A battle for foreign perceptions: Ukraine’s country image in the 2022 war with Russia

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Revised: 10 November 2022 / Accepted: 14 November 2022 / Published online: 28 November 2022
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Abstract
This paper examines the 2022 War in Ukraine through the conceptual lens of country image within a broader framework of public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding. It applies integrative and longitudinal perspectives to examine Ukraine’s country image and country image cultivation strategies over a period of three decades from its independence in 1991 to the 2022 Russo-Ukraine War. To understand Ukraine’s country image, or perceptions of Ukraine held by international stakeholders, a case study examined a convergence of multiple sources of evidence and methods. One method focuses on sentiment analysis through Leximancer, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to evaluate and compare Ukraine’s country image in international news media discourse across three periods of analysis separated by three major events: Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, and the 2022 Russo-Ukraine War. The findings suggest that Ukraine’s country image has strengthened over time, and has been effective in delegitimizing the 2022 Russian invasion and securing strong support from the international community.

Keywords Country image · Public diplomacy · Soft power · Nation branding · Ukraine · Russia · War · Conflict · Leximancer · Case study

A favorable image of a country in a foreign public’s mind can benefit the country in many significant ways (Dubinsky 2019; Ingenhoff and Klein 2018; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Martin and Eroglu 1993; Wu and Wang 2018). It is imperative for a country to have a positive image that attracts, for example, tourism and investment—and in the case of Ukraine more recently, support and aid from the international community as the country battles a full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022.

As a young nation that gained independence in August 1991, Ukraine has struggled with its country image (Bureiko 2021; Markessinis 2010; Zarembo 2011). After independence, the government tried to shed its image of “a grey, cold, poverty-stricken, backward, alcohol-ridden, desolate former Soviet republic” (Markessinis 2010). Markessinis attributed Ukraine’s weak country image to its failure in creating a separate, unique international reputation by itself that would set it apart. As a result, “the country’s image is plagued with the regional stereotypes which pour into the country’s image void” (ibid). Ukraine, like other former Soviet and Yugoslav republics, experienced an identity crisis (Tereshchuk 2016). Foreign publics identified Ukraine closely with the former USSR. The two countries have been in conflict since 2014, but Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 drew significant international attention as Moscow’s attack on its Eastern European neighbor set off the largest armed conflict in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

Russia’s hopes for a quick victory in Ukraine have yet to materialize. As of November 2022, Ukraine has refused to capitulate despite heavy losses. The Ukrainians have been fighting this war on two fronts: hard power (military engagement with the Russians) and soft power (power of attraction and persuasion to secure support from the international community). Unlike hard power or military might, soft power is the power to attract co-opt rather than to coerce, thus influencing the preferences of others through appeal and attraction (Nye 2008). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has roots in show business, delivered a speech at the 2022 Grammy Awards in which he rallied for global support for Ukraine (Kramer 2022). Although the
actor-turned-wartime leader of Ukraine failed to secure an invitation to speak at the 2022 Academy Awards, his efforts to court the global community reflect a soft power approach to rally support for country’s defense in a war situation (Nye 2022a).

Relating country image to public diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power

This paper applies the conceptual lens of country image within a broader framework of public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding. Country image can be understood through “the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places” (Kotler et al. 1993, p. 141). Image is a complex construct and includes both cognitive and affective evaluations (Alvarez and Campo 2014; Beerlí and Martín 2004; Maher and Carter 2011). Images represent “a simplification of large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place” because “they are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place” (Kotler et al. 1993, p. 141). Country image has been defined as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country” (Martin and Eroglu 1993), or “a simplification of large number of associations and pieces of information connected” with a country (Kotler and Gern 2002).

Buhmann et al. (2018) noted that country image is an interdisciplinary construct that draws attention from a range of disciplines including business studies (e.g., international marketing and destination branding), social psychology (e.g., intergroup relations, collective and national identity research), sociology and political science (e.g., international relations, political anthropology, sociology of competition, public diplomacy), and communication science (e.g., mass media, social networks and media effects research, international communication, public relations, and communication management). However, country image studies within the context of war and conflict have focused on tourism (e.g., Alvarez and Campo 2014; Tabak and Avraham 2018) or country-of-origin associations related to consumers’ purchase intentions and decisions (e.g., Kang et al. 2018; Maher and Carter 2011). So far, no study has examined Ukraine’s country image within a broader framework of public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding although much has been discussed in the press and trade journals about the perceived gains made by Ukraine in what were labeled convenient as “soft power” advances (A new nation brand 2022; Adler 2022; Blake 2022; Clarke 2022; Ellwood 2022; Galeeva 2022; Kavanagh 2022; Knickmeyer and Arhirova 2022; Kramer 2022; McClorey 2022; Nye 2022a, 2022b; Sarat and Aftergut 2022; Watson 2022).

The constructs of country image, public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding continue to be debated by scholars, and remain largely segregated by disciplinary biases and conceptual disarray (Buhmann et al. 2018). Broadly defined, country image is the cognitive representation that individuals hold about a given country (Dubinsky 2019; Ingenhoff and Klein 2018; Wu and Wang 2018). As a perceptual construct, country image is an expression of personalized feelings of what individuals know and think about a country that are developed by representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, and history of a country. A discussion of country image as a construct is incomplete without the related constructs of public diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power.

Public diplomacy broadly refers to strategic efforts to promote a country’s national interest, policies, and culture to strategically influence citizens of other nations by means of values, culture, art, food, music, media, language, and economic aid (Hachten and Scotton 2015). From a strategic perspective, the mandate of public diplomacy is to enhance a country’s image and reputation because country image is a core element of a state’s strategic equity (Dinnie 2008). As such, an important goal of public diplomacy is to enhance country image by “cultivating and managing a favorable international/world opinion toward a nation-state” (Wang 2006, p. 92).

When countries engage in public diplomacy, they are seeking to gain power, more specifically soft power—what Nye (2008) described as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (p. 94) via intangible or indirect influences such as culture, values, and ideology. Soft power is a political theory of attraction (Nye 2004). Nye (2008) observed that a country’s soft power arises primarily from three sources: its culture (when it is attractive to others); its political values such as democracy and human rights (when it lives up to them); and its policies (when they are viewed as legitimate). To some scholars, country image—how country is perceived by international publics—is a form of soft power (e.g., Aronczyk 2013).

Also related to country image is nation branding, the purposeful cultivation of a country’s image on the international stage (Anholt 2007; Dinnie 2008; Fan 2006, 2010; Kahraman 2017; Lee 2021; Quelech and Jocz 2005). Father of nation branding Simon Anholt describes the process as “a strategic, policy-making approach, designed to help places build on the strengths that will earn them a better reputation” through “the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build and manage the reputation” (Anholt 2007, p. 4). It is a process through which a nation’s image “can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country’s reputation among
a target international audience” (Fan 2010, p. 101). The scope of nation branding is broad, encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions with goals to enhance, change, or repair an existing image to make it more attractive and competitive (Anholt 2007; Fan 2006; Quelch and Jocz 2005).

Like public diplomacy, nation branding is a way to strengthen country image (Wu and Wang 2018). Nation branding is the purposeful cultivation of a country’s image on the international stage (Anholt 2007; Dinnie 2008; Fan 2006, 2010; Kahraman 2017; Lee 2021; Quelch and Jocz 2005). As a proactive action to strengthen and promote country image, nation branding is mainly driven by the will of the state actor or organizations on behalf of the state actor and thus “it is necessary to consider nation branding studies when examining country image in public diplomacy and political communication” (Wu and Wang 2018, p. 216). Although both public diplomacy and nation branding are concerned with the management of country image (Ingenhoff and Klein 2018), they have different disciplinary antecedents. Public diplomacy emerged from international relations and communications (i.e., international PR), whereas nation branding originated from marketing, and can be understood as the promotion and development of a country image through marketing activities (Anholt 2010; Fan 2006; Hynes et al. 2014). According to Fan (2006), the ultimate goal of nation branding is country image promotion.

To some scholars, nation branding and soft power are positively correlated (Fan 2006, 2010; Kahraman 2017; Lee 2021). According to Kahraman (2017), “[i]f nation branding as a technique for soft power is used strategically, it projects a positive image of the country and consequently the country will gain soft power” (p. 94). Fan (2006) defined public diplomacy as “a subset of nation branding that focuses on the political brand of a nation, whereas nation branding is about how a nation as whole reshapes international opinions” (p. 147). In explicating the relationships between and among the constructs of country image, nation branding, and soft power, Fan (2006) conjectured that a successful nation branding campaign “will help create a more favorable and lasting image among the international audience, thus further enhancing a country’s soft power” (p. 147).

This study adopts integrative and longitudinal perspectives to evaluate Ukraine’s country image and its efforts to cultivate its image. The findings can help clarify the conceptual relationships between and among country image, public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding in a contemporary war context. Focusing on the 2022 war in Ukraine, this paper is driven by two research questions. The first research question asks: How has Ukraine’s country image changed? (RQ1). To evaluate Ukraine’s country image outcomes in the context of the 2022 war in Ukraine, it is helpful to take a longitudinal approach and begin from a baseline of its country image over a period of three decades from its independence in 1991 leading up to the 2022 Russo-Ukraine War.

The second research question, how has Ukraine sought to improve its country image? (RQ2), helps to contextualize Ukraine’s country image cultivation efforts, to better understand the outcomes in relation to the context in which the change effort occurs.

The two research questions are connected within a theory of change (Anderson 2005; Chen 1990; Weiss 1995) evaluation framework that helps us to understand the relationship between a given intervention and its outcomes. Within this analytical framework, RQ1 focuses on changes in Ukraine’s country image as outcomes that are related to the interventions that RQ2 addresses. More specifically, a logic model explicates the resources expended, the activities undertaken to produce the outcomes, and the tangible results of the activities (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). Within the field, a theory of change is implicit and deserves more scholarly attention. Banks (2020), in discussing the challenges of evaluation in public diplomacy, observed that a theory of change can help identify changes (outcomes) we can reasonably expect public diplomacy to achieve.

**Method**

A case study approach was used. As a research strategy, case studies contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin 1984, 2003, 2014). Yin (2003) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined” (p. 13).

Case studies are “the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real-life context” (Yin 2003, p. 1). The essence of a case study, as explained by Schramm (1971), is to “illuminate a decision or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p. 17).

One defining trait or strength of case studies is their reliance on “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (p. 14) that can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Therefore, this case study focused on a convergence of multiple sources of evidence and methods: (1) Secondary data from soft power and nation branding indices, media coverage, and government documents; and (2) Primary data based on sentiment analyses of international news. In war, news media discourse is a core channel for soft power propagation to legitimize or delegitimize a war (Chouliaraki 2007). Given
its perceptual nature, country image is typically associated with sentiments—individual emotions, subjective perceptions, evaluative opinions, and behaviors. Sentiment analyses help us understand people’s sentiments, what Mullen (2017) defined as subjective feelings, rather than facts, that include people’s attitude, emotions, and opinions.

RQ1 outcomes: sentiment analyses and Ukraine’s country image

Country image is affected by many factors, including personal experience and media portrayals (Wu and Wang 2018, p. 216). For many individuals, media portrayals of a country are more accessible compared to visits to personally experience a foreign country. A textual analysis of English-language texts published outside Ukraine was conducted using Leximancer, a data mining software and machine learning tool. The texts reflected a wide range of news publications of varying size and influence, and from a diverse population of countries and news media across the globe compiled by LexisNexis. They include BBC News, Egyptian Gazette, CNN, the Malay Mail, Sydney Morning Herald, Asahi Shim bun, LA Times, Straits Times, China Daily, New York Times, Fox News, Nepal Times, Palestine Chronicle, South China Morning Post, Rio Times, and Times of India.

Leximancer is particularly suited for analyses requiring the visualization and interpretation of large, complex corpuses of natural language text data. The software applies an iterative process of seeding word definitions from frequencies and co-occurrences of words within blocks of text. It then applies algorithms to analyze meanings within passages of text by extracting concepts, themes and how they relate to one another (Cretchley et al. 2010; Lemon and Jameson 2020; Tseng et al. 2015; Ward et al. 2014). In this study, Leximancer’s ability to scientometrically describe and analyze content of collections of textual documents was harnessed for sentiment analyses by extracting subjectivity to measure “the attitude of a speaker or writer toward a concept, whether they express something positively or negatively” (Ward et al. 2014).

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as Leximancer allows for an objective and efficient examination of the data, driven by the program (rather than the researcher) and with minimal researcher’s influence which might cloud the analysis (Wilk et al. 2021). The use of Leximancer is growing across a variety of disciplines. More specifically, Leximancer sentiment analyses have been used in many studies including international perception of China’s vaccine diplomacy (Lee 2021); Singapore’s hosting of the Trump–Kim Summit (Kim and Lee 2020), hospitality studies (Ma and Hsiao 2018), and social media sentiment about digital entrepreneurship (Wilk et al. 2021).

In a comparative, longitudinal approach, three periods of analysis were examined in this study, based on more than 2.7 million international news media texts over a period of three decades that were generated using the keyword “Ukraine.” The subsequent section presents the results for each period of analysis after the texts were seeded for positive, neutral, and negative sentiments.

Period 1: Post-independence (August 1991–February 2014)

The first period of analysis begins with Ukraine’s independence leading up to the Revolution of Dignity in February 2014 that overthrew the Ukrainian government that was led by the country’s pro-Moscow president Victor Yanukovych. Upon Yanukovych’s request, Russia intervened and the conflict between the two countries quickly escalated into the annexation of Crimea in late February 2014 by Russia and the Donbas War, in what many consider to be precursors to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

This period of analysis precedes the 2015 institutionalization of Ukrainian public diplomacy. Bureiko (2021) observed that after independence in August 1991, “public diplomacy in the official Ukrainian public and academic discourse was practically absent.” The Leximancer results support Bureiko’s observation that Ukrainian public diplomacy initiatives were isolated and lacked complexity, strategic vision, and financial support during this period. A sentiment analysis of 591,397 texts showed mostly negative sentiments about Ukraine with 58.7% of texts showing negative mentions, 20.4% positive mentions, and 20.9% neutral mentions.

A concept refers to a group of related words that travel together in the text. Evidence words include synonyms and adjectives. Leximancer concepts begin with seed words. The learning process then evolves the seed-word definitions into a full thesaurus that generate concepts that are word-like (e.g., create/creating/creation) or name-like (proper names such as Valerie or Singapore).

The overall likelihood scores in Leximancer indicated mostly negative sentiments (63.3%). “Backward” was the negative concept with the highest likelihood score at 73%. Likelihood scores describe the conditional probability of text segments within a concept also containing another concept (Leximancer 2011), meaning that 73% of text segments with “backward” contained negative sentiments. Other prominent negative concepts included “unsafe” (67%), “Russia” (63%), “poverty” (61%), “Communist” (59%), “conflict” (56%), and “history” (43%).

Four elements were reported positively. “Freedom” was the positive concept in Leximancer with the highest
likelihood score at 45%, meaning that 45% of text segments with the term “freedom” contained positive sentiments. Other less prominent positive concepts included “agriculture” (41%), “affordable” (36%), and “culture” (31%) (see Table 1).

Period 2: Early phase of Russo-Ukraine conflict (March 2014–February 2022)

The second period of analysis, focused on the aftermath of the February 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, was marked by significant events that were part of the wider Russo-Ukraine conflict: continued armed engagement in various regions including Russia’s move to annex the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, the Crimea status referendum followed by Crimea’s independence in March 2014, and the creation of self-proclaimed breakaway states in Donetks and Luhansks. The institutionalization of Ukrainian public diplomacy began in earnest in 2015, with an important milestone: a proposal by the foreign ministry to establish a specialized state institution called the Ukrainian Institute with the goal of improving perceptions of Ukraine around the world. The institute opened in June 2017 and became fully operational in 2019.

A sentiment analysis of the 1,514,157 texts between March 1, 2014 and February 23, 2022 (Russian launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022) showed mostly positive sentiments about Ukraine with 54.3% of texts showing positive mentions, 34.1% negative mentions, and 11.6% neutral mentions. The overall likelihood scores in Leximancer indicated mostly positive sentiments (57.1%), a marked change from Period 1’s results. “Culture” was the positive concept with the highest likelihood score at 82%, meaning that 82% of text segments with “culture” contained positive sentiments. During this period, cultural diplomacy was a key priority for Ukraine despite persistent conflicts with Russia. Other prominent positive concepts included “history” (75%), “tourism” (72%), “modern” (70%), “grain exports” (69%), “independence” (65%), “affordable” (63%), “friendly” (58%), and “European” (51%) (see Table 1). These concepts suggest a changing country image in the international news media discourse. It is worth noting that “history” was a negative concept (likelihood score of 43%) in Period 1 but in Period 2, it transformed into a positive concept (likelihood score of 75%). The positive concepts

| Period 1 | Period 2 | Period 3 |
|----------|----------|----------|
| Post-independence | Pre-war | War |
| Positive concepts | Positive concepts | Positive concepts |
| Concept | Likelihood (%) | Concept | Likelihood (%) | Concept | Likelihood (%) |
| Freedom | 45 | Culture | 82 | Zelenskyy | 94 |
| Agriculture | 41 | History | 75 | Heroic | 91 |
| Affordable | 36 | Tourism | 72 | Zelenska | 90 |
| Culture | 31 | Modern | 70 | Help | 89 |
| Grain exports | 69 | Independence | 66 | Military | 88 |
| Affordable | 63 | Affordable | 63 | Resistance | 86 |
| Friendly | 58 | European | 51 | Resilience | 85 |
| European | 51 | | | Brave | 85 |
| | | | | Grammyys | 78 |
| | | | | Recapture | 78 |
| | | | | Soft power | 66 |
| | | | | Social media | 64 |
| | | | | Humanitarian aid | 56 |
| Negative concepts | Negative concepts | Negative concepts |
| Concept | Likelihood (%) | Concept | Likelihood (%) | Concept | Likelihood (%) |
| Backward | 73 | Russia | 69 | Russia | 95 |
| Unsafe | 67 | Military | 62 | War | 85 |
| Russia | 63 | Safety | 58 | Losses | 81 |
| Poverty | 61 | Communist | 50 | Casualties | 79 |
| Communist | 59 | Conflict | 49 | Refugees | 77 |
| Conflict | 56 | Regional differences | 46 | Casualties | 72 |
| History | 43 | | | United States | 62 |
| | | | | Inflation | 60 |
| | | | | Grain exports | 59 |
Six elements were reported negatively. “Russia” was the negative concept with the highest likelihood score at 69%, meaning that 69% of text segments with the term “Russia” contained negative sentiments. Other less prominent negative concepts included “military” (62%), “safety” (58%), “Communist” (50%), “conflict” (49%), and “regional differences” (46%) that speak to Ukraine’s old Soviet ties and prevailing tensions in the region.

**Period 3: Russo-Ukraine war of 2022 (beginning February 2022)**

The final period of analysis begins on February 24, 2022 with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and ends on September 30, 2022, when this paper was completed. A sentiment analysis of the 621,168 texts over 7 months revealed a majority of positive sentiments about Ukraine with 79.9% of texts showing positive mentions, 15.2% negative mentions and 4.9% neutral mentions. The data also revealed significant shifts in sentiments about Ukraine, when compared against the results from the two preceding periods of analysis.

The overall likelihood scores indicated a clear trend of positive sentiments at 80.3%. “Zelensky” was the positive concept with the highest likelihood score at 94%, meaning that 94% of text segments with “Zelensky” contained positive sentiments. Other prominent positive concepts are as follows: “heroic” (91%), “Zelenska” (Zelensky’s wife) (90%), “help” (89%), “military” (88%), “resistance” (86%), “resilience” (85%), “brave” (85%), “Grammy Awards” (78%), “recapture” (78%), “soft power” (66%), “social media” (64%), and “humanitarian aid” (56%) (see Table 1).

These concepts speak to the leadership role played by Zelensky, the values that are being used by Ukraine to brand its beleaguered nation, and the significance of Ukraine’s social media communication about the war.

Nine elements were reported negatively. “Russia” was the negative concept with the highest likelihood score at 95%, meaning that 95% of text segments with the term “Russia” contained negative sentiments. Other prominent negative concepts included “war” (85%) “losses” (81%), “características” (79%), “refugees” (77%), “children” (72%), “United States” (62%), “inflation” (60%), and “grain exports” (59%) (See Table 1). Russia emerged as the biggest loser in Period 3, suggesting a support for the Ukrainians’ efforts to delegitimize Russia’s attack. Moscow did not find favor in the preceding periods of analysis, but in Period 3, its reputation suffered significantly, consistent with the findings of soft power and nation branding indices such as the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index (NBI) 2022 and the Global Soft Power Index 2022 that shows an ascent in Ukraine’s country image during this period.

Reputations are difficult to measure but this has not stopped global indices such as the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brand Index (NBI) and the Global Soft Power Index from continuing to rank nations annually using surveys and public opinion polls. Ukraine’s rankings in these nation brand and soft power indices support assertions (Bureiko 2021; Markessinis 2010; Zarembo 2011) about the country’s weak reputation. The NBI collects over 60,000 interviews online in 20 panel countries with adults aged 18 or over each year. In the 2021 Anholt-Ipsos NBI that ranked 60 countries, Ukraine was at the 48th place, having dropped five places from its 2020’s 43rd spot (Germany maintains top ‘nation brand’ 2021). Russia placed 27th in 2021 and 26th in 2020. In both years, Germany was ranked as the world’s strongest nation brand, for the seventh time overall and fifth year in a row.

In Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index 2021, Ukraine fell 15 places to 61st place, and lost its place in the top 50 (Ukraine drops out 2021). In the latest 2022 index, released in March 2022—less than a month after the Russian invasion, Russia’s soft power collapsed whereas Ukraine’s surged forward. Worldwide perceptions of Ukraine improved. The majority of survey respondents rated Ukraine’s conduct and response during the conflict positively. Net positive approval ratings ranged from +23% in Brazil to +60% in the U.K.—the highest in the study (Russia’s soft power collapses globally 2022). Ukraine’s Familiarity score increasing by 44%, Influence by 24%, and Reputation by 12%. The Index utilizes annual surveys to study global perceptions of nation brands by measuring the opinions of survey respondents worldwide on 120 nation brands. The global media spotlight on the war has also had a positive indirect effect on foreign perceptions of Ukraine across most other Global Soft Power Index pillars, even those unrelated to the war effort (USA bounces back 2022).

In the Leximancer analysis, the other negative concepts emphasized the consequences of war not only as domestic war losses and casualties but also impact on the global economy. The war has exacerbated supply shocks caused by COVID-19 on global commodity markets, trade, and financial linkages. The two countries are major suppliers of global commodities. Russia is a supplier of oil, gas, and metals, and, together with Ukraine, of wheat and corn. The OECD projected that the world economy will pay a “hefty price” for the war in Ukraine encompassing weaker growth, higher inflation, and potentially long-lasting damage to global supply chains (Horobin 2022).

In sum, the findings reveal an enhanced positive country image for Ukraine in Period 3. The results support the assertions made in the press and trade journals (A new nation brand...
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2022; Adler 2022; Blake 2022; Clarke 2022; Ellwood 2022; Galeeva 2022; Kavanagh 2022; Knickmeyer and Arhirova 2022; Kramer 2022; McClory 2022; Nye 2022a, 2022b; Sarat and Aftergut 2022; Watson 2022) that Ukraine has effectively advanced its interests in the war in the court of public opinion. The country image that the Ukrainian government has sought to associate with the symbolic representation of Ukraine at war and to delegitimize Russia’s military actions—its plight as an invaded nation, its heroic leaders, its resilience, its brave defense, its appeal to universal values of freedom and national sovereignty, and its need of international support, and the urgent need to prevent further fallout in the global economy—is vividly in place in the international news media discourse.

The U.S. is a negative concept (likelihood score of 62%). This result supports findings of a Global Soft Power Index survey that was conducted in March 2022 based on a representative sample of over 5000 respondents in 10 countries. In every surveyed nation, only a small number of respondents, between 1 and 10%, blame Ukraine for the invasion. The only Western nation to feature a significant proportion of people who blame the U.S. for the conflict is the U.S. itself—at 22% (Russia’s soft power collapses 2022).

This study’s Leximancer sentiment analyses have significant empirical value, especially in a field where evaluation is fraught with challenges. Outcomes often manifest themselves over the long term. Nye (2022a, b) suggested that soft power, for instance, tends to “operate subtly and over a longer time horizon.” Wagner (2014) argued that generating hard power “requires much less time as its resources are tangible” but soft power “takes relatively long to build as it is intangible.” However, as seen in the substantive country image gains generated by Ukraine within a short span of months, the power of values, persuasion and attraction could have the potential to be more powerful—less subtle and more immediate—in shaping foreign perceptions than previously envisioned. Instantaneous communication or the ability of social and digital media users—governments, corporations, organizations, crowd-funders, communities, individuals—to easily share information rapidly—augmented by visuals that help convey believability—may have very well amplified Ukraine’s country image in this case.

That said, it is difficult to conclusively attribute an outcome to a specific intervention. Outside of laboratory settings, causal relationships are difficult to prove. However, within a theory of change analytical framework, the country image outcomes of Ukraine can be better understood in relation to its country image interventions or the context (RQ2) in which the change effort occurs.

**RQ2 Interventions: Ukraine’s country image cultivation**

Ukraine has engaged in significant efforts to enhance its country image since its independence in 1991, consistent with its desire to change how the country was perceived by foreign publics. Through a logic model approach (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2004) within a framework of theory of change (Anderson 2005; Chen 1990; Weiss 1995), this study investigates the country image resources expended by Ukraine, the activities undertaken to target the outcomes discussed earlier under RQ1, and the tangible results of the activities.

**Institutionalization of public diplomacy**

A key resource for Ukraine’s country image cultivation was cultural diplomacy. To differentiate itself from Russia after independence in 1991, Ukraine embarked on cultural diplomacy as a core strategy to strengthen its country image. However, it was a difficult start; “public diplomacy in the official Ukrainian public and academic discourse was practically absent; soft power initiatives were isolated and lacked complexity, strategic vision and financial support” (Bureiko 2021). Ukrainian public diplomacy began in earnest as late as 2015 with the institutionalization of public diplomacy as “a set of planned measures to convey specific messages about Ukraine to influence the formation of public opinion” in other countries (Bureiko 2021). The institutionalization is grounded in five core activities:

- The creation of a department of public diplomacy (later renamed the department of communications and public diplomacy) in 2015. It established a digital portal to communicate information about modern Ukraine to foreign publics at www.ukraine.ua. Since 2015, Ukraine has actively used Twitter to promote a number of information campaigns including #CrimeisUkraine, #JusticeforMH17, #LetMyPeopleGo, #StopNordStream2, and #KyivnotKiev (Bureiko 2021).

- The establishment of the Ukrainian Institute (https://ui.org.ua/en/) in 2017 to improve understanding and perception of Ukraine around the world through cultural diplomacy and the country’s commitment to development to the values of freedom and democracy, and of international exchanges and dialogue. Then foreign minister Pavlo Klimkin described the institute as “the identification of Ukraine—what Ukraine is for the average Dutchman, Greek or Brazilian, what it is associated with, and of course, its attractiveness” (Ukrainian Institute: Soft power for promoting modern Ukraine 2017).
• The formation of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (https://ucf.in.ua/) in 2017 to internationalize Ukrainian culture with state support for grant funding for culture and creative industries development and preservation of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

• The launch of the Ukrainian Book Institute (https://book-institute.org.ua/uk) in 2016 to promote Ukrainian literature abroad through residency programs for authors and translation of Ukrainian literature into foreign languages.

• The formal adoption of a national brand called “UkraineNow” in May 2018 and attendant narratives to promote Ukraine internationally as a “creative, dynamic and innovative” nation and “a country of freedom and dignity” where “millennia of history and culture are complemented by an ambitious vision of the future”—in the words of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine launched the website 2021).

These five pre-war initiatives not only focused on activities of harnessing inter-institutional synergy and applied research and analytics but also, beyond image building, helped to consolidate Ukraine’s foreign policy priorities in cultural diplomacy, attraction of investment, promotion of Ukrainian exports, educational opportunities, tourism potential, and scientific-expert and digital diplomacies (Bureiko 2021).

The 2015 institutionalization of public diplomacy in Ukraine is a direct response to the forays of aggression against Ukraine by Russia, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Donbas conflict, and what Ukrainians viewed as widespread anti-Ukraine misinformation initiated by Moscow. March 2021 marked a new milestone when the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, for the first time in its history, formalized a five-year public diplomacy strategy (Ukrainian Public Policy Strategy 2021). The strategy document outlined seven action areas or activities: cultural, expert, culinary, scientific, educational, sport, and digital diplomacy. Prior to this, public diplomacy activities were assigned to cultural and information centers, which operated at foreign diplomatic missions. These centers were tasked disparately with disseminating information about Ukraine abroad, acquainting foreign audiences with Ukrainian history and culture, and informing them about Ukraine’s tourism opportunities and attractions, albeit with scant coordination (Bureiko 2021). The tangible results of the March 2021 strategy document included a consolidated framework of strategy, recalibration of activities, and greater engagement with foreign audiences.

The Zelensky factor

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has emerged as Ukraine’s most significant country image cultivation resource. In tangible results, international news media reports have called him a hero and the voice and face of Ukrainian resilience leading a beleaguered nation in standing up against a powerful aggressor (Adler 2022; Blake 2022; Editorial: Why Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy 2022; Sarat and Aftergut 2022; How Volodymyr Zelensky found his roar 2022; Watson 2022). Blake (2022) argued that Zelensky is successful because he has “demonstrated, during the invasion, a style of political presentation that is the antithesis of that shown by Russian President Vladimir Putin.”

Ingenhoff and Klein (2018) found that political leaders can have a significant nation branding influence in shaping their country’s country image; the leader’s integrity played the strongest role followed by competence and charisma. Fan (2010) noted that “famous faces (celebrities)” is one important element that affects a country’s image. In the case of the Ukraine war of 2022, Zelenskyy “has proved especially adept at wielding soft power” (Nye 2022a). Zelensky’s country image cultivation activities are well-documented. The former comedian and television actor, with his informal attire, ubiquitous social media presence, and constant communication with Western media and parliaments (prompting standing ovations) and friendships with Western celebrities, has proved successful “in representing Ukraine as an attractive and heroic country” (Nye 2022a). The tangible result “was not just Western sympathy but a substantial increase in deliveries of the military equipment that Ukraine needed for the hard-power task at hand” (ibid).

In response to the U.S. government’s offer to evacuate him and his family—prime targets of Russian assassination attempts—out of the country, Zelensky told Washington: “The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride” (Braithwaite 2022). Zelensky has been highly adept at leveraging social media networks to humanize Ukraine’s plight and build support for the country’s defense (Khan 2022). He operated his social networks himself, appeared before the public directly, conveyed the messages personally in his own voice, and managed to repel Russian misinformation attempts about his whereabouts and his control of the country (Einhorn 2022). After rejecting Washington’s offer to spirit him out of Ukraine, he promptly tweeted that “Ukrainians are proud of their president” and posted a video titled, “Do not believe the fakes,” revealing that he was still in Kyiv, as depicted in the video. He said:

“I am here. We are not putting down arms. We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth, and our truth is that this is our land, our country, our
children, and we will defend all of this. That is it. That's all I wanted to tell you. Glory to Ukraine.”

Zelensky may be the voice and face of Ukraine on news media and social media, but the Ukrainian government’s expertise in shaping its message through social media—in addition to video, tweets and memes—has helped it marshal the support of many countries and their citizens. In tangible results for the Ukrainians, governments have punished Russia with more sanctions than any other country in history (Shapero 2022). Ukraine’s social media campaigns have inspired foreign publics to express support for McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Dentsu, P&G, and other companies that suspended their businesses in Russia (Russ and Kumar 2022; Ukraine: Latest industry news 2022). Ukraine’s official social media channels have experienced a surge in followers since the start of the war. In just one month after the start of the war, followers of Ukraine’s Twitter account increased to 1.9 million followers, nearly six times as many as before the war (Social Blade 2022). Zelensky’s Instagram account added more than six million followers in just one month. Zelensky has been so popular on social media that hundreds of fake Zelenskys have emerged, using his image, name and “brand” to scam individuals into sending donations to purportedly aid Ukraine’s military and humanitarian efforts (Suciu 2022).

In terms of activities, Zelensky’s wife, Ukraine’s camera-shy first lady Olena Zelenska also stepped into the global stage. Zelenska made an unofficial trip to Washington, D.C. in July 2022 to become the rare first lady to address U.S. Congress. In her speech, she said that she was there to ask for more weapons for her country: “Weapons that will not be used to wage a war on somebody else’s land but to protect one’s home and the right to make up a life in that home” (Friedman 2022). Thanking the U.S. for its support, Zelenska applied soft power to ask for hard power; “I’m asking for weapons,” she said. “I’m asking for air defense systems in order for rockets not to kill children in their strollers” (Ukraine’s first lady appeals 2022). During her trip to Washington, D.C., Zelenska reaped tangible results including receiving a $30 million donation of computers and learning materials from HP Inc.’s Digital Equity for Ukraine initiative (First lady of Ukraine accepts 2022). Like her husband, Zelenska has given numerous media interviews to international media, including one to Time magazine where she was featured on the cover and spoke at length about the trauma of war (Shuster 2022). In July 2022, she hosted a high-profile summit moderated by British journalist Piers Morgan that featured prominent political figures and Hollywood celebrities including U.S. first lady Jill Biden, actors Richard Gere, Mila Kunis, Ashton Kutcher, and European Commission President Charles Michel (Nerozzi 2022).

Leveraging on existing public diplomacy machinery

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the latter was able to leverage on existing resources in the form of extant public diplomacy machinery created by the 2015 institutionalism of Ukrainian public diplomacy strategy. The department of public diplomacy (later renamed the department of communications and public diplomacy) quickly built on the Ukrainian digital portal, expanding into activities to communicate information about the war to foreign audiences at www.ukraine.ua. On July 27, the website featured this message:

“On February 24, 2022, the ordinary life in Ukraine stopped, as did this website. Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine at 5 am that day with an attempt to destroy the freedom and independence of our country. From that moment, Ukrainians ‘froze’ at the end of winter on that terrifying February morning. Spring has not come to Ukraine yet. You can find out how Ukraine is going through the war right now or discover what a dynamic and ambitious country we were before Russia launched a full-scale invasion on us.”

Visitors could click on a new link “Do not look away from the war” or proceed to “Explore peaceful Ukraine” for the original, pre-war content. Pop-up content redirected the visitor to a situation page featuring updates on the war and photographs of war-ravaged cities and communities. The same page also featured three links for visitor to “Support Ukraine,” “Donate to Ukraine,” and “Arm Ukraine.”

A similar messaging strategy was found on the Ukrainian Institute website (https://ui.org.ua/en/). It featured two photos of the Palace of Youth—the first taken before the war and the second featuring the bombed-out building spliced together, with the message: “What held a memory may now become a memory.” In April 2022, Ukraine launched a campaign, spearheaded by the Office of the President, to highlight the nation’s bravery. The series of campaign, created by Kyiv-based advertising agency Banda (a Cannes Lion winner), would appear in 15 countries worldwide. The campaign actively recruited global media owners to donate their media surfaces to highlight Ukraine’s bravery.

Other activities include the role played by the Ukraine House, a state-funded venue for Ukrainian cultural events, in expanding its mission to support Ukraine in the 2022 war against Russia. In September 2021, Zelensky officially opened the Ukraine House in Washington, D.C. It was designed to serve as a soft power hub in the U.S., to “provide the opportunity to significantly expand meetings, receptions, cultural and historic exhibitions, and other related activities in Washington” (Ukraine House
opens 2022). When the war broke out, the Ukraine House proved to be a valuable asset, as local events to raise funds and awareness were organized at various Ukraine House locations across the globe including Washington, D.C. and Davos, Switzerland.

The role of G2P and P2P exchanges

While the role of governments is considered important in a traditional government-to-government (G2G) framework and in the government-to-public (G2P) structure of public diplomacy, newer public diplomacy relies more on people-to-people (P2P) exchanges in which voluntary participation of private citizens is saliently important (McPhail 2014; Rockower 2014). Ukraine’s soft power resources in the 2022 war have expanded into G2P and P2P exchanges. As argued by Rockower (2014), unlike traditional state diplomacy that relies on government-to-government (G2G) exchange, contemporary public diplomacy focuses on channels of government-to-public (G2P) exchange, and increasingly people-to-people (P2P) exchange. As the number of “help Ukraine” initiatives proliferated across the globe—and billions were raised through celebrity-fronted concerts, corporate initiatives, and private donations, the lines between G2P diplomacy and P2P diplomacy have also blurred. Ukraine has heavily depended on financial and military assistance from other nations, but the tangible results of crowdfunding efforts have also revealed the activities enacted by a large network of private individual donors and volunteers worldwide in augmenting Ukraine’s war chest (Private donations help 2022; Taylor 2022).

One example of P2P exchange is the indirect soft power role of foreign volunteer fighters in Ukraine and their activities on the battlefield and beyond it. In tangible results, the 2022 war in Ukraine has drawn a legion of volunteers to help Ukrainians repel the Russian invasion. Military veterans across the globe have been drawn to the war, “emboldened by their combat training and an eagerness to apply their skills in a conflict that, for many, feels like a struggle of good versus evil” (Horton et al. 2022). Many are self-appointed freedom fighters who responded to Zelensky’s plea through the International Legion of Defence of Ukraine (https://fight forua.org) that he created to recruit “foreign citizens wishing to join the resistance against the Russian occupants and fight for global security.” The website featured a photo of Zelensky accompanied by a personal plea: “Anyone who wants to join the defence of security in Europe and the world can come and stand side by side with the Ukrainians against the invaders of the twenty-first century” (Russia invaded Ukraine: Enlist to the international legion of defence of Ukraine n.d.). In March of 2022, Zelensky claimed that 16,000 foreigners had volunteered to fight in Ukraine (Bella and Timsit 2022).

Military volunteers are a form of hard-power resource, but they amplify Ukraine’s soft power resources and country image indirectly. Many of these volunteers use social media to livestream their day-to-day lives fighting on Ukraine’s front line. Their powerful messages and visuals appeal to their home audiences and beyond, creating a secondary and indirect source of soft power—and tangible results—to communicate Ukraine’s plight to the world and amplify its messages. For example, South Korean citizen Rhee Keun, also known on social media as Ken Rhee, was one of the many prominent volunteer fighters in Ukraine. He signed up at the Ukrainian embassy in Seoul when Zelensky asked for global volunteers. Rhee, a former member of South Korean naval special forces, posted regularly on social media photographs and videos of his experience in Ukraine (General 2022). The YouTuber, who has 700,000 followers and documented much of his Ukraine experience on his popular Instagram account, said he has no regrets when he was arrested upon his return to Seoul after being injured on the front lines in Kyiv. Seoul banned its citizens from traveling to Ukraine, and Rhee, who was hurt while leading a special operations patrol there, was met at Incheon Airport by 15 South Korean police officers waiting to arrest him on his return (S. Korean does not regret 2022). His dramatic return generated other tangible results of more international media coverage and viral interviews that helped to highlight the 2022 war in Ukraine.

Another example of P2P exchange reflects the indirect soft power activities played by communication professionals, with tangible results for Ukraine’s country image. It is significant that the public relations and advertising industries across the globe have also rallied to Ukraine’s aid, creating—in many cases, pro bono—impactful messaging and visuals that serve the Ukrainian government’s soft power and nation branding goals. In early May, a pro bono industry team effort led by TANK Worldwide and Grey Canada drew inspiration from President Zelensky’s speech to the Canadian parliament. The advertising campaign, targeted at Canadians, imagined Toronto city under attack like what happened in Ukraine, to send a powerful message on behalf of the Ukrainian government (Ukraine: Latest industry news 2022). On May 19, 2022, as part of its Global Awards, PR Week, an influential a trade magazine for the public relations industry, named Zelensky PR Week Global Communicator of the Year in recognition of his communication skills (Ukraine: Latest industry news 2022). In early March, Cannes Lion, the world’s largest gathering of the advertising and creative communications industry, banned Russian delegates and entries from its 2022 Awards (Ukraine: Latest industry news 2022).
Conclusion

This study is significant for addressing an understudied topic. It is the first study to apply the conceptual lens of country image within a broader framework of related constructs of public diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding to a twenty-first-century, contemporary war context. Research on military conflicts typically emphasize hard power, consistent with Nye’s conceptual dichotomy of soft versus hard power, or attraction versus coercion. The findings of the primary data based on Leximancer sentiment analyses corroborated secondary data from existing soft power and nation brand indices that measure reputation, suggesting that Ukraine has strengthened its country image since its independence in 1991, and most recently in the context of the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war to effectively deny the legitimacy of the Russian invasion and secure strong support from the international community. Rhetoric alone cannot change a country image. In a sense, “the ability to share information—and to be believed—becomes an important source of attraction and power” (Nye 2004, p. 31). Country image may be symbolic, but the power of argument and belief must be substantiated by substance—as seen in the resources expended by Ukraine, the activities undertaken to produce the outcomes, and the tangible results of the activities. The question is whether Ukraine’s enhanced country image would have a lasting effect beyond the 2022 war. As a case study based on a comparative and longitudinal approach, this research tells a compelling story about the state of Ukraine’s country image and its country image cultivation strategies through a logic model within a theory of change framework, but it does not explicitly pinpoint causal-beyond identifying the chronology of events and relating them to the outcomes from a baseline. Another limitation is the analysis of English-language news articles. Future research should address the direct causal relationships between and among country image, soft power, and nation branding, as well as address more diverse samples beyond English-language international media discourse.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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