

# Public Diplomacy in French Scholarship: Exploratory Analysis of an Emerging Field

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## Abstract

This paper is an analysis of French literature on public diplomacy available on the Cairn.info platform. Despite the notable achievements of the French government in the realm of international communication, public diplomacy is often perceived as a marginal term or mere political rhetoric within the domains of foreign policy, political communication, and regional studies. Nonetheless, the body of French literature on public diplomacy is expanding.

The objectives of this exploratory study are threefold: (a) to delineate the main areas and trends within the public diplomacy articles published in French by reviewing the existing literature, (b) to identify their primary outlets, and (c) to ascertain the thematic focus of these studies.

**Keywords:** Public Diplomacy, French, International Relations, Communication, Area Studies

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We conducted a comprehensive review of scholarly investigations concerning public diplomacy within the academic literature of the Francophone community. The objective was to trace the evolution of public diplomacy within a sphere predominantly influenced by non-Anglo-Saxon academic discourse, particularly among French scholars. Since its emergence, public diplomacy has garnered attention from practitioners and scholars across diverse disciplines. However, its conceptualization has been challenging due to the diversity of practices and ideologies it contains, not only the strategic calculation of national interests amidst geopolitical dynamics (Huang & Arceneaux, 2024) but also narrative framing (Hayden, 2013), competitive positioning (Golan et al., 2019), and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Cummings, 2009) through various communication activities. Therefore, the methodologies and focal points of research on public diplomacy exhibit significant variation across different social contexts, precluding a universally accepted definition of public diplomacy within the international academic community.

Public diplomacy, broadly understood, is a new form of state engagement in international communication within the framework of global political multipolarity (Zaharna, 2019). It encompasses a wide range of communication practices and objectives, reflecting the complexity and depth of the subject. In other words, states, governmental bodies, and their constituents actively or strategically engage in public diplomacy to manage international public opinion (Cull, 2010), facilitate the dissemination and advocacy of foreign policy objectives (Pamment, 2012), enhance global standing (Fitzpatrick, 2017), and engage target audiences (Huang & Wang, 2020). These goals involve diverse communication strategies and tools, including the latest digital technologies (e.g., algorithms and generative AI), to defend interests and foster cross-cultural understanding (Bjola & Manor, 2024).

France boasts a rich history of engaging in public diplomacy. According to a recent report, France secured the top position among soft power nations in both 2018 and 2019, primarily due to the global influence of its cultural, artistic, and tourism assets (*The Soft Power* 30, 2019). Indeed, France's extensive cultural exchange and educational initiatives have traditionally served as pivotal instruments for the deployment of influence diplomacy (*diplomatie d'influence*), commonly referred to as "public diplomacy," on the global stage (Charillon, 2020). Predominantly driven by governmental entities, the French public diplomacy apparatus heavily invests in audiovisual policies and media platforms, with the overarching objective of enhancing the country's image and reputation (Lequesne, 2021). Despite France's robust and impactful public diplomacy endeavors, the French-speaking community has displayed minimal engagement in the study of public diplomacy until the latter part of the 2010s. Given this context, a meta-analysis of published studies will highlight state-of-the-art examples of how French scholars understand public diplomacy practices.

## A General Understanding à la Française of Public Diplomacy

The academic conceptualization of *public diplomacy* began in the scholarly discourse of Edmund Gullion in 1965. However, its contemporary definition can be traced back to the World War I through the work of French journalists. Indeed, inspired by the Wilsonian advocacy for open diplomatic practices (Cull, 2009), French intellectuals and journalists criticized Germany's proposal to Austria for non-binding secret talks on the fundamental principles of the concluded peace on September 16, 1918 in *Le Petit Journal*. They revitalized the Wilsonian model of open diplomacy under the banner of public diplomacy while simultaneously promoting democratic principles in all their diplomatic activities. For these journalists, advocating for transparency and democracy was integral to their approach to diplomacy:

The return of the secret diplomacy that Wilson and so many others condemned. We want a public diplomacy. A form of diplomacy under the purview of the populace, inherently undermines the viability of clandestine diplomatic endeavors, rendering them devoid of prospects for success within the framework of the Entente. (*Le Petit Parisien*, 1918, § 3)

While the scholarly discourse around the theorization of public diplomacy has garnered more attention since the latter stages of the Cold War era, examination of this phenomenon within Francophone literature remains relatively scarce. Due to their disciplinary background in the field of international relations, most scholars seem to prefer exploring activities related to public diplomacy from the macro perspective of foreign policy or cross-cultural communication initiatives. Moreover, within the broader academic landscape, a considerable corpus points to the nuanced interpretations of public diplomacy in various disciplinary frameworks. For instance, within the realm of international relations, scholars posit that diplomacy, particularly its public dimension, embodies the mechanisms and practices of international engagement necessitated by an increasingly interconnected global environment. In this context, political entities must orchestrate and execute diplomatic initiatives to advance foreign policy agendas and safeguard political and economic interests. Such initiatives primarily “manifest through the institutionalization of bilateral or multilateral dialogues” (Fernandez, 2018, p. 144) characterized by official exchanges between states, reflecting the fundamental principle of reciprocity.

Furthermore, as interest in public diplomacy and its organized activities has grown, communication scholars have increasingly begun to examine this international communication initiative through more tangible case studies. This approach aims to understand the modes of policy implementation and the power relations underlying communication practices within the framework of public diplomacy. Indeed, from a communicative standpoint, diplomacy is “the art of negotiating for peace” (Bély, 2007, p. 3). It is also a mode of political communication

by a sovereign state vis-à-vis foreign governments and their constituencies (Ségas, 2012). It requires diverse discursive strategies to construct meaning. In this context, Huang and Hardy (2021) considered public diplomacy a set of long-term communication acts “covering a set of discourses and practices by which organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, aim to influence, in a discreet way, the attitudes and perceptions of foreign audiences toward the image not only of the organization but also of the country they represent” (p. 74). Indeed, for French communication scholars, public diplomacy actors are not merely official emissaries executing the political and diplomatic mandates delegated to them by their respective governments on foreign soil; they are also “interpreters” or “translators” (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2015, para. 14) assuming a mediating role akin to that of a “writer” (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2011, p. 58). They engage with foreign publics to expound upon the political information entrusted to them to disseminate, as dictated by governmental directives. Simultaneously, such a practice systematizes and mediates the diverse linguistic registers emanating from various governmental factions internally, with the objective of “harmonizing multiple and oftentimes divergent influences into a cohesive discourse” (Ségas, 2012, para. 26).

Consequently, French-language studies consider public diplomacy as “the conduct of trade with other political units, the art of persuasion without the use of force.” Given the integral role of all states within the global community, “maintaining relations with other powers is part of the authority and legitimacy of a sovereign state” (d’Estmael, 2014, p. 22). In this way, governments support and fund public diplomacy to achieve foreign policy objectives peacefully (Bély, 2007), eschewing recourse to military intervention, economic sanctions, or legislative measures.

After reviewing general perspectives on the concept of public diplomacy in the French research on Social Sciences and Humanities, we conducted a meta-analysis of studies on public diplomacy published in French journals and books. The goal was to trace the advancement of public diplomacy as a topic of academic inquiry within French-language publications and to furnish a comprehensive framework for answering the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main areas and trends in public diplomacy articles published in French?
- RQ2. (a) How extensive is the scholarly work being published? (b) What is the temporal distribution of publications? and (c) Which journals serve as the primary outlets for public diplomacy studies?
- RQ3. (a) What thematic strands characterize these publications? and (b) What specific topics do these articles address?

## Method

We examined French-language articles in journals and books published since 1963 and indexed in the French academic database *Cairn.info*. Established in 2005, *Cairn.info* is one of the largest repositories of French-language scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. Initially established through collaborations with prominent French and Belgian publishers (e.g., *Éditions Belin*, *De Boeck*, *La Découverte*, and *Éditions Érès*), *Cairn.info* later expanded its holdings to include the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, amassing a collection exceeding 150,000 French-language journal articles and 4,000 French-language books.

Given the emerging status of public diplomacy within France and the Francophone academic sphere, we collected all pertinent literature except news releases for scientific conferences in French-publishing academic journals. Thus, the corpus included papers published through the end of 2023: peer-reviewed manuscripts, book chapters, research notes, editorial notes, commentaries, and book reviews featuring the French term “public diplomacy (*diplomatie publique*)” and/or its alternative expression “influence diplomacy (*diplomatie d’influence*)” in the title, abstract, or keywords. A systematic search of the *Cairn.info* database yielded 256 papers for subsequent analysis.

The metadata of papers retrieved from *Cairn.info* included the following essential information: publication year, title, journal titles, keywords, abstract, authors, and affiliations. To address the research questions, we devised a comprehensive codebook with four distinct coding categories:

1. **Mode, publication form, and research field:** This category refers to the format of the paper in its respective discipline. As public diplomacy emerges as a research interest within the Francophone academic community, scholars often take an interdisciplinary approach, using various publication formats to discuss this topic. In the coding process, we first identified the writing mode of the paper: 1 = original article, 2 = scholarly commentary, 3 = research notes, 4 = Academic interview/dialogue, 5 = book review, or 6 = editorial. Then we classified the form of publication: 1 = Peer-reviewed journal article, 2 = book chapters, 3 = conference proceeding, or 4 = non-peer-reviewed journal publication (e.g., commentary, notes, dialogues). Finally, we assessed the disciplinary alignment of the journal or book based on the classifications provided by the French *Conseil National des Universités* (CNU)<sup>1</sup> for the relevant subject area: 1 = Information and Communication Sciences, 2 = Political Science and International Relations, 3 = Area Studies (Anglophone Studies, Germanic and Scandinavian studies, Slavic and Baltic studies, Romance studies, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew and other languages and literatures), 4 = Sociology, 5 = History, or 0 = Other.

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1) The Conseil National des Universités (CNU) is a French advisory and decision-making body with national scope. It is organized into “groups of sections” corresponding to recognized academic disciplines. Each group encompasses multiple sections, reflecting the official categorization of academic disciplines.

2. **Research paradigm and structure:** This category refers to the academic rigor of the paper. In the coding process, we first classified each paper according to its research paradigm. Inspired by the classification of research paradigms of Deng (2021), we coded each paper as follows: 1 = positivist paradigm, 2 = interpretive paradigm, 3 = critical and speculative paradigm, or 0 = none. Then we assessed the structure of each paper by comparing it to the conventional structure of a study in Anglo-Saxon academia, typically including the following sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Questions, Method, Results, and Discussion (California State University Monterey Bay, n.d.). We took into consideration that papers aligned with the interpretive or critical and speculative paradigm might not strictly conform to this structure. Our coding addressed several key aspects: whether the paper explicitly used or developed theories, mentioning specific schools or authors; whether it articulated clear research questions or hypotheses; the clarity and specificity of the research question or hypothesis, or at least the aim of the paper; the specific research methods used; and whether the author(s) clearly discussed the implementation and contribution of the research.
3. **Research objective:** This category refers to the publication objectives of the paper. Our codebook contained the following types: 1 = theoretical exploration and reflection on public diplomacy, 2 = introduction to and development of established public diplomacy theory via case study, 3 = policy recommendations derived from case study, 4 = academic dialogue, debate, and brief commentary, 5 = analysis of specific phenomena in international communication, 6 = use of public diplomacy concepts to examine geopolitical relationships, 7 = historical analysis of diplomacy practices across various nations, or 0 = non-explicit research purpose.
4. **Themes in French public diplomacy research:** The final category refers to the primary theme explored in the paper: 1 = Theoretical exploration and trends in public diplomacy, 2 = Comparative study of public diplomacy practices across different countries, 3 = National image and influence strategies, 4 = Policy research examining governmental claims, 5 = Educational and scientific diplomacy, 6 = Sports diplomacy, 7 = Cultural diplomacy, 8 = Place branding, 9 = Interplay between economic diplomacy and international communication, 10 = Diaspora diplomacy and immigration, or 11 = Other.

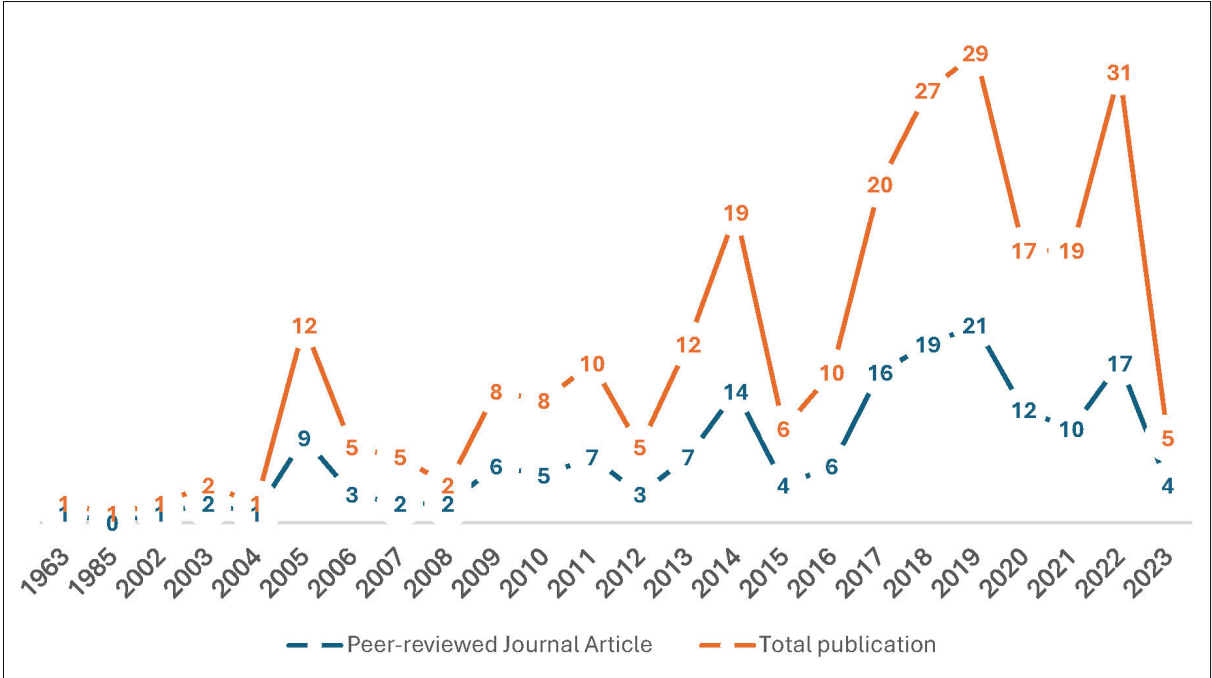
Two bilingual French-English coders participated in dual rounds of training using a random sample of 60 articles, achieving intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha > 0.8). Following this training phase, the coders independently coded the remaining articles in the dataset.

## Results

Among the 256 papers related to public diplomacy indexed in the *Cairn.info* database from 1963 to 2023, 172 were peer-reviewed journal articles (see Table 1). The publication trend reveals that the French academic community exhibited growing interest in the field of public diplomacy beginning in 2016. Since that time, the annual output of publications on this topic has consistently increased, culminating in a total of 158 papers (61.7%) published between 2016 and 2023 (see Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Forms of publication of French-language papers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Original articles	172	67.2	67.2	67.2
Book reviews	33	12.9	12.9	80.1
Editorial	19	7.4	7.4	87.5
Research notes	16	6.3	6.3	93.8
Dialogues	10	3.9	3.9	97.7
Commentary	5	2.0	2.0	99.6
Other	1	.4	.4	100.0
Total	256	100.0	100.0	



**Figure 1.** Annual count of French public diplomacy research papers

## ***French Public Diplomacy Research Fields***

Table 2 illustrates that research on public diplomacy predominantly appeared in journals focused on international relations and political science, with notable examples including *Politiques étrangères* ( $n = 21$ , 8.2%), *Revue internationale et Stratégique* ( $n = 14$ , 5.5%), and *Revue Défense Nationale* ( $n = 11$ , 4.3%). Although all three journals are high-quality French publications in the field of international relations and political sciences, each serves as a research platform spearheaded by leading think tanks or research institutions associated with the French government. For instance, the journals *Politiques étrangères* and *Revue internationale et Stratégique* are affiliated with two of France’s leading think tanks in international relations research, the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), respectively. Meanwhile, the *Revue Défense Nationale* is supported and published by the École Militaire, the military academy of the French government.

In addition, public diplomacy studies frequently appeared in information and communication sciences journals. However, a substantial portion of French-language articles appeared in *Communiquer. Revue de communication sociale et publique* ( $n = 12$ , 4.7%), a Canadian French-language journal. Moreover, *Hermès, La Revue* ( $n = 10$ , 3.9%), a French political communication journal published by the French National Centre for Scientific Research, also accepted diplomacy-related studies frequently.

Furthermore, considering the distribution of papers, public diplomacy is still an emerging topic within French research in the humanities and social sciences. Numerous journals in the fields of political science and communication sciences contain only a handful of peer-reviewed articles on this topic compared to all research topics covered by these journals. Moreover, journals focused on sociology and history often provide only a cursory introduction to public diplomacy, typically through research notes, dialogues, book reviews, or editorials.

**Table 2.** Distribution of research fields of French public diplomacy papers

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
IR/Political sciences	147	57.4	57.4	57.4
Information and Communication studies	56	21.9	21.9	79.3
Area studies	29	11.3	11.3	90.6
History	20	7.8	7.8	98.4
Sociology	3	1.2	1.2	99.6
Other	1	.4	.4	100.0
Total	256	100.0	100.0	



We conducted a crosstabulation analysis to delve deeper into the relationship between the scope of French-language public diplomacy literature and the geographical focus of the research. As indicated in Table 3, France itself is not the primary subject of investigation in the French public diplomacy literature. Generally, the predominant regions examined include the United States ( $n = 38$ , 14.8%), China ( $n = 35$ , 13.7%), France ( $n = 26$ , 10.2%), Islamic countries ( $n = 12$ , 4.7%), and the European Union ( $n = 11$ , 4.3%).

More specifically, scholars in international relations and political science ( $n = 147$ ) writing in French tend to focus on the public diplomacy of the United States ( $n = 27$ , 18.4%) and China ( $n = 18$ , 12.2%). Their analyses frequently concentrate on the political systems of these countries, their strategies in international relations, and specific initiatives related to public diplomacy. Meanwhile, studies in information and communication sciences ( $n = 56$ ) often concentrate on the public diplomacy strategies of the European Union and its member states ( $n = 7$ , 12.5%). Chinese public diplomacy strategies ( $n = 7$ , 12.5%) are also a central concern for French-speaking scholars in communication studies, mirroring the interest in China studies ( $n = 9$ , 31.0%) shown in area studies literature ( $n = 29$ ). Additionally, historical research ( $n = 20$ ) on public diplomacy predominantly focuses on the United States ( $n = 7$ , 35.0%).

**Table 3.** Crosstabulation analysis of research fields and research objectives

		Other	Information and Communication studies	IR/Political sciences	Area studies	Sociology	History	Total
No country mentioned	Count	0	17	46	5	0	1	69
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	30.4%	31.3%	17.2%	0.0%	5.0%	27.0%
<b>China</b>	Count	0	7	18	9	0	1	35
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>	<b>31.0%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>13.7%</b>
Africa Countries	Count	0	3	1	0	1	0	5
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	5.4%	0.7%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	2.0%
Oceania countries	Count	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
General theoretical discussion	Count	0	3	15	3	2	1	24
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	5.4%	10.2%	10.3%	66.7%	5.0%	9.4%
<b>Islamic countries</b>	Count	0	2	7	2	0	1	12
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>	<b>6.9%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>4.7%</b>
<b>France</b>	Count	1	6	13	3	0	3	26
	% within Q0.3	100.0%	<b>10.7%</b>	<b>8.8%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>15.0%</b>	<b>10.2%</b>
<b>European Union</b>	Count	0	7	3	0	0	1	11
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>4.3%</b>
Canada	Count	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%

		Other	Information and Communication studies	IR/Political sciences	Area studies	Sociology	History	Total
Atlantic countries (NATO)	Count	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Soviet Union	Count	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.0%	1.2%
India	Count	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
United States	Count	0	3	27	1	0	7	38
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	5.4%	18.4%	3.4%	0.0%	35.0%	14.8%
Russia	Count	0	2	8	1	0	0	11
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	3.6%	5.4%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%
Japan	Count	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
South Korea	Count	0	0	1	1	0	1	3
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	3.4%	0.0%	5.0%	1.2%
Southeast Asia	Count	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Asian countries other than Japan, Korea, and South-East Asia	Count	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	1.8%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
European countries other than Russia and the European Union members	Count	0	2	3	2	0	1	8
	% within Q0.3	0.0%	3.6%	2.0%	6.9%	0.0%	5.0%	3.1%
Total	Count	1	56	147	29	3	20	256
	% within Q0.3	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

### *Research Interests in French Public Diplomacy Literature*

To deepen our understanding of the research interests reflected in French-language public diplomacy papers across various disciplines, we first conducted a statistical and analytical review of the words used in the abstracts of these works. The rationale for textual analysis of abstracts is that much of the literature published in French lacks explicit keyword sections, making this approach vital for broadly describing and analyzing areas of interest.

The analysis revealed notable variability in terminology usage within the abstracts of public diplomacy literature across different disciplines (see Table 4). For instance, the term “politics/political (in French: *politique*)” frequently appeared in political, international relations, and regional studies. However, while also common in information and communication studies, the same term predominantly pertained to institutional discourses surrounding communication and media rather than to policies concerning international relations.

Detailed analysis of field of study indicates that in international relations and political science, prevalent keywords included “policy,” “diplomacy,” “actors,” “foreign strategy,” and “power” and “influence.” Conversely, communication studies tended to concentrate on “communication” and the strategic deployment of “influence” through “media” and “public” interactions. In area studies, the works published in French mentioned “China,” “Taiwan,” and “the United States” frequently as key terms. Meanwhile, the limited number of sociological studies addressing regional conflicts through a public diplomacy lens typically featured keywords associated with conflict regions. Finally, historical research in public diplomacy often centered on the histories of specific conflicts, particularly the Korean War and Cold War regional developments, leading to a frequent mention of terms such as “war,” “Korean,” “the United States,” “development,” and “economic” in the abstracts. This focus underscores the historical dimension of public diplomacy research within these thematic areas.

**Table 4.** High-frequency keywords in French public diplomacy study abstracts

Research fields	Keywords in abstracts
IR/Political sciences	politique (64), diplomatie (34), États-Unis (33), pays (32), influence (26), France (23), stratégie (21), étrangère (21), puissance (19), acteurs (18)
Information and Communication studies	communication (38), politique (31), influence (22), médias (19), publique (17), chinois (16), diplomatie (16), guerre (13), stratégies (12), internationale (12)
Area studies	politique (51), Chine (37), Taiwan (36), américaine (23), relations (19), États-Unis (17), politiques (12), power (12), guerre (11), république (11)
Sociology	alliance (5), Palestine (3), région (2), contexte (2), question (2), coopération (2), stratégie (2), guerre (1), froide (1), atlantique (1)
History	politique (9), guerre (8), coréenne (7), Américaine (7), état (6), internationales (5), diplomatie (5), développement (4), culturelle (4), économiques (4)

Moreover, we coded and analyzed the primary research interests reflected in public diplomacy-related papers published in French. According to Table 5, the predominant focus of French-language public diplomacy literature was national or territorial image enhancement ( $n = 80, 31.3\%$ ). These studies primarily investigated how communication efforts and policy support from various political actors might strengthen the image and reputation of a region or country. Second, the concept of soft power was frequently linked with public diplomacy in French scholarly discourse. In 67 French-language texts, *soft power* was a recurring theme, often discussed in relation to its deployment through public diplomacy. In other words, public diplomacy was considered an instrument of soft-power statecraft. Furthermore, French-language researchers extensively explored political and communication theories associated with state-driven public diplomacy, frequently reconceptualizing and reflecting on established theoretical frameworks through the lens of public diplomacy phenomena ( $n = 40, 26.2\%$ ). Moreover, French-language literature on public diplomacy contained diverse insights into the

significance of this form of international communication by analyzing various governmental public diplomacy programs, initiatives, and foreign policies ( $n = 22$ , 8.6%), often through specific case studies ( $n = 17$ , 6.6%). French-writing scholars also broadened the discourse on public diplomacy to include analyses from the perspectives of sports diplomacy ( $n = 5$ , 2.0%), cultural diplomacy ( $n = 5$ , 2.0%), and immigration ( $n = 4$ , 1.5%), enriching the understanding of how these distinct areas intersect with and influence public diplomacy practices.

**Table 5.** Distribution of research interest in French public diplomacy papers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Image of the state	80	31.3	31.3	31.3
State's soft power	67	26.2	26.2	57.4
Trends in political or communication theory research related to public diplomacy	40	15.6	15.6	73.0
Projects, foreign policy, or initiatives related to public diplomacy	22	8.6	8.6	81.6
Presentation of specific public diplomacy actions in other countries	17	6.6	6.6	88.2
Other	16	6.3	6.3	94.5
Sport diplomacy	5	2.0	2.0	96.5
Cultural diplomacy	5	2.0	2.0	98.5
Immigration	4	1.5	1.5	100.0
Total	256	100.0	100.0	

In addition, we coded the research objectives of the papers collected. As shown in Table 6, the findings indicate that the most frequent purpose was to conduct case studies from a theoretical perspective. These studies typically emphasized the application of theory to specific instances and practical examination ( $n = 72$ ; 28.1%). Another 70 papers were published as short articles (27.3%), which generally took the form of reviews and commentaries of public diplomacy practices or consisted of interviews and dialogues with scholars and practitioners. These papers served a scholarly exploratory purpose, aiming to introduce the concept of public diplomacy to the French academic community. However, they often lacked rigorous theoretical discourse and conceptual debate. Furthermore, the French-language public diplomacy literature offered strategic analyses of geopolitical conflicts and power dynamics ( $n = 20$ , 7.8%), enriching the discourse with insights into the strategic implications of public diplomacy within global contexts.

**Table 6.** Research purposes in French public diplomacy papers.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Equal emphasis on theory and practice	72	28.1	28.1	28.1
Commentary (some papers written in a style similar to media commentary, lacking a theoretical research process)	70	27.3	27.3	55.5
Analysis of geopolitical conflicts	39	15.2	15.2	70.7
Introductory (describing a phenomenon, introducing experience and phenomena)	20	7.8	7.8	78.5
Historical analysis and sorting, historical paths of development of practice or theory	20	7.8	7.8	86.3
Academic orientation (seeking new discoveries through research, exploring or verifying theories, or advancing research)	19	7.4	7.4	93.8
Think tank consulting	8	3.1	3.1	96.9
Other	8	3.1	3.1	100.0
Total	256	100.0	100.0	

## Discussion

We analyzed literature published in French on the *Cairn.info* platform to describe the status of public diplomacy as an emerging concept in French-speaking academia. Despite increasing engagement with this concept by scholars in international relations, political science, information and communication sciences, and area studies, public diplomacy has not yet achieved mainstream academic prominence in these disciplines. We also found that Francophone scholarship paid limited attention to the public diplomacy of France or other Francophone countries, such as Canada or French-speaking African countries. Instead, the focus predominantly rested on the historical, policy, and strategic dimensions of U.S. public diplomacy. Moreover, many scholars in political and communication sciences explored the strategic implementation of public diplomacy in other economies, notably China, Islamic countries, and the European Union, through specific case studies.

The marginal status of public diplomacy in Parisian academic and professional communities might be attributable to a lack of clear policy and academic definitions in the field. In France, scholars often view public diplomacy as an “*ad hoc* diplomatic practice without a dedicated overseeing department” (Charillon, 2020, p. 265). This perspective has fostered ongoing debate among stakeholders about whether public diplomacy should primarily participate in foreign policy formulation, articulate foreign policy actions to the public, or directly shape target audience perceptions through new media and communication strategies. While the body of French literature on public diplomacy is expanding, it is often

considered a marginal term or an example of political rhetoric within studies of foreign policy, political communication, and area studies.

In the analyzed French-language literature, public diplomacy was frequently linked with soft power as an analogous concept but without robust theoretical development. The prevalence of this issue stems partly from the restrictive word limits (around 35000 characters, including spaces) imposed by French academic journals, constraining the scope for extensive literature review and critical reflection. Additionally, French-language academic writing often adheres to Cartesian principles, emphasizing critical and reflective stances. These expectations have led to a preference for qualitative approaches in much of the French-language public diplomacy literature and a concentration on fine and critical analysis of the phenomenon. In this way, the structural format of French-language articles significantly differs from the typical structure observed in mainstream U.S. academic papers, which conventionally contain sections for introduction, literature review, method, results, and discussion. In contrast, French-speaking scholars tend to prioritize reflective analysis, focusing on the use of conceptual ideas to visualize and critically interpret cases, often neglecting thorough review of previous studies or enumeration of methodological detail. This approach highlights a distinct difference in academic writing styles and priorities between French-language literature and its American counterpart, the latter of which reflects a more profound cultural and intellectual tradition in scholarly communication.

Finally, this study also found that, similar to the French government's official stance, the French scientific literature shows less interest in the term "public diplomacy". Instead, most scholars prefer the expression "influence diplomacy" (*diplomatie d'influence*) as an alternative concept in their research. The use of influence diplomacy is rooted in the long-standing tradition of employing influence as a basis for diplomatic strategy within the European Union, as well as the deeply entrenched role of the term influence in French political and diplomatic discourse when conceptualizing foreign affairs operations (Lequesne, 2012). Indeed, the terms influence diplomacy and influence strategy frequently appear in the working documents and discourses of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France related to public diplomacy. This suggests that influence diplomacy has become a new ontology of public diplomacy in the French political and academic context and is gradually being institutionalized. Such a shift is reflected not only in various speeches by the Minister for European and Foreign Affairs but also in the frequent use of these terms in official French government documents, such as mission letters.

The establishment of the Directorate of Cultural, Educational, Academic and Scientific Diplomacy (*Direction de la diplomatie culturelle, éductive, universitaire et scientifique*) at the Quai d'Orsay further solidified the use of influence diplomacy as an alternative to public diplomacy in an institutionalized context. Notably, this directorate is sometimes directly referred to as the "Directorate for Influence Diplomacy (*Direction de la Diplomatie d'Influence*)" in internal and official documents of the French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs

(Sévin, 2024, p. 75). Therefore, future research on public diplomacy in France, the French-speaking world, and even the European Union needs to pay closer attention to the process of conceptualizing and institutionalizing the notion of influence in international communication initiatives. This approach will provide a better understanding of how relevant actors engage with public diplomacy initiatives in the foreign policymaking process.

As part of the special issue titled “Public Diplomacy in Other Words,” this article presents discussion on public diplomacy from the perspective of Francophone scholars. The aim was to familiarize the international public diplomacy community with the contributions of Francophone scholarship, showcasing its vital role in enriching the diversity of international scientific research. However, the scope of this study is limited by our sole reliance on the French *Cairn.info* database. Future scholars should analyze relevant journals and books more comprehensively and systematically from broader Francophone regions, especially those in Francophone Africa.

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