

## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF JUNGKOOK BTS'S PERFORMANCE AT THE FIFA WORLD CUP 2022

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### ABSTRACT

*Jungkook from BTS (Bangtan Boys) made history as the first Asian singer to perform at the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup 2022. While his performance symbolized a significant moment for the Korean wave and its role in Korean cultural diplomacy on the global stage, it drew criticism from some Western countries. This response stemmed from concerns about human rights issues in Qatar, such as the treatment of migrant workers involved in constructing Al-Bayt Stadium. This study aims to analyze the objectives of South Korea's cultural diplomacy in the Middle East through Jungkook's appearance at the FIFA World Cup 2022 opening ceremony. Employing a netnographic approach, the research involved analyzing social media commentary, particularly by categorizing relevant keywords from Twitter (X) posts connected to this topic. Using frameworks in cultural diplomacy, constructivism, and nation branding, the study finds that Jungkook's performance served to foster mutual understanding, strengthen international cooperation between Qatar and South Korea, establish a positive image in the Middle East, and further promote South Korea's nation branding on a global scale.*

**KEYWORDS** Cultural Diplomacy, Constructivism, Nation Branding, Jungkook BTS, FIFA World Cup.



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### INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Qatar was selected to host the FIFA World Cup, making it the third Asian country after the Republic of Korea and Japan to have hosted the event in 2002. Qatar's appointment caused controversy, particularly from Western countries, with criticism ranging from allegations of corruption in the selection process to issues of human rights violations. First, there were three executive members who were allegedly involved in bribery in the bidding process. Second, racism against

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non-Qataris and discrimination against women. Third, issues of human rights violations related to the conditions of migrant workers in preparation for the World Cup (Riddell, 2022).

According to Amnesty International, since 2010 around 6,500 migrant workers have died, while hundreds of thousands more have suffered human rights violations and physical and sexual abuse (International, 2019). Reports from human rights organizations indicate that many migrant workers face a range of problems, including late or non-payment of wages (Holmes, 2020), forced labor (Ashraf, 2016), extremely long working hours in extremely hot weather conditions (Kelly et al., 2019), intimidation from employers, and restrictions on leaving work (Lewis, 2023). Calls and protests have emerged under the hashtag #BoycottQatar2022 (Aroslen, 2022), based on alleged human rights violations against families of migrant workers who have been injured or lost their lives during preparations for the tournament.

That same year, BTS drew attention with its planned involvement in the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. In particular, BTS member Jeon Jungkook was invited to sing the song "Dreamers" at the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup on November 20, 2022. However, Jungkook's presence sparked controversy due to the human rights issues surrounding Qatar. As a member of BTS who is known for championing humanitarian values, Jungkook's involvement in the event generated significant debate, especially among fans and the international public.

BTS itself is considered a cultural ambassador of the Republic of Korea that has always prioritized humanitarian issues, so their involvement in an event in a country with a poor human rights record is considered contrary to these values, especially from the perspective of Western countries. BTS' involvement, particularly through Jungkook's performance, sparked conversations around the role of the Republic of Korea's cultural diplomacy.

Thus, Korean cultural diplomacy through Jungkook BTS' performance at the opening of the 2022 FIFA World Cup is the focus of this research. Researchers will show the purpose of Korean cultural diplomacy in the Middle East Region by analyzing every comment given when the issue occurs or has occurred.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with a netnography approach. In the study of International Relations, the netnography method is now starting to be widely applied to enrich research results. Netnography itself is a data collection technique that focuses on online communities and social media (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015). Netnography is essentially a research method that collects data through *online field research*, based on widely recognized qualitative methods (Bakry, 2017).

The unit of analysis in this study was determined based on the research title and grouped according to the keywords used to search for relevant posts. The keywords were divided into two categories, namely main and additional keywords. The main keywords included phrases such as "Jungkook BTS Performance in World Cup Qatar," while the additional keywords included terms such as *support*, *hate*, *boycott*, *human rights*, *law*, and others. Data collection was done by screen

capturing each comment on the selected posts, saving them in JPG format on Google Drive, and grouping them according to their respective comment categories to facilitate data analysis. After data reduction, the analysis will be processed into *pie* charts to visualize the percentage of each comment category. The results of the selected posts are as follows:

1. <https://x.com/FahadAlkubaisi/status/1594415074931875848>
2. [https://x.com/BangtanGER\\_twt/status/1591366879515639809?t=pF6gxGILtdlYJ4J60V2rWA&s=19](https://x.com/BangtanGER_twt/status/1591366879515639809?t=pF6gxGILtdlYJ4J60V2rWA&s=19)
3. <https://x.com/lunehoney/status/1584445011072258048>
4. <https://x.com/130613fate/status/1591400192917520384>
5. <https://x.com/bingbunhe/status/1591308630678450176?t=o7xERCiVbzMi9foFGYpoYA&s=19>

The results of the posts discussed are based on considerations sorted based on Jungkook's relationship with the actor, the relevance of the research topic, and argumentative audience interaction. After data reduction, namely by looking at comments that can be seen in the posts that are the source of data. This is done because of the limitations of the social media application system that cannot display all existing comments. By categorizing comments into three categories, namely supporting, not supporting, and *unrelated*, the data obtained are as follows:

No.	Additional Keywords	Account Name	Number of comments		of Opinion		
			Before reduction	After reduction	Support	Not in favor	Not Relate
1.	Cooperation, Participation	@fahadalkubaisi	8000	363	325	7	31
2.	Boycott, Workers	@lunehoney	703	363	266	84	13
	Death, Human Rights Violations	@BangtanGER	1063	242	132	110	-
3.	Hate/Outrage, Islamophobia, Qatar Sharia laws	@130613fate	397	274	206	61	7
		@bingbunhe	280	111	82	28	1

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

BTS's Jungkook has been the talk of the town with the understanding that he has been ignorant of human rights violations in the country of Qatar. This argument of rejection is also strongly supported by the *image of* BTS, which has always voiced humanitarian and human rights issues. To analyze this, the following post discusses public opinion related to human rights issues and the problems that occurred during the construction of the World Cup stadiums in Qatar.

In answering this question, the researcher will use the concepts of cultural diplomacy, constructivism approach, and *nation branding* to analyze the purpose of Jungkook's appearance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup using the netnography method. The following are the results of the analysis of the posts that have been selected in the study:

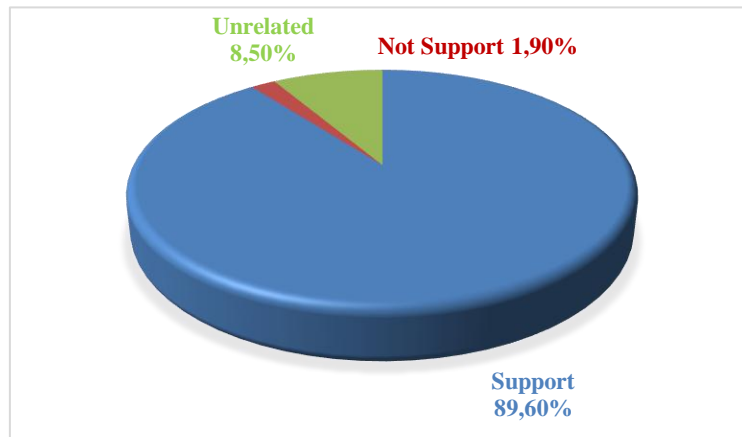


Figure 1. Pie Chart for @fahadkubaisi's Posts

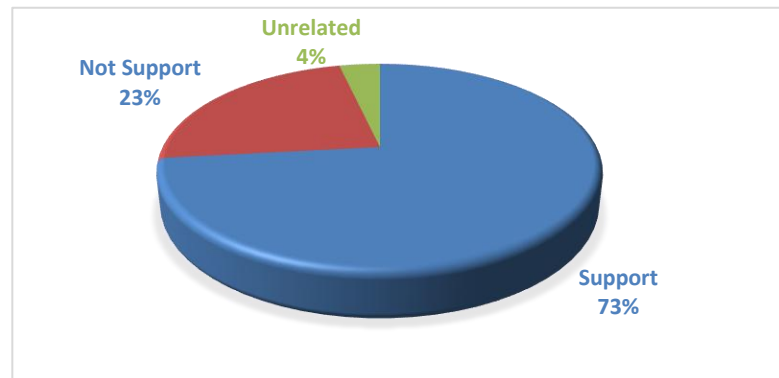


Figure 2. Pie Chart for @luneyhuney's Posts

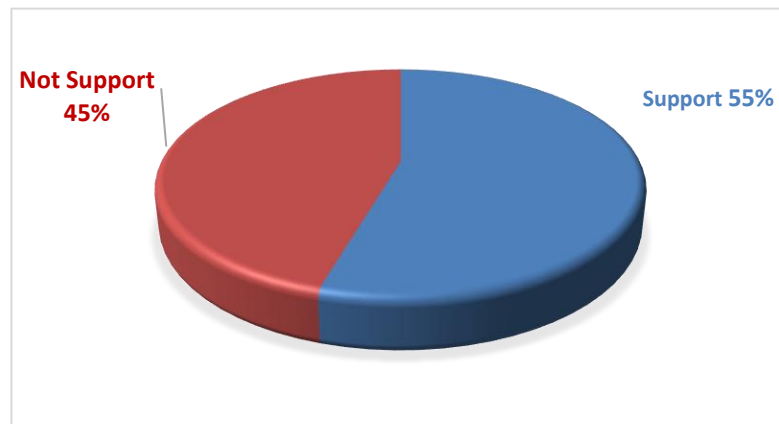


Figure 3 Pie Chart for @BangtanGER Posts

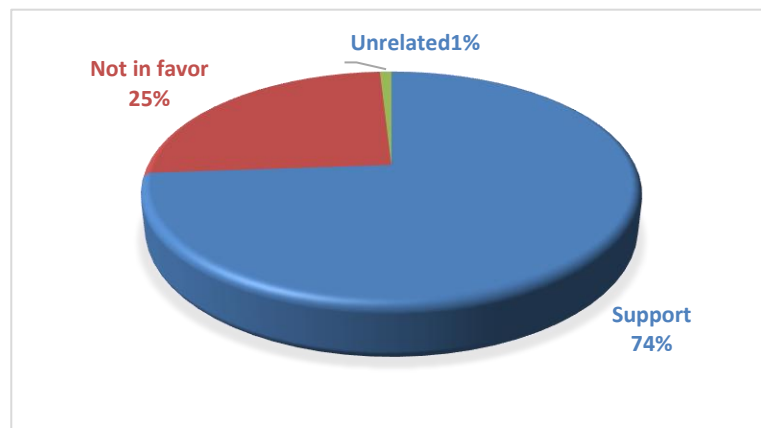


Figure 4. Pie Chart for @bingbunhe Posts

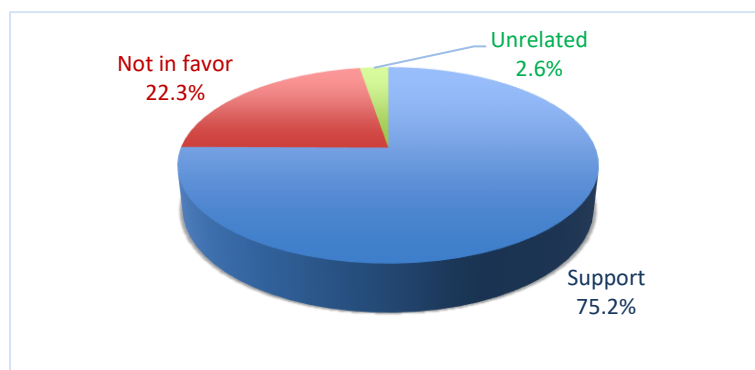


Figure. 5 Pie Chart of @130613fate's posts

The image above shows that the average comment is in favor of Jungkook's performance although a significant percentage of rejections remain. These percentages were calculated by analyzing the types of comments by category and then adding up the total comments on the post. In the pie chart, the majority of comments show positive support from various countries, Arabic, Russian, Indonesian, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, Turkish, Republic of Korea, French, and the rest are in English. The name of the country is determined by the language used when commenting. From the analysis of the post, the research found that Jungkook BTS' performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup aims to achieve cultural diplomacy, which is as follows:

### **Mutual Understanding**

The main goal of cultural diplomacy is to gain *mutual understanding*. This understanding is an idea that many people believe in. That is why cultural diplomacy is considered capable of determining how someone views a country. This is because cultural diplomacy can influence the actor. Jungkook's performance at the opening of the 2022 FIFA World Cup is one of the cultural diplomacy that aims to create mutual understanding between the Republic of Korea and Muslim and Arab countries.

The results of the analysis of the posts studied, broadly speaking, discuss how the international community has been divided into two camps, namely people in Western countries such as the United States, Germany, Spain, France and so on, with Muslim and Arab countries. These two schools of thought have their views on Jungkook BTS' performance at the FIFA World Cup, where Western countries have ideas and thoughts that Arab countries have intolerant attitudes, perpetuate corruption and crime, and violate human rights with Islamic law prevailing in the country. This view gave birth to the beliefs held by the majority of Western countries, so they responded to Jungkook's performance in Qatar with rejection. Meanwhile, comments in favor of Jungkook's performance were predominantly from Arab and Middle Eastern countries.

On November 20, 2022, the hashtag #Dreamers2022, which was directed at BTS' Jungkook after his performance at the FIFA World Cup 2022, reached 936,900 posts on Twitter (X), surpassing the FIFA World Cup keyword of 777,800. On November 21, 2022, the keyword "Jungkook" reached 5.61 million, while the keyword "Dreamers" reached 2.95 million. After one month, the name "Jungkook" entered the top ten "FIFA World Cup" related topics, becoming the only artist name to enter the soccer trend. This international popularity is one of the benefits the Republic of Korea stands to gain from Jungkook BTS' appearance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

According to *The Hallyu Survey Report* from the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and KOFICE, BTS' Jungkook was recognized as one of the *Major Korean Wave Issues* in 2022 for his participation in the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar with the song *Dreamers*. The annual report also maps global Hallyu trends through surveys in 24 countries. Jungkook BTS' performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup made a significant impact in spreading

Korean culture in Qatar. This can be seen from the organization of the K.One Festa Qatar festival in April 2023. The organizers of the K-pop festival stated that the event was held due to the positive influence of Jungkook's performance at the World Cup, where Jungkook was called an influential figure in Qatar thanks to his performance (Dohanews.co, n.d.). The K.One Festa festival became the first K-pop event to be held in the country, reflecting the goal of cultural diplomacy aimed at increasing cross-cultural communication between the two countries or regions. Jungkook's performance has expanded the influence and increased the popularity of K-pop and Korean culture in Qatar and the Middle East Region.

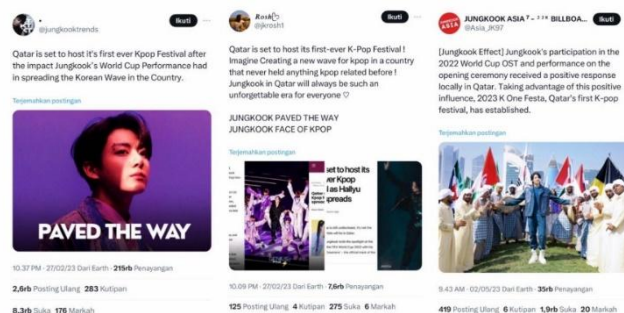


Figure 6 Comments on Jungkook's influence in Qatar

Cummings (2009), who argues that cultural diplomacy consists of aspects such as information, ideas, art, and other cultural aspects that are carried out between countries, communities, and other actors with the aim of achieving *mutual understanding*. James (2016) says that the practice of cultural diplomacy focuses on growing mutual understanding rather than a country's national interests (Hurn, 2016). The increase in Korean cultural activities in the Middle East region through the appearance of Jungkook BTS has formed mutual understanding between actors, namely the Republic of Korea and countries in the Middle East region itself.

### International Cooperation between Qatar and the Republic of Korea

Established cultural diplomacy can pave the way for cooperation between the two parties, as seen in the relationships formed after the diplomacy took place. Although Middle Eastern countries do not have geographical proximity, collaboration is still possible if there is a mutual strategic interest.

After the opening of the FIFA World Cup, South Korea's Minister of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Park Bo-Gyoon, mentioned Jungkook's performance and the song "Dreamers" several times, including in his meeting with Qatar's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani (News, 2023). In October 2023, the President of the Republic of Korea, Yoon Seok Yeol, during his inaugural visit to Qatar, stated that the relationship between Korea and Qatar would be upgraded to a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*. The President's statement emphasized the important role of Jungkook's performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup as a cultural diplomacy effort of the Republic of Korea (Agency., 2023).



She stated that the Korean people's interest in Qatar has increased significantly since Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Yeon Seok Seol highlighted the appearance of Jungkook, a popular Korean singer, who performed alongside Qatari artists at the opening of the World Cup as an important opportunity to strengthen friendly relations between the two countries. That is, BTS' Jungkook's performance has created closer cooperation between the Republic of Korea and countries in the Middle East Region, including Qatar.

### **Building a *Positive Image of Korean Culture in the Middle East Region***

In this context, international image is not something objective. It is how other countries see the beauty of the country's culture, language and norms. Cultural diplomacy then becomes a bridge to show the country's identity and build a positive image. Cultural diplomacy is a complex social process, where the perceptions of others greatly influence how a country acts and interacts on the international stage.

BTS' Jungkook's appearance with a Qatari citizen is an example of cultural diplomacy, where actors in international relations understand and perceive each other, influenced by their views and beliefs about the world. This factor is closely related to the concept of social construction, which, according to Tannenwald (2005), includes a collection of beliefs, principles and attitudes that influence behavior and policies. Jungkook BTS' performance has influenced the opinions of the international community on how Korean culture perceives the culture of Arab or Middle Eastern countries.

The success of Jungkook BTS' performance can also be seen in the achievement made by the song "Dreamers", becoming the first FIFA World Cup theme song in history to reach number 1 on iTunes in over 100 countries. The song reached the top spot in 102 countries and topped the iTunes Worldwide, Europe, and US charts in less than 13 hours. Jungkook BTS also managed to reach number one in 8 of the world's largest music markets, including the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Canada, Australia, France, Italy, and Germany. The song became the fastest World Cup soundtrack to top US iTunes.

The success data in Western countries has shown that the opposition and rejection related to the issue of human rights issues in the country of Qatar did not reduce the huge impact generated by the song "Dreamers" through the performance of Jungkook BTS at the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Jungkook BTS' performance is a cultural diplomacy that can construct identity as a country that exists, understands diversity, and accepts differences. The success and acceptance is the result of achieving *shared ideas* between each country that chooses the idea of "friends" to build cooperation.

*The Global Hallyu Trends* report from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Republic of Korea and *the Korea International Cultural Exchange Agency* shows that BTS are the most popular Hallyu Stars in various regions, including Asia-Pacific (42.0%), the Americas (36.7-49.9%), Africa (44.6%), and the Middle East with the highest popularity in the UAE (39.1%) and Saudi Arabia (22.2%). The report also noted Jungkook's performance at the opening of the FIFA



World Cup Qatar 2022 as a *Major Korean Wave Issue*. In the *Brand Power Index* section, the report examines global perceptions of South Korea. A total of 70.7% of respondents had a positive view, most of whom immediately associated Korea with "K-pop" (14.3%) and "Korean cuisine" (13.2%).

In the midst of the rapid development of K-Pop fans in the Middle East Region, there is a dance group called The Pixies, which consists of UAE residents who love K-Pop. Quoted from Vogue (2023), Nesrine Naaman, an active member of the Pixies said that BTS not only provides good music, but also creates a desire to learn Korean (Lomas, 2023). This statement shows that Korean cultural diplomacy, especially in the Middle East, continues to grow thanks to BTS' influence. This provides a positive image and serves as an important tool to introduce national identity while strengthening South Korea's reputation in the international arena.

Based on the data and comments on the posts analyzed, it can be seen that BTS has gained immense popularity in a number of Arab countries. This acceptance makes Jungkook's performance more easily recognized by the people in these countries. This greatly helps the Republic of Korea in spreading cultural promotion that will affect the country's tourism and economy.

### **Republic of Korea *Nation Branding* Promotion in the International World**

Cultural diplomacy is closely related to *nation branding*, both of which function as instruments in international relations without the use of force. Cultural diplomacy aims to create attraction and influence through cultural representations, while *nation branding* focuses on shaping a country's image. This positive perception can strengthen diplomatic relations, encourage foreign investment, and strengthen a country's position in the global arena, thereby enhancing its reputation and influence in the international system.

Keith Dinnie states that nation branding can be done through various means, including *nation branding ambassadors* and *nation brand advertising* (Dinnie, 2022). In this context, the term '*brand*' refers to the country or nation being represented. First, the concept of *nation ambassador* refers to a figure who can represent the image of the country. Second, *nation brand advertising* is a promotional effort that is carried out so that it can spread more widely and quickly throughout the world.

In this study, Jungkook BTS acts as a *nation branding* ambassador for the Republic of Korea. Jungkook BTS, although not directly sent by the government but by FIFA, still fulfills this role as a figure who strengthens South Korea's image in the Middle East. With his wide influence and popularity, Jungkook brings a positive impact to the *image of* the Republic of Korea.

In addition, the influence of Jungkook and his group has been recognized in various countries, which BTS itself is supported by the moral message they carry about humanity. This is in line with the concept of *nation branding*, where a *brand ambassador* should reflect the values and image that the country wants to highlight. *Nation branding* will be effective if represented by a figure with strong influence in the international arena. As such, Jungkook BTS' popularity helped strengthen South Korea's positive image through his appearance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Jungkook BTS' performance at the 2022 FIFA World Cup is a concrete example of nation brand advertising, which is the promotion of a country's image through various media channels, including social media and television. In this case, Jungkook performed the song "Dreamers," which continued to attract attention even after the event was over. The song was streamed online through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube since its performance on November 20, 2022, and is still accessible today.

The promotion was strengthened through simultaneous broadcasting on various national and private television channels, as well as the support of ARMY, BTS' fans around the world. They set a target to expand the reach of "Dreamers" by continuously streaming and creating customized playlists on platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, and others. *Streaming* is a term among K-Pop fans for watching a video on social media or apps repeatedly to increase the number of views, so that the celebrity sets a new record. This is done by ARMYs from all over the world to achieve these *goals*.



Image 6.14 Example of Target Streaming of Dreamers Song by ARMY

## CONCLUSION

Based on this research, it can be concluded that Jungkook BTS' performance at the Opening of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar played an important role in South Korea's cultural diplomacy, particularly in building positive relations with countries in the Middle East. Despite the controversy over human rights violations in Qatar, Jungkook's performance managed to break the polarity of opinion, gaining huge support from Arab and Middle Eastern countries. This shows the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy run by the Republic of Korea, where arts and culture can be a tool to introduce and strengthen the country's image in the international arena.

Through netnographic analysis of the comments on social media, it was seen that this performance not only raised awareness of Korean culture, but also introduced K-pop as a symbol of modernity and cultural tolerance. In addition, Jungkook's involvement in this global event served as a diplomatic bridge that brought South Korea closer to Middle Eastern countries, reinforcing the country's positive image and increasing its popularity in regions previously less exposed to Korean culture.

The research also shows that BTS, as South Korea's non-official brand ambassadors, plays a vital role in the promotion of the national image through arts and culture. The success of "Dreamers" as the 2022 World Cup theme song and its wide social media impact confirm that pop culture, through figures like Jungkook, can influence public opinion and strengthen relations between countries. Overall, Jungkook's performance at the World Cup reflects that cultural diplomacy and nation branding can

support each other to build understanding between nations and expand a country's influence on a global level.

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