooperation, joint degrees, and academic partnerships (Butt et al., 2024). However, the literature still lacks exploration of the role of Educational Diplomacy in Pakistan's soft power.

### **Empirical Review of Previous Studies**

#### **Global Studies**

The studies of the world show that soft power has a positive correlation with higher education all over the world. Gauttam et al (2023) identified that higher education institutions strengthens their international influence through selective recruitment of international students, cultural exchange and the generation of knowledge. Likewise, Tan (2025) found that nations that had robust higher education systems had more international credibility and influence.

#### **South Asian Studies**

Studies done in South Asia underscore the significance of education cooperation and human capital development in the competitiveness of the region. Research shows that investments in education lead to economic modernization, diplomatic engagement and international recognition (Nitza-Makowska, 2021). The countries that invest in the education of their youth tend to be more successful at creating positive images for their nation in their region and the world (Butt et al., 2024).

#### **Pakistani Studies**

Most of the studies conducted in Pakistan have been related to reforms in higher education, educational quality and problem of youth development. The existing studies emphasize the role of the HEC in increasing access to higher education and increasing research capacity (Bukhari et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2025). Butt et al. (2024) have, however, paid little attention to how these educational developments help Pakistan develop its soft power and international influence. This suggests additional empirical studies are warranted.



### Research Gap

The concepts of education, soft power, youth development and human capital have already been explored by the existing literature separately. But, few studies have combined these factors into a comprehensive model to understand the combined impact of education and youth on national soft power in terms of human capital development.

While Pakistan has tremendous youth population and has made significant reforms in the field of higher education, there is an absence of empirical evidence about how much these reforms help in the process of development of the country's emerging soft power (Ali, 2023; Hafeez & Fasih, 2018). The majority of the available studies concentrate on economic and educational rather than on international influence.

A survey of the literature shows that various studies on education, youth and soft power have a qualitative, descriptive or conceptual method. Empirical studies with quantitative measurements of the connections between education, youth engagement, human capital development and soft power are still limited (Munir & Zaidi, 2023; Javed, 2020). Hence, there is a need for strong empirical studies that can test these relationships in the Pakistani context.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Soft Power Theory

The concept of "soft power" is important in understanding how countries influence through attraction rather than coercion, and is a framework that has been used to analyse the concept, such as in the context of the "soft power" of the UK in the Middle East. Nye's (2021) definition of soft power is the result of the nation's culture, values, institutions, and policies that are seen as attractive by the other nation. In today's global society, education is one of the most significant fields of soft power as it fosters the exchange of knowledge, intercultural understanding and cooperation between different countries (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021). The education institutes play a role in the name of the country as they produce skilled graduates, they do research and they welcome international students. Likewise, their role in promoting a positive national image when it comes to their capacity for innovation, leadership, entrepreneurship and involvement in global networks is vital (Ali, 2023; Munir & Zaidi, 2023). Thus, the investment in education and youth development can boost the capacity of Pakistan to shape international perception and improve its positioning in the international arena.

#### Human Capital Theory

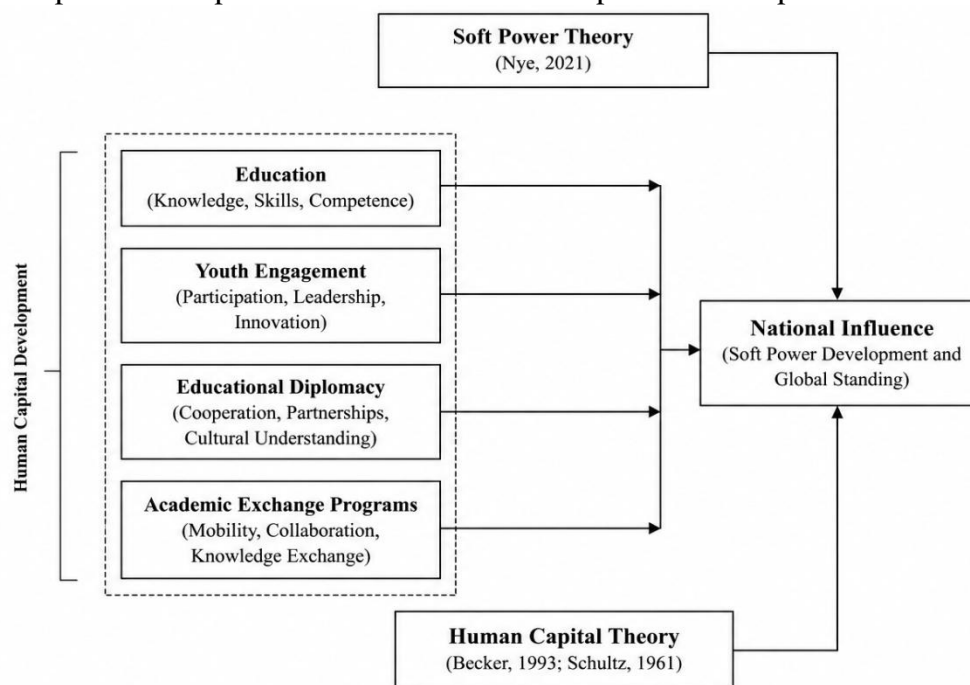
According to Human Capital Theory, education, training, and skills development enhance individuals' productivity and ability, which helps in the development and growth of the country. The theory is that education is an investment and should be seen as such and should offer economic, social and political gains over a long period of time. An educated and skilled population encourages innovation, economic development and competitiveness, and enhances the country's ability to compete in the global markets. In Pakistan's context, investments in human capital can play a vital role in socioeconomic development as well as establish the reputation and international appeal of the country to become a soft power in the future (Ali et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025; Rafiq-Uz-Zaman, 2025).

#### Linking Soft Power and Human Capital

Soft Power Theory and Human Capital Theory are integrated to give a thorough understanding of the role of education and youth in shaping national influence. Engagement of youth leads to innovation, leadership, civic participation and the



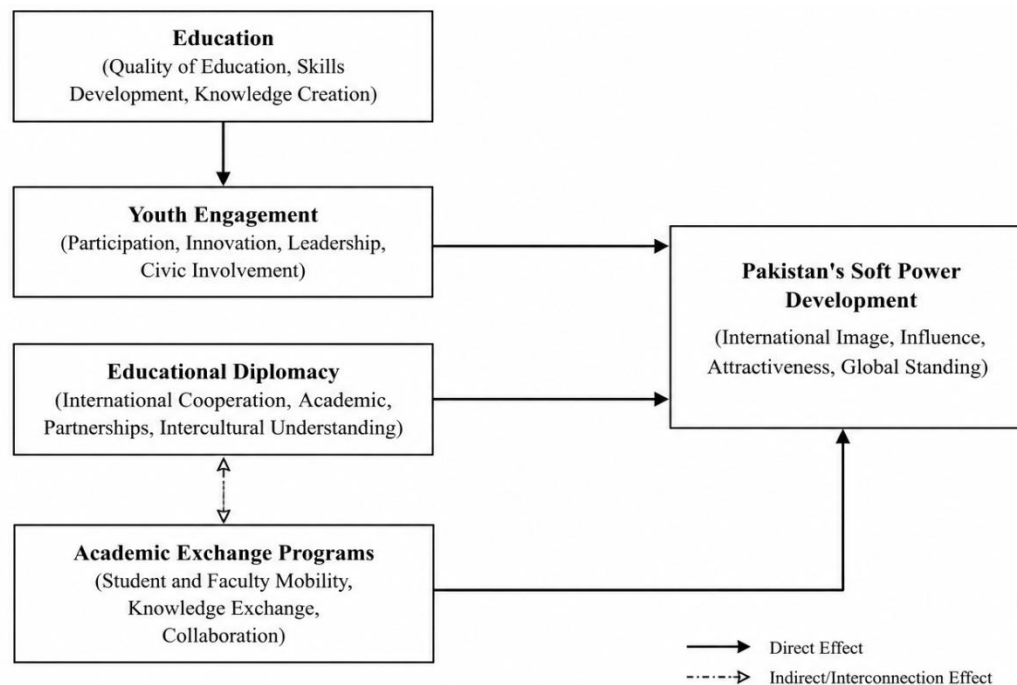
enhancement of knowledge, skills and global awareness through education (Ali, 2023; Javed, 2020). Educational diplomacy, which is rooted in international cooperation, is achieved through scholarship programmes, institutional cooperation, and joint projects, while academic exchange programmes focus on acquiring knowledge and understanding of the world's cultures (Butt et al., 2024; Nitza-Makowska, 2021). All this helps in building Pakistan's soft power by increasing its visibility, credibility and influence in the international arena, and thereby adds to its human capital. As shown in Figure 1, there is a theoretical relationship between dimensions of human capital development and soft power development in Pakistan. As shown in Figure 1, there is a theoretical relationship between human capital development dimensions and soft power development in Pakistan.



**Figure 1:** The theoretical framework shows that education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy, and academic exchange programs as four dimensions of human capital development, can support the national influence and the development of soft power, from the perspective of Soft Power Theory and Human Capital Theory.

### Conceptual Framework

On the basis of the theoretical knowledge, study suggests that the positive role of education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy, and academic exchange programs in the development of soft power of Pakistan can be seen according to the empirical literature. These are important international dimensions of human capital development to improve international reputation, deepen global engagement and boost national influence. The envisioned framework assumes that the improvement in these dimensions will have direct impact on the enhancement of soft power of Pakistan. The conceptual framework of the study as shown in figure 2 was used to represent the hypothesized relationship among the variables of the study.



**Figure 2** The conceptual framework proposes that education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy, and academic exchange programs independently and collectively influence Pakistan's soft power development by enhancing human capital, international engagement, and national reputation.

### Methodology

The quantitative research methodology was used in this study to explore the education-youth engagement-education diplomacy-academic exchange programs-soft power development nexus in Pakistan. Since the collection of numerical data and the analysis of relationships between variables using statistics were thought to be appropriate, quantitative research was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study used a cross sectional survey design and surveyed the respondents at a single point in time. This design proved appropriate to study the perceptions of the participants about the role of education and youth in the promotion of Pakistan's soft power. The positivist paradigm was used in guiding the research as it believed that social phenomena can be measured and analyzed objectively using empirical observation and statistics (Saunders et al., 2003).

The population of the study was undergraduate and postgraduate students of public and private universities in Pakistan. The students of the universities were chosen as they are an important part of the educated population of the country and are directly associated with educational and international efforts. The sample for this study was made up of 300 students. The sample size was judged to be sufficient for statistical analyses such as correlation and multiple regression. Stratified random sampling was used to get a representative sample of students from both public and private universities. This method increased the representativeness of the sample and decreased sampling bias.

This study was conducted by using a structured questionnaire which has six parts. The data was gathered in Section A (Demographic) and the following dimensions were measured in Sections B, C, D, E and F: Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy, Academic Exchange Programs, and Soft Power Development. All items were measured on a 5 point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In order to



make the quality of the instrument, the questionnaire was subjected to the examination by experts to establish content validity. A pilot study with a small number of participants was conducted prior to the main survey to help detect ambiguities and clarify the instruments. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess reliability and scores  $>0.70$  were deemed to have acceptable internal consistency (Taber, 2017).

Primary data were gathered by conducting an online and face-to-face survey to students from selected universities. The subjects were voluntary participants and filled out the questionnaire with informed consent. The data collected were analysed via SPSS. The respondent characteristic and study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics, such as frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation. Relationships between variables and testing of the proposed framework were investigated using inferential statistics such as Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis.

The ethical principles were observed rigorously during the study. The respondents were made aware of the purpose of the research and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to and the gathered information was only used for research purposes. Participants also had the option of withdrawing at any point of the study without consequences.

## Results

### Demographic Profile

**Table 1:** *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	162	54.0
	Female	138	46.0
Age	18–22 Years	128	42.7
	23–27 Years	116	38.7
	Above 27 Years	56	18.6
University Type	Public	170	56.7
	Private	130	43.3
Academic Level	Undergraduate	188	62.7
	Postgraduate	112	37.3

As shown in table 1, 54.0% of the respondents were male and 46.0% were female. The majority of participants (42.7%) were between 18 and 22 years of age, with 38.7% of the participants aged 23–27 years. The majority (56.7%) of the students was public universities and 43.3% were private universities. The majority of respondents were undergraduate students (62.7%) while postgraduate students made up 37.3% of the respondents.



### Reliability Analysis

**Table 2:** *Reliability Statistics*

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Education	5	.842
Youth Engagement	5	.861
Educational Diplomacy	5	.878
Academic Exchange Programs	5	.853
Soft Power Development	5	.891
Overall Scale	25	.903

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the study variables. Cronbach's alpha values were from .842 to .891, which is greater than the suggested value of .70. The overall reliability coefficient for the whole scale was .903, which is very good. Thus, for statistical analyses the instrument was deemed reliable.

### Descriptive Statistics

**Table 3:** *Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD
Education	4.08	.61
Youth Engagement	4.02	.65
Educational Diplomacy	3.95	.69
Academic Exchange Programs	3.89	.71
Soft Power Development	4.11	.58

As shown in Table 3, respondents mainly showed a positive perception of all the variables of the study. The highest mean score ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) was recorded by Soft Power Development followed by Education ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = .61$ ). Academic Exchange Programs earned the lowest average score ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = .71$ ), but it was still above the scale midpoint. The positive results suggest positive attitudes regarding the role of education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy and academic exchange programmes in bolstering Pakistan's soft power.

### Correlation Analysis

**Table 4:** *Pearson Correlation Matrix*

Variables	EDU	YE	ED	AEP	SPD
Education (EDU)	1				
Youth Engagement (YE)	.612**	1			
Educational Diplomacy (ED)	.574**	.638**	1		
Academic Exchange Programs (AEP)	.529**	.593**	.671**	1	
Soft Power Development (SPD)	.701**	.742**	.693**	.654**	1

Note:  $p < .01$



Table 4 shows that there were significant positive correlations among all variables. Soft Power Development was significantly and positively related to Education ( $r = .701, p < .01$ ). Soft Power Development was most strongly related to Youth Engagement ( $r = .742, p < .01$ ). Additionally, there were positive relationships between Soft Power Development and Educational Diplomacy ( $r = .693, p < .01$ ) as well as Academic Exchange Programs ( $r = .654, p < .01$ ). These findings indicate that perceived soft power development is related to the increase in education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy and academic exchange activities.

### Multiple Regression Analysis

**Table 5: Multiple Regression Results Predicting Soft Power Development**

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	.684	.215	—	3.181	.002
Education	.231	.054	.254	4.278	.000
Youth Engagement	.317	.052	.361	6.096	.000
Educational Diplomacy	.201	.048	.228	4.188	.000
Academic Exchange Programs	.156	.047	.179	3.319	.001

Model Summary				
R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig.
.842	.709	.705	179.74	.000

Table 5 shows the results of multiple regression analysis to determine the influence of Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy and Academic Exchange Programs on the development of Soft Power. The model was statistically significant,  $F(4,295) = 179.74, p < .001$ , explaining 70.9% of the variance in Soft Power Development ( $R^2 = .709$ ).

Higher level of education was a significant predictor of the Soft Power Development ( $\beta = .254, p < .001$ ), which suggests that education plays a positive role in the soft power of Pakistan. Youth Engagement was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .361, p < .001$ ), demonstrating its importance for strengthening national influence. Educational Diplomacy ( $\beta = .228, p < .001$ ) and Academic Exchange Programs ( $\beta = .179, p = .001$ ) also showed positive significant impact. The findings are also in line with the proposed conceptual framework and the study results showed that all the independent variables significantly affect the soft power of Pakistan.

### Summary of Findings

The results indicated that the measurement instrument had good internal consistency and reliability. The findings of descriptive statistics showed that the university students were positive on education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy, academic exchange programs and soft power development. There were high and significant positive correlations between all the variables of the study. Multiple regression analysis also indicated that Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy and Academic Exchange Programs accounted for 70.9% of the variance in Pakistan's Soft Power Development. Youth Engagement, Education, Educational Diplomacy, and Academic Exchange Programs, were the strongest predictors. The findings of the study corroborate the study objectives and indicate that investments in human capital development can be a



significant portion of the policy levers which can enhance the soft power and strengthen international influence of Pakistan.

### Discussion

#### Education and Soft Power Development

The results showed that education was a significant factor in the development of Pakistan's soft power. Since education and soft power are positively correlated, this suggests that the more one is educated, the more positive their international image, reputation and attractiveness will be. The results indicate that education institutions are also a good source of soft power as they create knowledge and promote research productivity as well as engage internationally (Gauttam et al., 2023). Education can help a nation's influence be projected via intellectual contributions, and the development of a globally competent citizenry. The findings also indicate that the investments in quality and access of education can increase the influence and competitiveness of Pakistan as suggested by Butt et al. (2024) and Nitza-Makowska (2021) on the role of education in shaping national influence.

#### Youth Development and the Environment

The results showed that youth engagement was the highest factor for the development of soft power of Pakistan. The find highlights Pakistan's strategic advantage among the youth, as they play a pivotal role in shaping the nation's influence and visibility on the international stage. Youth participation in innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership and civic engagement is a great strength of the national image and engagement in the world. This reflects the study conducted by Ali (2023) and Munir and Zaidi (2023) who reported that empowering the youth is instrumental in the development of a country and increased participation of the society. Investment in youth development programs can yield benefits in the long term, both domestically and globally, in a country with a significant youth population, such as Pakistan.

#### Educational Diplomacy and International Image

The study revealed that educational diplomacy positively contributed towards the soft power development of Pakistan. It suggests that academic cooperation, scholarships and international education assistance are involved in improving Pakistan's image in the world. Educational diplomacy is used to exchange knowledge, to promote intercultural understanding and to build long-term institutional ties that produce trust and goodwill between countries. The findings are consistent with the findings of De Wit and Altbach (2020) and Butt et al. (2024) who proposed that cooperation in education can be a successful diplomatic tool in improving global relations and international perceptions.

#### Academic Exchange Programs and Global Standing

The findings of the study also revealed that academic exchange program has also been a big contributor in the development of soft power of Pakistan. The cultural exchange program between students and faculty enables the faculty to gain access to the students' professional networks, expand their cultural understanding and gain access to the students' knowledge while simultaneously increasing the international visibility and reputation of both the faculty and the students. Such results have been confirmed by OECD (2023), who have found that positive perceptions about host countries and greater long-term international ties can be created through international exchange experiences. Likewise, Nitza-Makowska (2021) highlighted the importance of educational engagement for the attractiveness and the influence of a country, via academic mobility.



### Alignment with Soft Power Theory

The findings corroborate the Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2021) which holds that a nation can acquire influence by means of attraction as opposed to coercion. All the following proved to have positive impact on Pakistan's soft power agenda including Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy and Academic Exchange Programs. These are the non-coercive size dimensions which build global credibility, goodwill and global perceptions. The findings thus validate the fact that human capital development is one of the vital instruments by which Pakistan can build up its soft power and international influence.

### Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings do not contradict with the previous studies on Education, Youth development and soft power. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Gauttam et al. (2023), Tan (2025) and Butt et al. (2024) which indicated that education has an important role in influencing the nation. Youth engagement has been supported by the studies conducted by Ali (2023), Javed (2020), Munir and Zaidi (2023) where they identified the youth as a good national asset for development and international engagement. Likewise, the comparative importance of the educational diplomacy and exchange programs in the context of soft power is reflected in numerous studies by Nitza-Makowska (2021), OECD (2023) and Butt et al. (2024), which emphasize the importance of cooperation and international mobility in education. Overall, the present study goes beyond the existing literature by providing empirical evidence that education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy and academic exchange programmes are the effective and tangible areas that contribute towards the uplift of the soft power of Pakistan through building human resources.

### Conclusion

The present study explored the importance of Education, Youth Engagement, Educational Diplomacy and Academic Exchange Programs in the improvement of Pakistan's Soft Powers via Human Capital Development. The findings revealed that all the four variables were positively and significantly affecting the development of soft power in Pakistan. According to the predictors, the most frequently mentioned were: youth engagement, followed by education, educational diplomacy, and academic exchange programs. For the correlation and regression analyses, investments in human capital development were found to be beneficial for national influence, international reputation and global engagement. The findings suggest that education and youth empowerment can be used as a means of socio-economic development and as strategic assets to enhance Pakistan's international image.

The study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it gives empirical information regarding the correlation between education and youth development with respect to soft power in the context of Pakistan which is not given much attention by scholars. Second, it pulls all strands of education, youth engagement, educational diplomacy and academic exchange programs together and sets its standards with the term "soft power development". This holistic view is complementary to the current knowledge and brings the interdependency of different aspects of Human Capital to the fore as the drivers of the influence of Nations.

Theoretically, it contributes to the concept of Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2021) and Human Capital Theory by adding the concept of investments in education and youth can create



influence through attraction, credibility and global engagements. In practical terms the results will help policy makers, educational institutions and development practitioners to give useful directions to the improvement of quality of education, youth participation, cross border academic cooperation and exchange programs as an important instrument to enhance the soft power and competitiveness of Pakistan.

### **Implications**

#### **Policy Implications**

Findings suggest that the policy makers need to recognize education and youth development as a strategic tool for a country's soft power. Increased investment in the sectors of higher education, skills training, youth empowerment initiatives and international academic exchanges will strengthen the reputation and influence of Pakistan on the international level. Research and Innovation policies which encourage research productivity and engagement should be made a high priority to draw the best out of the country's human capital.

#### **Educational Implications**

Improving the quality of education, research capability and international cooperation of educational institutions to contribute to national development and soft power. Universities should broaden students' mobility experiences and forge more international collaborations and intercultural learning opportunities for students to ensure they are ready to become citizens of the world. It is also important to continue to focus leadership development, innovation and civic engagement of students.

#### **Diplomatic Implications**

The results highlight the importance of educational diplomacy as a complementary instrument of foreign policy. Pakistan can achieve international goodwill and enhance its global image through an expansion of scholarship programs, academic exchange programs and joint research projects. Cooperation in education, therefore, should be part of a larger diplomatic agenda that includes involvement of and development of soft power.

#### **Limitations and future research:**

##### **Limitations**

The study has contributed to the knowledge, but it is limited to certain aspects. This was a cross sectional study, which does not permit causal relationship between variables. Second, the study only involved the university students, again possibly limiting the generalizability of the results to other population groups. Thirdly, data from the study were self-reported based on responses from the questionnaires, which may be subject to respondent bias and perception. Lastly, some aspects of human capital development were not discussed, as was the case with other factors that may have affected soft power development.

##### **Future Research Directions**

Longitudinal study designs should be used in future research to explore the changes of soft power development over time. Researchers can also recruit a diverse group of participants from different industries, locations, and occupations to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Other countries could be compared to extend the study to get more insights on the human capital development - soft power relation. Moreover, other factors such as innovation, digital literacy, cultural diplomacy and global citizenship and international collaboration as the mediator or moderator can be investigated in the future research to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of soft power development in emerging economies.



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