



# Cultural diplomacy as corporate strategy: an analysis of Pasona Group's "New Tohoku" program in Japan

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## Abstract

Corporate diplomacy research suggests US executives display little interest in supporting government diplomacy and promoting national culture; rather, corporate strategy focuses on profit. The corporate diplomacy phenomenon, however, needs additional examination in the more collectivistic East Asia context. This study investigates a public–private partnership in which a corporation sponsors a cultural exchange project in Japan, specifically how Japanese business leaders perceive and integrate promoting national interests and country image into corporate strategy. This research analyzes the New Tohoku program that brings foreign students, businesspersons, and social media influencers to Tohoku, a region undergoing reconstruction since the 2011 tsunami, to learn about Japan's economy, history, climate, and culture. Interviews with executives and managers and documentary information from corporate webpages, news releases, and promotional brochures reveal motivations for engaging to (1) promote Japan's culture, (2) stimulate economic growth, and (3) generate awareness about Pasona through publicity. While unrelated to Pasona's business model, New Tohoku reflects the "Japanese mindset" of helping Japan; the founder, employees, and shareholders ensure this remains a strategic objective regardless of profits. This research has implications for multinational corporations' role in cultural diplomacy as a component of public diplomacy.

**Keywords** Cultural diplomacy · Corporate diplomacy · Non-state actors in public diplomacy · Public diplomacy · Country image

## Introduction

Public diplomacy involves a country's strategic communication and actions directed toward foreign publics with the goal of generating mutually beneficial relations that support the country's foreign policy agenda and increase its attraction. While traditional public diplomacy was viewed as state-centric activities, the conceptualization of the "new public diplomacy" (e.g., Melissen 2011) takes into consideration non-state actors' involvement in diplomatic activities, through cultural and corporate diplomacy, that influence public diplomacy and affect country image. The fundamental essence of public diplomacy, which is to influence public opinion in other countries and cultivate understanding of

a nation's ideals, is often carried out by non-state actors working intentionally with governments through partnerships, or independently through activities that include cultural exchanges and sponsorships that produce diplomatic outcomes.

Although a research stream investigating private corporations as non-state actors in public diplomacy is developing, literature about the corporate role in promoting a country image through cultural diplomacy initiatives is sparse. Moreover, previous studies about corporations as public diplomacy actors focus on Western-centric perspectives. Fitzpatrick et al. (2019) call for research examining government–corporate partnerships in public diplomacy, especially with corporations based outside the United States. In countries such as Japan with closer ties between government and businesses, private–public partnerships (PPPs) may be more prevalent and accepted (Kamphof and Melissen 2018). This study builds upon previous literature to analyze a Japanese multinational corporation's engagement in initiatives to promote Japan's culture.

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The purpose of this study is to investigate a case in which a corporation engages in a PPP to sponsor a cultural diplomacy project. This study elucidates how corporate leadership views corporate diplomacy, how cultural diplomacy initiatives factor into corporate strategy, and why executives and managers prioritize promoting the country image through PPPs. The primary case examined in this study is Pasona Group's "New Tohoku" program. Pasona is a multinational corporation, based in Tokyo, Japan, that provides a variety of staffing services. Launched in 2016, New Tohoku is the result of a PPP between Pasona and the Japanese government. New Tohoku facilitates international exchanges by hosting foreign high school and university students, business professionals, and social media influencers in rural Japan; foreigners learn about Japan's culture through a variety of cultural workshops and homestay experiences.

Corporate diplomacy in the context of Japan is ripe for investigation since the public diplomacy field needs additional research focusing on contexts outside the United States; Japan offers a unique case. The New Tohoku program provides insight into a collaborative project with state and non-state actors amid Japan's foreign policy that prioritizes soft power through cultural diplomacy (Naoyuki 2008; Otmazgin 2018; Soeya 2015; Tsutomu 2008; Watanabe and McConnell 2008; Wilkins 2015). Otmazgin (2018) describes the three-pronged public diplomacy strategy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan: first, to improve the "cultural image" of Japan; second, to advance the "brand image" of Japanese corporations; and, third, to facilitate "cultural exchanges" that influence opinion leaders in other countries (p. 60). This soft-power-through-cultural-diplomacy approach involves numerous government ministries and agencies along with private corporations as Japan was host to the World Rugby Cup in 2019 and will host the Olympics and Paralympics and World Masters Games in 2021 and the World Expo in 2025.

## Literature review

The public diplomacy literature, particularly research about soft power through cultural diplomacy and corporate diplomacy, grounds this study and provides background to the analysis of Pasona Group's New Tohoku program.

### Softening the boundaries of public diplomacy

The twentieth century conceptualization of public diplomacy as a state-based function puts the emphasis on who is in charge of the message or activity (government officials), rather than emphasizing outcomes that help achieve the goals of public diplomacy and increase a country's soft power. In the twenty-first century, increasing interdependence between

business and governments, as well as shifts in relationships among non-state actors and governments have made the boundaries of public diplomacy more porous (Gregory 2015; Melissen 2011; Saner and Yiu 2003). Scholars at the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California assert that public diplomacy includes not only government-sponsored cultural, educational and informational programs, but also citizen exchanges, private media broadcasts, and corporate communications used to promote the national interest of a country by informing and influencing foreign audiences ([www.uscpublicdiplomacy.com](http://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.com)). This definition puts the emphasis on promoting national interests and bringing about an understanding of values and culture—which are the outcome goals of public diplomacy—and softens the analytical lines between state-sanctioned activities and non-state involvement in public diplomacy.

Nye (2017) notes that civil society produces much of a country's soft power. Even in government-sponsored cultural exchanges, civil society often provides the agents for cultural diplomacy, and non-state actors often are the impetus for exchanges. Educators interact with educators, artists and performance groups with other artists and groups, business people with other business people, sports teams with other sports teams, etc. In addition to government-sponsored exchanges, non-state actors often act independently from the state, yet with similar goals of generating understanding for institutions and culture. In many countries, non-state actors may be perceived as more trustworthy and credible than governments and may be more influential in affecting country image (Szondi 2008). Schneider (2005) argues that cultural exchanges are more credible voices than government communication, and non-state actors may have a soft power advantage.

### Cultural diplomacy as the soft power engine of public diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is the exchange of cultural elements with the aim of fostering understanding among nations (Hurn and Tomalin, 2013). Cultural diplomacy has been characterized as a subset of public diplomacy (Schneider 2005; Signitzer 2008) with recognition for its role in shaping the environment for policy acceptance in other countries (Topić and Sciortino 2012; Zamorano 2016). It is often associated with the arts (Hurn 2016), but also involves cultural agreements and cooperation (Signitzer 2008).

Mark (2009) contends that cultural diplomacy can give substance to public diplomacy, and that scholars and practitioners have not fully realized its value. Cultural diplomacy is more dialogic and longer-term than political diplomacy and transcends and outlasts any particular political administration. State-centric, policy-focused public diplomacy is more transient than cultural diplomacy since it is usually



connected to the agenda of a political leader or administration, while the cultural aspects of diplomacy are permanent and can operate outside the constraints of foreign policies (Topić and Sciortino 2012; Zamorano 2016). In the age of polarized political discourse, cultural diplomacy can provide a neutral voice.

Cultural diplomacy operates differently in different national contexts, ranging from well-developed, government-sponsored institutes of culture that work closely with governments (and may even be under state control) to institutes that are independent of government influence (Mark 2009; Paschalidis 2009). Countries, including Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have formalized processes through which non-state actors work with governments in public diplomacy (Lee 2004), while other countries such as the United States do not. On a supra-national level, Isar (2015) found that practices of institutes of culture within the European Union differed among nation-states, and that, furthermore, some cultural diplomacy functions have been appropriated by non-state actors. Mark (2009) believes that to be most effective, cultural diplomacy should be free to operate from government control in independent models that allow cultural diplomacy to “show a country in its brilliance, vitality, and madness” (p. 36).

### Corporate diplomacy as a component of cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy activities often include corporate-sponsored cultural activities and non-governmental exchanges, which emanates from private sector corporations. Popular culture including movies, music, and games is produced and exported by the private sector, the effects of which often mitigate negative perceptions. International, multinational, global, and transnational corporations engage in business practices that promote understanding of national values through cultural exchanges and sponsorships as well as an array of other activities which contribute to a nation’s public diplomacy (White 2015). In particular, activities associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR) have positive diplomatic effects for the corporation’s home country (Ingenhoff and Marschlich 2019). Nation branding and its components (place and destination branding) are often activities of non-state actors such as resort developers and chambers of commerce. Such corporate practices and activities may or may not include intentional coordination of effort with governments, but nonetheless produce positive diplomatic outcomes.

The concept of corporate diplomacy recognizes that private corporations can act in their own behalf for their business and profit-oriented interests and, at the same time, use their resources and increasing power to address broader social and political concerns (Lee and Ayhan 2015; White

2015). Global corporations wield soft power and have resources to influence public opinion, political decisions, and policy and media agendas in foreign countries. Businesses have vast communication networks and extensive expertise that are advantageous to public diplomacy (Reinhard 2009). Bolewski (2019) asserts that when governments are unstable or unpopular (e.g., Trump’s climate change policy), corporate diplomacy can play a balancing role that is as important as political diplomacy. Furthermore, credibility and resources often limit governments; private corporations can contribute both.

Corporate diplomacy views the corporation as a diplomatic actor but expands the purpose of the outcome of diplomatic activities to benefit not only the corporation, but also to address broader social issues and to enhance the overall image and soft power of the nation with which the corporation is associated (White 2015). Bolewski (2019) describes this conceptualization of corporate diplomacy as a mindset that requires a new, symbiotic way of thinking and puts the focus on diplomatic outcomes rather than on analytical lines between governments and non-state actors. Wang (2006b) refers to this as “enlightened self-interest” (p. 45). When corporations engage in diplomatic activities beyond their economic self-interests, either through parallel efforts or PPP, issues such as public health, education, protection of human rights, and working for global standards and regulations often are addressed (e.g., Fort and Rehbein 2015; Frynas and Stephens 2015; Scherer and Palazzo 2011). According to Westermann-Behaylo et al. (2015), the concept of corporate diplomacy recognizes the increasing role and responsibilities of corporations in global governance.

Corporate diplomacy can be implemented independent of governments, or through PPPs, which may operate differently in different national contexts. Bovaird (2004) defines PPPs as “working arrangements based on a mutual commitment between a public sector organization with any other organization outside the public sector,” which includes private sector corporations (p. 200). Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011) note, while PPPs have many advocates and provide an array of advantages to governments, PPP is a nebulous concept used in a variety of contexts, many of which are partnerships with non-profit, non-governmental organizations for the purpose of global governance. Wettenhall (2003) acknowledges that not all public–private associations are true partnerships. However, the important component of a PPP is that it involves shared and mutual goals to achieve a joint outcome that serves the interests of both parties, and relies on synergy and shared accountability for outcomes (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011).

The prominence of corporate involvement in social, political, and cultural issues is increasing in the era of accelerated global change. Scholars and practitioners have acknowledged the growing role of corporations as social actors and



as non-state actors in promoting cultural understanding. Government entities, non-profit organizations, political think tanks, and academics have endorsed corporations' participation in public diplomacy (e.g., Bolewski 2019; Lee 2004; Lee and Ayhan 2015; Wang 2006a; White 2015); however, the nature, purpose, and motivations of corporations to be involved in corporate diplomacy are understudied and vary among countries.

### Global differences in the practice of corporate diplomacy

The context of corporate involvement in diplomatic activities varies among countries. Businesses may not want to associate closely with their home country for different reasons. For example, US corporations may want to distance themselves from anti-American sentiments in certain parts of the world (Reinhard 2009), and corporations in countries transitioning from communism to democracy may want to disassociate from previously-authoritarian governments (Szondi 2008). Fitzpatrick et al. (2019) found that US executives believed their companies have no responsibility to promote the image of the United States; however, in the same study, executives of Chinese and Swiss companies in the sample said their companies promote the values and national image of China and Switzerland, respectively. Cases from Canada, Kuwait, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom show companies in these countries balance their own financial interests with national interests and work to promote country image and values (Lee 2004; Saner and Yiu 2003; White and Alkandari 2019). Research to explore national differences is a first step in building theory about the role of non-state actors in promoting the cultures of their home countries. The purpose and motivations for corporate involvement in cultural and public diplomacy need to be better understood.

### Need for research

While the increasing role of corporate involvement in cultural and diplomatic issues has been acknowledged in recent years, Brown et al. (2010) emphasize the need to explore and evaluate the complex motivations for such involvement, and contend that corporate motivations can be understood only by evaluating the environments in which firms operate. Implying that management decisions regarding PPP involvement are purpose-driven, they argue that corporate social engagement usually aligns with and enhances business goals.

Thus, the current study investigates a PPP in which a corporation sponsors a cultural diplomacy project. This study addresses how Japanese executives and managers perceive and integrate promoting national interests and country image into corporate strategy as well as their motivations for doing

so. This study provides public diplomacy insights by analyzing Pasona Group's New Tohoku program that brings foreign high school and university students, business leaders, and social media influencers to the rural Tohoku region in Miyagi Prefecture and Iwate Prefecture, an area undergoing reconstruction since the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, to learn about Japan's economy, history, climate, and culture.

### Research questions

**RQ1** How does Pasona Group's leadership view the role of business in promoting Japan's culture?

**RQ2** How has Pasona Group's leadership integrated initiatives to promote Japan's culture into its corporate strategy?

**RQ3** Why does Pasona Group's leadership prioritize initiatives to promote Japan's culture?

### Method

This study explored the role of corporations in diplomacy through qualitative methods to elucidate rich, descriptive insights in a real-world context and in response to "how" and "why" questions. The analysis included executive- and manager-level perspectives of corporate involvement in the New Tohoku project. It triangulated qualitative interview data and documentary information according to the protocols established by Yin (2014) and Merriam (2009).

First, in-depth interviews with Pasona executives and managers were conducted to explore their perspectives of initiatives to promote Japan's culture and to understand how and why they integrate such initiatives into corporate strategy. Interviews are suitable for providing comprehensive insights into personal views and identifying patterns and themes (McCracken 1988; Yin 2014). Thus, an interview guide comprised of open-ended questions to generate participant-directed discussions about key concepts was constructed. Open-ended questions allowed information to emerge organically during interviews with opportunities to probe for deeper understanding of cultural diplomacy as a component of corporate strategy (Kallio et al. 2016; Kvale 1996).

Second, English-language documentary information from Pasona webpages, news releases, brochures, and corporate profile documents was analyzed to understand more about how and why Pasona leadership integrates promoting Japan's culture into corporate strategy. Such documentation is suitable for providing specific details and for corroborating and augmenting interview evidence (Yin 2014). English-language documents were sufficient since they present



cultural diplomacy initiatives that Pasona desires to reach an international audience. Thus, data from interviews and documentary information afford understanding into the corporate diplomacy phenomenon with depth as a marker of quality (O'Reilly and Parker 2012).

### Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from January 2019 to February 2020. Pasona Group executives and managers based in Los Angeles, California, United States, and in Tokyo and Sendai, Japan, were invited by email to participate in the study. This resulted in nine interviews conducted by one of the authors via telephone, Zoom video conference, and face-to-face meeting in Tokyo, Sendai, and Los Angeles according to logistical availability and participant preference. Eight interviews were conducted in English while one was facilitated by an interpreter. Two participants worked in strategic planning, one in operations, four in public relations, and two as project managers. The author took extensive notes during interviews and followed up with participants by email to clarify points of confusion; once typed into a Word document, this resulted in 24 pages of data. Interviews were concluded when the RQs could be answered with confidence (Patton 2002).

Documentary information was collected from Pasona webpages. Interview participants also shared documents related to the New Tohoku program. Hard copies of documents outlining Pasona Group's corporate philosophy and providing business activities guidelines were given to one of the authors during face-to-face meetings in Los Angeles and Tokyo, while brochures pertinent to the New Tohoku program were given to the author during meetings in Sendai and sent by email. This provided 99 pages of data when incorporated into a Word document.

Interview data and documentary data were analyzed following the protocol suggested by Yin (2014) for a descriptive qualitative study framework. Data were organized according to the three research questions: perceptions of the role of business in promoting culture, the integration of promoting culture into corporate strategy, and the rationale for prioritizing initiatives to promote Japan's culture. Multiple close readings of the data evolved into identifying themes and building an explanation for cultural diplomacy as corporate strategy in the Pasona Group context.

## Results

### Description of Pasona Group and the New Tohoku program

According to the corporate website, the Pasona Group mission is based on "serving society, serving our clients, serving job seekers, serving our employees, and serving our stockholders." Pasona's business activities encompass temporary staffing, contracting, human resource consulting and training, global sourcing, placement/recruiting and outplacement, outsourcing, and employee life solutions. Interview participants highlighted the multinational corporation's financial and business successes such as group sales exceeding \$5 billion, its listing on the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange, and its certification in the White 500, a selection of large companies by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry for excellence in health and productivity management.

New Tohoku, which launched in 2016, merges Pasona's interests in job creation, business training, and tourism with country image promotion. Data indicated the program began as a PPP with the Japan Reconstruction Agency for the purpose of facilitating foreign high school and university students' and social media influencers' travel to rural Tohoku in the northern part of Japan. Pasona then established Visit Tohoku, a subsidiary to manage operations and promotion for the New Tohoku initiative. The subsidiary maintains partnerships with local government agencies in Tohoku as well as with private companies (e.g., transportation companies, boarding houses, tour guides, etc.) to ensure a quality program. Since its inception, Visit Tohoku has shifted from hosting social media influencers to focusing on educating high school and university students.

Government leaders selected Tohoku as a site for regional revitalization after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami devastated the area. One Pasona news release indicates Tohoku "boasts a bountiful natural environment and history, traditional Japanese architecture, a tranquil rural landscape, and other tourist attractions, but suffers from a lack of widespread recognition that has posed a challenge for these local areas in promoting inbound tourism." Prior to establishing Visit Tohoku, Pasona had already entered into a PPP to form the subsidiary Tohoku Sousei. While Tohoku Sousei focuses on industrial reconstruction through business development and human resource support for locals, Visit Tohoku focuses now on building relationships with locals through the provision of educational tours for foreigners/tourists.

Since 2016, Visit Tohoku has focused on offering programs to foreign students to learn about Japan's culture through a series of workshops. Promotional brochures with



colorful photographs of beautiful scenery and cultural artifacts elaborate on opportunities to gain hands-on experience while studying "regional economy," "craftsman," "history," "agriculture," and "reconstruction." The New Tohoku program webpage further details available cultural workshops, including topics such as ceramics, glass blowing, indigo dye, and other "Japanese traditional crafts and dance." The program also contains marine biology, fishing, forestry, agriculture, and business components. Students can learn to milk a cow, reap rice with local farmers, and prevent crop flooding. Additionally, they have opportunities to visit Japanese companies to learn about various quality management issues, manufacturing methods, sustainability, and local sourcing. According to the New Tohoku webpage, students experience the daily lives of Japanese through a homestay, eat a variety of regional and traditional Japanese foods, and learn the proper techniques for wearing a kimono. Interview participants indicated that the "gold and rice cake culture" and the "mochi culture" workshops have been the most popular among foreign students.

Interview participants were uncertain exactly how many foreigners have participated in New Tohoku workshops to date. One explained that data for allocated resources and participant numbers are not publically available and that Pasona Group and the Japanese government track participants according to different criteria: While Pasona counts any visitor to the Tohoku region, including Japanese students and foreigners already residing elsewhere in Japan, the government counts only foreigners who are new visitors to Japan. Interviewees concurred that many students from China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States have engaged with various elements of the New Tohoku program in the last four years and that the number of participants was high enough to consider the PPP a success. Building upon the success of New Tohoku, Pasona created Ihatov Tohoku in 2017; this subsidiary extends the New Tohoku program to foreign businesspersons who visit Tohoku to experience Japan's culture, learn about agriculture in Japan, and take part in service projects such as marine debris removal.

### **Perceptions of the role of business in promoting Japan's culture**

RQ<sub>1</sub> explored how Pasona Group's leadership views the role of business in promoting Japan's culture. Interview data suggested executives and managers identify promoting Japan's image as a principal consideration. While Pasona functions as a for-profit organization that aims to earn profit through its operations and considers its own interests when making business decisions, leaders, especially those working at Pasona's Tokyo headquarters, expressed a desire to nurture

a favorable image of Japan and promote Japan's culture through business activities.

Two interview participants emphasized that their perspectives reflect their experiences with Pasona and may not be the perspectives of other executives and managers working in Japanese companies. However, every participant acknowledged collectivistic thinking toward aligning business goals with national goals. For example, one participant said, "Japan is one of the countries that is aging and we are an island, so we have to take care of ourselves by having initiatives with government and private business." Another explained the Japanese perception that cultural and technological trends originate in the United States, so Japanese feel they must fight for cultural power and business power; this participant stated that "business integrated with government and culture" is commonplace in the Japan context.

Furthermore, interview participants with educational and/or business experiences in the United Kingdom and the United States distinguished the Japanese business perspective from the dominant approach in Europe and North America. Such distinctions focused on the relationship between the corporation and the country: Most companies around the world prioritize profits, but many Japanese companies do business with the primary goal of generating profit and the secondary goal of building Japan's reputation. One participant said that in Japan, "with the exception of a few companies, the decision-making process is directly related to the country image."

The global corporate culture emphasizes assessing financial elements such as revenue, expenses, and profitability when making business decisions. According to Pasona executives and managers, however, Japanese business leaders make decisions differently: Corporate culture in Japan situates image and reputation at the forefront of the decision-making process. Interview participants indicated that financial and legal factors drive business decisions in the United States whereas reputational factors highly influence decisions in Japan. One participant said that in Japan, when making decisions, "the factor that is most important is what your company will look like in the business newspapers the next morning."

This concern for the corporate image extends to country image. Data suggested Japanese business leaders feel a sense of responsibility to make decisions in corroboration with government policy. For example, one participant referred to the "Japanese mindset" when elucidating that within the Japanese business context "the presumption is to look out for the country." Interview participants recognized loyalty to both the corporation and the country as a Japanese cultural value, which can be problematic for foreigners who want to enter the Japanese market with an aggressive business agenda for challenging the status quo. One participant referred to a famous Japanese saying—"the nail that sticks



out gets hammered”—to explain that Japanese business leaders tend to work collectively to follow “the same types of rules,” including promoting the country image.

During interviews, participants acknowledged the role of PPPs in promoting Japan’s culture. One participant said, “In the United States, the government and the corporation—there’s a line with concrete separation. But in Japan companies work closely with the government.” Interview participants identified three main areas in which business has recently supported and advanced the Japanese government’s agenda. First, the private sector has been central to strategies to transform the Japanese tourism economy through inbound travel promotion. Second, many private sector fields have aligned with government agencies through the “Cool Japan” campaign to export elements of Japan’s traditional and contemporary culture such as food, anime (animation), manga (cartoons), fashion, and technology in an effort to strengthen the country’s diplomatic, economic, and cultural standing throughout the world. Finally, PPPs are preparing to reintroduce Japan as a global leader in infrastructure, robotics, and sustainability through the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

### **Integrating initiatives to promote Japan’s culture into corporate strategy**

RQ<sub>2</sub> investigated how Pasona Group’s leadership integrates initiatives to promote Japan’s culture into its corporate strategy. Four interview participants explained Pasona’s history to elicit understanding of the corporate commitment to promote Japan’s culture. Yasuyuki Nambu, who founded Pasona in 1976 and remains CEO, purposed to start a non-profit organization until parental influence moved him toward a for-profit company that utilizes its resources for social good. Pasona initially operated with the mission to assist women in reentering the workforce. Then and now the corporate philosophy centers on providing solutions to society’s problems, including problems that can be addressed by promoting Japan’s culture to foreigners.

In addition to Nambu’s continued influence on Pasona’s commitment to promoting Japan’s culture, interview data indicated that shareholders champion cultural initiatives. For example, one participant described the discussion at the general meeting of shareholders after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami; the participant recalled a shareholder saying, “Pasona is about contributing and giving back to society,” and a consensus of shareholders encouraging the use of corporate resources toward regional revitalization—Japanese helping Japanese. While cautioning that shareholders’ perspectives may not be monolithic, interview participants said many shareholders have vocalized support for cultural initiatives such as New Tohoku.

Thus, with direction from the CEO and support from shareholders, Pasona executives and managers ensure that

promoting Japan’s culture through the New Tohoku program remains a strategic objective even though it does not directly generate profits to the corporation. Interview data revealed that employee engagement strategies make certain that, as one participant stated, “the founder’s character is strong throughout the company.” Interview participants contended that employees understand Pasona’s mission and commit to living the corporate values. One interview participant asserted, “We hire employees who are passionate about the company and country and are not self-centered—they know what they’re doing means something.”

Interview data showed Pasona executives and managers perceive establishing business social networks as the foundation of their corporate strategy. One participant said, “Pasona is a staffing company, but also we connect people—that’s one of our focuses and goals—connecting women, men, Japanese, non-Japanese, people without disabilities, and people with disabilities.” Every participant noted that Pasona has launched numerous projects to achieve this endeavor through cross-national exchanges, tourism, and regional revitalization. For example, in 2017, Pasona initiated the Awaji Youth Federation to encourage innovative problem solving from a global mindset among future business leaders; the program brings foreigners to Japan to learn about entrepreneurship, international relations, and Japan’s culture. In 2017, Pasona opened Travel Hub Mix on the first floor of its Tokyo headquarters; according to interview participants, Pasona wants to function as an information center for foreigners, and thus provides tourism literature about Japan and offers travel-related services. Moreover, Pasona headquarters in Tokyo houses a farm on the 13th floor with cows, pigs, goats, flamingos, owls, and alpaca; the farm is open to the public with the goal of connecting visitors to agricultural life in Japan. Pasona also regularly hosts workshops focused on dairy farming and provides a dedicated space called the “Regional Revitalization Lounge” for discussion, programming, and public–private collaboration toward improving regional economies in Japan. Interview participants listed several other projects that establish networks for the benefit of Japanese society such as training women in entrepreneurship and creating jobs for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

### **Motivations for engaging in initiatives to promote Japan’s culture**

RQ<sub>3</sub> explored why Pasona Group’s leadership prioritizes initiatives, including PPPs, to promote Japan’s culture. Three themes emerged in the data regarding Pasona leadership’s motivations to engage in cultural initiatives such as New Tohoku. As one participant said, “Even if it’s for fun, it’s still for a reason”—and the reasons for the New Tohoku program can be summarized as building Pasona’s corporate



reputation through publicity, promoting Japan's culture, and supporting economic development to address problems such as urban overpopulation and natural disaster catastrophes.

Two interview participants referred to New Tohoku as a CSR program. A company profile document, while not identifying New Tohoku specifically, describes international exchanges as CSR "to promote mutual understanding between Japan and the United States on a private sector level and to cultivate people with a truly international perspective." However, the document addresses Tohoku in a section titled "Regional Solution," not in the section titled "Pasona CSR." Six interview participants contend New Tohoku is not focused on accountability, a characteristic of many CSR practices, but rather centers on programming with mutual benefits for the company, country, and local economy.

The first theme regarding Pasona leadership's motivations to engage in cultural initiatives focuses on the public visibility of the corporation. Every interview participant identified publicity as Pasona's return on investment for supporting cultural initiatives such as New Tohoku. Interview participants view social media reach and traditional media coverage about cultural initiatives as central to building their corporate reputation, achieving their business objectives, and strengthening meaningful business relationships. Corporate news releases give further insight into the initial social media strategy of the New Tohoku program: Pasona desired to partner with influencers who would travel in the Tohoku region and then publish original content on various social media platforms. One news release states that Pasona is seeking applications from "talented participants to raise awareness of the 'Tohoku brand' and broadcast the region's appeal to the rest of the world."

In addition to social media, Pasona counts on traditional media placement through the New Tohoku program. One interview participant said, "We put almost zero money into our public relations." Another participant commented, "We don't spend so much on advertising. Instead we do interesting things. Media come and report on the interesting things we do." Another explained, "If we have reserves, [rather than pay for advertising] we'll do projects in Awaji or Tohoku, which will get fans among media." Thus, according to Pasona executives and managers, investing time and resources into programs to promote Japan's culture contributes to Pasona's business growth by increasing external brand awareness through traditional media exposure and through social media reach, impressions, and engagement. This external brand awareness, according to interview participants, attracts new clients and partnerships.

Second, every interview participant suggested that Pasona's leadership provides opportunities for cross-national experiential learning programs focused on traditional Japanese cultural practices because promoting Japan's culture benefits Japan, especially rural Japanese. One participant

said the Japanese government often requests proposals from companies for involvement in programs that promote Japan's culture, and Pasona's leaders are eager to respond to these requests and to form PPPs. According to interview participants, both Pasona and the government want to inspire people to learn about Japan, so a focused partnership in this area is natural. While New Tohoku does not directly relate to Pasona's human resources business model, the project connects to one of their core ideals, which is helping people in Japan who need help.

Interview participants based in Tokyo and Los Angeles maintained that promoting tourism is not the primary motivation for activities of the New Tohoku project. According to a webpage designed for a target audience of foreign university students who could potentially join the New Tohoku program, "this educational tour is done with the purpose of learning, not sightseeing;" the webpage also states, "The authentic Japanese culture and business experience that cannot be learned in school is guaranteed." However, interview participants in Sendai, which is home to the Visit Tohoku office and is the largest city in the Tohoku region, highlighted tourism, including their hope that foreigners in the New Tohoku program will return as tourists and encourage their friends to visit Tohoku as tourists.

Every interview participant deemed New Tohoku a success in educating foreigners about Japan's culture. The program webpage further declares, "We would like to bring the name 'Tohoku' up to the level of places like Paris, New York, London, Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong." Interview participants indicated that Pasona's leadership wants to promote Japan's culture to foreign audiences but also to Japanese who may not be familiar with traditional customs or rural practices; this provides rationale for establishing the farming program in the Tokyo headquarters, which, according to one participant, is visited more often by Japanese. Data demonstrated that motivations for promoting Japan's culture are rooted in helping to raise awareness about issues affecting Japanese populations in rural areas. One participant said, "It is in our corporate culture that we help those in need in Japan." Thus, the New Tohoku program focuses on Japanese as primary beneficiaries and foreign participants as secondary beneficiaries.

Third, every interview participant explained that Pasona's leadership continues programs such as New Tohoku because they recognize the need to contribute to economic development in struggling regions. One corporate news release states, "Visit Tohoku strives not only to help increase the number of visitors to the Tohoku region, but also contribute to the sustainable economic development and industrial revitalization of the area." While interview participants based in Tokyo and Los Angeles cited the economic objective of the New Tohoku initiative, they placed greater emphasis on the benefit to Japan's country image. Conversely, interview





participants in Sendai accentuated economic recovery for the Tohoku region more so than benefit to Japan as a whole, and they highlighted local human capital and natural resources.

One way Pasona leaders, particularly those working directly with Visit Tohoku in Sendai, seek to revive the Tohoku economy is through job creation. Visit Tohoku partners with locals to provide transportation, accommodations, food, educational programming, and entertainment for foreigners. One interview participant described Pasona's support for entrepreneurs in Tohoku and said, "We create work in Tohoku and make interesting and fun facilities and bring tourism back into these areas so in that we promote Japan's culture." This sentiment echoes the mission statement on the Visit Tohoku website: "Our mission is to keep stepping forward to revitalize Tohoku region with profound respect to Japanese culture and continuous polish of global awareness." Another interview participant referred to Pasona's focus on regional revitalization as the "Pasona differentiator" and highlighted the success of PPPs to transform "rural villages that were like ghost towns." Ultimately, as another interview participant said, the goal is to encourage Japanese urban to rural migration as areas such as Tohoku become a "self-sustainable society without reliance on Tokyo."

## Discussion

Integrating research about corporate diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, this case provides evidence of how and why a corporation becomes involved in a PPP to implement cultural diplomacy initiatives. It contributes to the theoretical foundation laid by Lee and Ayhan (2015) and White (2015) by providing evidence of the purpose and motivations for corporate involvement in promoting a country's culture. In the case of Pasona Group's New Tohoku program, executives and managers act in their own behalf for their own self-interests to enhance the corporate image through support of cultural diplomacy. The return on investment is a favorable corporate reputation and enhanced business relationships, but, at the same time, promoting the culture and image of Japan and helping to solve social problems are important to the company.

Along with garnering public awareness through traditional and social media, Pasona spends time and money to address broader social and governmental concerns, including revitalizing struggling regions and increasing the appeal of Japan to foreign audiences. Pasona's support reflects the mindset that Japanese should help Japanese, especially those who are challenged by disadvantage, discrimination, or disability. Thus, while recognizing the benefit of publicity to enhance the corporate reputation, executives and managers are equally as focused on contributing to society and doing good by connecting people

through cultural initiatives. Those involved in the strategy and promotion of cultural exchanges emphasized contributions to Japan, whereas those living in the local area and working daily toward program execution viewed the main social good as helping the local people and local economy.

The results of the study lend credibility to the potential for corporate-directed cultural diplomacy initiatives to provide a foundation for establishing a positive corporate identity and an effective employee engagement strategy. The New Tohoku program provides evidence of a PPP to sponsor a cultural diplomacy program that has resulted in purpose-driven management. Pasona's corporate values, which accentuate promoting Japan's culture to help Japan and Japanese, originated with the founder and CEO, but the data indicate that shareholders, executives, and managers now ensure that these values are realized through corporate actions.

## Public diplomacy in Japan

Brown et al. (2010) avow that understanding the environment in which the corporation operates leads toward understanding corporate motivations for engaging in diplomatic activities. Thus, explaining the corporate diplomacy phenomenon within Pasona Group requires an explanation of Japan's public diplomacy agenda and its extensive history of government-directed economic development and cultural promotion. In comparison to public diplomacy strategy in the Western world, East Asian country's public diplomacy practices and dynamics constitute "an entire different playing field" (Melissen 2015, p. 239). For example, in the post-9/11 era, US public diplomacy to Japan has prioritized policy advocacy over cultural promotion, while the Japanese government has facilitated private sector creations, worked to stimulate inbound tourism, and nurtured soft power through cultural promotion into its foreign policy (Crowell 2008; Naoyuki 2008; Seiichi 2008; Tamaki 2019; Winkler 2019).

Japan's public diplomacy initiatives have long focused on intellectual and cultural exchanges, e.g., higher education exchanges through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, arts and cultural exchanges through the Japan Foundation, the Japan Exchange and Teaching program administered by the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, etc. Such emphasis on intellect and culture goes back to the decades following World War II when the Japanese government purposed to overcome images based on militarism and to address anti-Japanese sentiment in other parts of Asia (Soeya 2015; Tamaki 2019). Japan later became an economic miracle with the Japanese government contributing heavily to private sector direction and growth (Otmazgin 2018; Tamaki 2019). In the



twenty-first century, the Japanese government launched the Cool Japan policy with the following aim:

For Japan to achieve a dynamic economic growth, Japanese businesses must actively expand and capture overseas markets. The government of Japan is focusing on increasing inbound and outbound demand by developing Japanese businesses that draw on the unique added value embedded in Japanese culture and lifestyle. ([www.cj-fund.co.jp](http://www.cj-fund.co.jp))

Thus, in Japan's public diplomacy model, non-state actors have long been agents to promote people-to-people exchanges and to enhance Japan's cultural appeal. This historical background provides another layer to explain why PPPs feel natural to Pasona executives and managers and to delineate the link between Japan's soft power policy and corporate practices. Japanese governmental policy purposes to nurture a favorable country image, advance the brands of Japanese corporations, and facilitate cultural exchanges (Otmazgin 2018), and Pasona similarly resolves to promote the corporate image and country image through cultural exchanges.

The results of the New Tohoku case allude to private corporations in Japan and elsewhere as powerful sources of soft power, which enhances a country's ability to engage globally and provides reputational security. Watanabe and McConnell (2008) identify Japan as a "soft power superpower." The Japanese government employed capital toward soft power through cultural sources as early as the 1873 Vienna World's Fair (McConnell 2008) and continues to cultivate soft power through branding the country's traditional and popular culture (Wilkins 2015). The New Tohoku case provides an example of how a multinational corporation can incorporate cultural diplomacy through international exchanges into corporate strategy. Otmazgin (2018) prescribes "people-to-people relations are the best way to connect people to Japan and their impact remains for a longer period of time" (p. 60). Reinhard (2009) calls for corporate diplomacy in which US corporations generate soft power by leading cross-national exchanges. Pragmatically, the results in this current study offer an in-depth view of Pasona Group leadership's strategic use of corporate resources to promote Japan's culture.

The New Tohoku program demonstrates the potential benefits of PPPs to achieve governmental cultural diplomacy goals as well as corporate goals focused on business and social connections and identity and image management. This study further shows that engaging in cultural diplomacy activities can potentially create corporate value through employee engagement and media publicity. Thus, this New Tohoku case provides corporate executives and managers with practical insight into the strategic decision-making behind purpose-driven cultural initiatives and provides

governments and diplomats with insight into the factors that motivate corporate decision-makers.

### Building theory through global cases

A primary contribution of this study lies in its investigation of a corporate diplomacy case outside the United States. The results point to the importance of not projecting the US experience into public diplomacy theory. Individual cases provide puzzle pieces that when put together with other cases, help to present a bigger picture of a phenomenon. For example, the results of the current study are congruent with White and Alkandari's (2019) evidence of a sense of obligation of Kuwaiti businesses to promote the image of Kuwait, suggesting the United States could be the outlier instead of the norm in terms of corporate willingness to promote a country image. Pasona executives and managers, particularly those with business experience in various countries, distinguished between US and Japanese decision-making. They perceived US decision-makers as focusing on the bottom line without regard for the country image, which aligns with the results put forth by Fitzpatrick et al. (2019). However, this current study posits that Japanese decision-makers consider both corporate reputation and country reputation along with profit.

The results align with previous research about the influence of culture and nation-level values on organizations. Japanese culture tends toward low individualism and ranks extremely high in uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2001). The data herein reflect these cultural dimensions. First, Pasona executives and managers emphasized that Japanese business leaders carefully communicate their corporate image and manage their corporate reputation as well as follow the same mindset when supporting cultural initiatives, which indicates uncertainty avoidance and explains why status quo is maintained in the Japanese business context. Second, Pasona executives and managers stressed forming PPPs based on mutual government and corporate goals, establishing connections among individuals, and helping Japanese by both fostering a favorable country image and revitalizing economically challenged regions. This indicates collectivism, or a high degree of interdependence among Japanese to the extent that they make great effort to care for each other. While Bolewski (2019) calls for symbiotic relationships between governments and non-state actors with an emphasis on diplomatic outcomes, this way of thinking seemingly already exists in collectivistic contexts. White and Alkandari (2019) found strong cooperation between public and private sectors for promoting the country image in Kuwait, a country with low individualism, and this analysis of New Tohoku indicates government-corporate partnerships are perceived as natural in Japan.



## Limitations and future research

While analysis of Pasona Group's New Tohoku program offers insight into the corporate diplomacy phenomenon by examining how and why a multinational corporation engages in a PPP that promotes a country's culture, the study design and scope are not without limitations. New Tohoku is unique in that the PPP developed from a national crisis. However, non-state actors often integrate public diplomacy activities with crisis response and disaster relief since public diplomacy and crisis management techniques share similar goals such as creating a favorable image, resolving a conflict or catastrophe, and achieving stability (Auer 2016; Schwarz et al. 2016). Moreover, national crises have influenced Japan's public diplomacy strategy and incorporated non-state actors' involvement in public diplomacy throughout the twentieth century. For example, businesses engaged in rebranding Japan as a pacifist, democratic nation after its World War II defeat and in exporting cultural products after the economic collapse of the 1990s (Soeya 2015; Wilkins 2015). The New Tohoku program is connected to an extraordinary national crisis, which likely influenced business leaders' motivations and perceptions toward engagement. More research about the intersection of the private sector, public diplomacy, and crisis management in Japan and elsewhere is warranted, especially in the context of a natural disaster.

While the results from the New Tohoku case are not generalizable, they contribute to an in-depth investigation of corporate initiatives to promote a country's culture. Future research should examine similar research questions from the perspective of another Japanese company, perhaps in another industry, that supports cultural diplomacy initiatives to determine whether similar themes emerge and if/how Pasona's engagement in the New Tohoku program differs from other corporate-sponsored cultural activities. Additionally, future research should address other PPPs related to cultural diplomacy elsewhere in East Asia and in other world regions. Future studies should also assess if corporate motivations for engaging in initiatives to promote a country's culture deviate from the identified themes in the absence of a cooperative arrangement with a government agency.

This study focuses on corporate executive and managerial perspectives of cultural initiatives rather than on the effects of cultural initiatives involving corporate actors. Future studies should incorporate governmental perspectives as well as a reception component. For example, a survey could evaluate program impact by examining the perspectives of foreigners and project partners who interpret cultural diplomacy messages and who participate in corporate-sponsored cultural activities; such research

could assess whether foreigners' length of time in Tohoku influences cultural diplomacy outcomes. Future research could also incorporate historical documents from previous cultural diplomacy programs and news feeds in traditional and social media for additional insights into the complexity of public opinion and communication surrounding public diplomacy and soft power.

Despite limitations, this analysis of New Tohoku offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the public diplomacy field. The results build upon previous corporate diplomacy research and lead toward a more thorough understanding of public diplomacy activities that intersect corporate goals and government policy. Future studies should test the theoretical implication of the themes that reveal corporate motivations for participating in PPPs to promote a country's culture, specifically building a positive corporate reputation, contributing to the country image for its citizens' benefit, and resolving regional problems in the country.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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