

THE FAMILIARITY–ACTION GAP: TRUST, YOUTH CONTACT, AND THE LIMITS OF U.S. SOFT POWER IN TAJIKISTAN

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines how different mechanisms of U.S. soft power, particularly direct interpersonal contact and media exposure, shape Afghan and Tajik youths' perceptions, trust, and intended engagement with the United States and international organizations. Using the first pilot survey collected from Afghan and Tajik youth residing in Tajikistan, the study quantitatively maps the relationships among youths' perceptions, trust, and immediate and future actions. The findings indicate that trust is more strongly associated with intended future action than favorability alone, and that perception and trust are not significantly correlated. Direct interpersonal contact is more consistently linked to higher-commitment behavioral intentions than media exposure, which is more closely associated with familiarity and affective responses. These findings suggest the presence of a "Familiarity–Action Gap," in which positive perceptions do not necessarily translate into active engagement. The objectives of this study are: (1) to examine how direct contact and media exposure relate to youth perceptions and trust, and (2) to test associations between perceptions, trust, and intended future actions. The study highlights the importance of trust-building mechanisms in contested soft power environments and suggests that interpersonal contact may play a critical role in translating favorable perceptions into supportive, proactive future actions.*

KEYWORDS: *geopolitical influence, interpersonal contact theory, public diplomacy, public trust, soft power, Tajikistan, youth political attitudes.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia's role as a site of geopolitical importance and foreign influence is not new, but the form that influence takes has changed significantly in the past decade. For youths, foreign engagement is now more than a distant geopolitical issue: they encounter "soft power" influence in their everyday lives, from education programs to cultural exchanges to social media posts online. Today's youths are future decision-makers and voters and are undergoing a critical period of identity and belief formation (Zimmermann, 2024; Baizhumakzy et al., 2025; Savolainen et al., 2021; Cantor et al., 2018). Yet, despite Central Asia's strategic importance and youth's unique role as a receiver of soft power exchanges, there is limited quantitative research examining how youths are willing to engage with the initiatives carried out by actors like China, Russia, and the U.S. This study contributes to soft power theory by bridging traditional theory with unique analysis on youths in Tajikistan and distinguishing familiarity from trust as separate mechanisms that influence future actions.

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The primary objective of this article is to delineate the factors, including approaches of U.S. soft power strategies (media outlets and exchange programs) and social cognition theories (trust and perception), and the extent to which they deepen influence. We evaluate this increased soft power on both favorability and action. The article will address the following research questions: 1) how different forms of engagement with the U.S. shape youths' perceptions and future engagement, and 2) what are the correlations between their perceptions, trust in the U.S., and future actions in relation to the U.S. and international organizations?

Contrary to existing research that treats positive sentiment as an “ends” rather than “means” of soft power and influence, this article contributes to the literature on soft power by distinguishing between familiarity, trust in the U.S., and behavioral engagement as analytically separate mechanisms. By introducing the concept of a “Familiarity-Action Gap,” the article offers a framework for understanding why certain soft power efforts may generate positive impressions without correlating with sustained cooperation and potential efforts to change existing relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background of Soft Powers

Soft power, first defined by Nye, refers to a state's ability to exert power and shape global decision-making by influencing public opinion through cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions, rather than through hard power, which is based on threats and military action (Nye, 1990). Soft power has been influential in shaping public opinion, which ultimately affects foreign countries' and international platforms' policies. Haneş & Andrei (2015) explain that, in future international relations, a nation's power will increasingly rely on its cultural power, a subset of soft power. Cultural power uses cultural assets, including language, art, and education, to foster mutual understanding, build long-term relationships between people from different countries, and shape public opinion. Because leaders hope to appease supporters, public opinion can largely drive a state's foreign policy outlook.

Today, the mechanisms through which soft power operates have become an increasingly important subject of study. Entering the 21st century, the general framework for soft power operates through a multi-stage process that links exposure to foreign initiatives with longer-term political outcomes. States deploy soft power resources, including cultural diplomacy and media outreach, to increase familiarity and positive perceptions among the public. These exposures, through the diffusion of norms and discourse, can gradually shape trust and legitimacy, which in turn may influence individuals' willingness to support cooperation with the foreign state. In this sense, soft power influence develops gradually through intermediate cognitive and social mechanisms that connect attraction with behavioral engagement (Popova et al., 2022; Murshed et al., 2025). Each mechanism not only changes the perceptions of leaders and elites, but also of ordinary people. Leaders inevitably change, and importantly, they adapt to their citizens' desires (Haneş & Andrei, 2015). Thus, examining the impact of soft power on individuals and lived experiences is crucial to understanding the future trajectory of a country's foreign policy influence.

Despite its prominence, however, scholars caution that soft power does not automatically translate into policy alignment or behavioral compliance. Attraction may generate favorable impressions without producing cooperation, and audiences may resist or compartmentalize foreign influence. Much of the current soft power literature vaguely defines the concepts of soft power and attraction to begin with, further complicating evaluations of its true impacts and highlighting the importance of examining how individuals actually respond to influence rather than assuming that attraction produces alignment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Knight, 2022). This theoretical ambiguity has practical consequences: if the field does not distinguish between generating familiarity, building trust, and producing behavioral change, it cannot assess the authentic effectiveness of soft power strategy. Thus, this study aims to distinguish and draw relationships between these mechanisms and effectiveness of soft power strategies.

While soft power theory identifies trust as a critical intermediate mechanism between familiarity and behavioral engagement, it does not specify how trust is generated, leaving a significant gap between theoretical prescription and practical strategy. Existing frameworks largely assume that exposure to foreign culture and media gradually produces trust, without specifying the conditions under which this occurs (Rothman, 2011). This study addresses that gap by drawing on intergroup contact theory to examine which specific mechanisms, comparing direct interpersonal contact, parasocial media use, or news exposure, are more consistently associated with trust formation and behavioral engagement among youth in Tajikistan.

Soft Power Competition in Central Asia

Central Asia is an emerging front of soft power competition between the U.S., China, and Russia due to its geographical importance between powers like China, Russia, and Iran, bridging trade, diplomacy, and culture between the East and the West. Tajikistan is uniquely important to soft power discussions due to its geographical significance, sharing a border with China, specifically Xinjiang, and its proximity to Russia (Bawa & Ashish, 2023). Similarly, Tajikistan's historical significance as a former Soviet Republic has deepened its linguistic and cultural ties with Russia; for example, Tajikistan is one of the few Central Asian countries that officially uses Cyrillic, the same writing system as Russia's. For these reasons, China and Russia both have immense capability and interest in dominating soft power influence in Tajikistan. Moreover, Tajikistan has the fastest growing population in the Europe and Central Asia region, with 29 births per 1,000 people in 2016 and a disproportionately young population where roughly one of every three people is under 15 years of age (World Bank, 2022). In Tajikistan, this demographic trend increases the likelihood that current youth perceptions will shape how U.S. foreign influence develops over time.

Russia leverages its historical and geographical ties with Tajikistan, a post-Soviet state, by expanding educational initiatives to enhance its soft power. Although noting the limitations of identifying the direct causality of soft power on a country's actions, Hudson shows that the salience of soft power has increased public approval, specifically among Kazakh higher education students, for state-level Kazakh-Russia cooperation, and individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that positively impact Russia (Hudson, 2022). Importantly, however, Hudson's study focuses on Kazakhstan and on

state-level outcomes rather than on the mechanisms linking individual-level exposure to behavioral intention, a gap this study addresses directly.

China similarly has largely increased its presence and influence in Central Asia. A study by Bawa & Ashish (2023) examines how China is rapidly leveraging a range of measures to boost its soft power in Tajikistan, including the Belt and Road Initiative, education investments, military assistance, and training programs. These initiatives have gradually improved China's favorability and recognition in Tajikistan and in Central Asia.

In addition to China and Russia's general rise in soft power, a study done by Rashidov et al. (2024) analyzes the higher-educational opportunities provided by China and Russia to increase their soft power in Tajikistan. Russia has implemented Russkiy Mir centers and the Russian Centers for Science and Culture, both of which are educational and cultural programs that hold various competitions and seminars for young people.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, alongside the recent scaling back of programs associated with agencies such as USAID, has contributed to a growing sense among local populations that American engagement in Central Asia is receding and will continue to decline (Ziegler, 2024; Repnikova, 2025). At the same time, the expanding visibility of Chinese and Russian initiatives in the region presents an increasingly competitive environment for sustaining U.S. influence.

Individual-level Contact Theory

Coined by Allport, intergroup contact theory argues that positive and meaningful interpersonal interactions between people of different groups can reduce prejudice. Intergroup contact theory has two defined categories: Direct Personal Contact (face-to-face) and Parasocial (virtual) Contact (Allport, 1954). Since direct personal contact is more intimate, people tend to form more concrete attitudes toward one another. Findings based on national surveys by Yun et al and others show that ethnic relations from direct contact have a sizable significant influence on favorability, supporting the intergroup contact theory (Yun & Kim, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Armstrong & Neuendorf, 1992; Schemer & Meltzer, 2020). Applied to soft power, contact theory suggests that direct person-to-person interactions, such as exchange programs, may build the individualized trust that media exposure alone cannot generate.

The parasocial contact hypothesis extends this framework to media, explaining that individuals can develop emotional bonds with people or figures on media platforms, creating an indirect form of intergroup contact. This provides an avenue for people to learn about groups they otherwise do not encounter in person (Abrams et al., 2018). While parasocial contact has been shown to influence attitudes, it operates through different psychological pathways than direct contact. This distinction between the depth of direct and parasocial contact is theoretically central to this study's investigation of the Familiarity-Action Gap.

Contact theory's positive impacts are greatest when the form of exchange focuses on achieving collaborative goals rather than explicit cultural comparison, reducing stigma and "us vs. them" narratives (O'Dowd, 2021). In some cases, a solely bicultural model of interaction produced negative evaluations of another group's culture following exchange

(Schäfer et al., 2025). These findings indicate that direct contact is not uniformly positive but rather depends on the method and consistency of interaction. Despite this variability, direct contact generally moves people away from simplistic cultural equations rooted in media, language, or government narratives (Risager, 2007), toward more local and nuanced perspectives (Menard–Warwick et al., 2013). Studies show that following exchange programs, participants tend to further engage with members of other cultures and act on issues common to both societies (Godwin-Jones, 2019), suggesting that the behavioral effects of direct contact can outlast the interaction itself.

Taken together, soft power theory and intergroup contact theory generate a specific and testable prediction: if trust is the mechanism that converts familiarity into action, and if direct interpersonal contact is the mechanism through which trust is built, then soft power strategies relying primarily on media exposure will systematically underperform those investing in direct contact programs. The "Familiarity-Action Gap" introduced in this study offers an empirical framework for evaluating this prediction in the context of Central Asian youth.

Existing soft power literature, especially in Central Asia, largely emphasizes U.S. actions such as state-led initiatives or economic treaties rather than how soft power is received and acted upon at the individual level (Torebekova & Baktiyarova, 2025; Kurmangali et al., 2025). Even when examining individual behavior, studies often prioritize investigating the breadth of exposure, such as the reach of U.S. media or cultural presence, over depth, particularly regarding future individual actions (Gauttam et al., 2024; Barrech & Khan, 2023). As a result, soft power is frequently assessed through surface-level measures of attitudes that reveal little about long-term behaviors (Zhai, 2025).

Moreover, few studies systematically compare different mechanisms of exposure, including contact, media, and news. Trust itself is often assumed to be an automatic outcome of favorable perception rather than an independent mechanism between attraction and action (Wrighton et al., 2022). Correspondingly, prior research frequently conflates interpersonal trust in Americans with trust in the United States as a political actor, leaving their relationship and independent impacts underexplored (Repnikova, 2025).

These gaps are especially pronounced in Central Asia, where historical legacies of skepticism toward U.S. foreign policy and competing Russian and Chinese influence complicate soft power dynamics, making the relationship between positive perception and future engagement more nuanced (Ziegler, 2024; Hudson, 2022; Bawa & Ashish, 2023). Youth perspectives are further underrepresented, even though young people are key indicators of long-term influence. This absence is especially notable in Tajikistan, where evidence at the individual level remains scarce (Ikromi, 2025; Rashidov et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses original survey-based methodology to collect primary data from Tajik and Afghan youth living in Tajikistan. The survey captured information on participants' socio-demographic characteristics, including their original country and age range. The survey consists of a comprehensive list of Likert-scale questions to measure perceptions

of the U.S., levels of trust in the U.S., forms of exposure, and future engagement, and open-ended questions for elaboration, consistent with the study's inductive and exploratory orientation, with operationalized definitions shown in Table 1. Lower mean scores indicate stronger willingness or agreement, consistent with the survey's Likert-scale design in which lower values correspond to greater readiness to engage.

Table 1. Operationalization of Key Variables

Construct	Operationalization	Scale
Familiarity	Frequency of exposure to U.S. media (movies, music, influencers), news, and direct contact with Americans	1–5 frequency scale
Favorable Perception	Overall evaluation of the United States today; perceived change in opinion over the past year	1–5 agreement scale
Trust	Degree of trust in the United States as an institution or foreign policy actor	1–5 agreement scale
Interpersonal Trust	Degree of trust in Americans as individuals representing the United States	1–5 agreement scale
Behavioral Intention	Willingness to engage in specific future actions, ranging from lower-commitment (cultural participation, English learning) to higher-commitment (applying to U.S. programs, working with international organizations)	1–5 willingness scale

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The sampling method involved purposive sampling, where the researcher identified a group of Tajik and Afghan individuals ($n=20$) who were previously involved with forms of U.S. soft power programs. While the sample size is modest, small-N exploratory studies are common when examining hard-to-access populations, specifically introducing hypotheses and patterns in understudied contexts. The survey was sent to individuals and other youths through snowball sampling, primarily via social media and peer networks.

This approach was deemed appropriate given the specific focus on Tajiki and Afghan youths who have specifically been involved with foreign and U.S. programs to determine the efficacy of different forms of soft power, allowing for targeted data collection from individuals most relevant to the research. Because purposive and snowball sampling were employed, the sample is not representative of the broader Tajik or Afghan youth population. The results, therefore, identify patterns and associations that warrant further testing using larger samples.

Tajik and Afghan youths in Tajikistan represent an analytically relevant population due to shared linguistic, educational, and social environments shaped by migration and overlapping media spaces. Afghan youth residing in Tajikistan often participate in the same educational programs, consume similar media, and interact within shared social environments, making their perceptions shaped by comparable exposure pathways. Examining these populations together allows for analysis of youth experiences within a shared soft power environment. Furthermore, independently, by including refugee youth, this study analyzes how soft power operates in displacement contexts.

The survey was conducted through an online channel, Google Forms, and designed to include Dari, English, and Tajiki languages to ensure all participants accurately understood and answered questions. We used Pearson correlations and linear regression

to identify and measure relationships, and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models examined associations between exposure measures (direct contact, media, and news), trust, sentiment, and reported behavioral intentions.

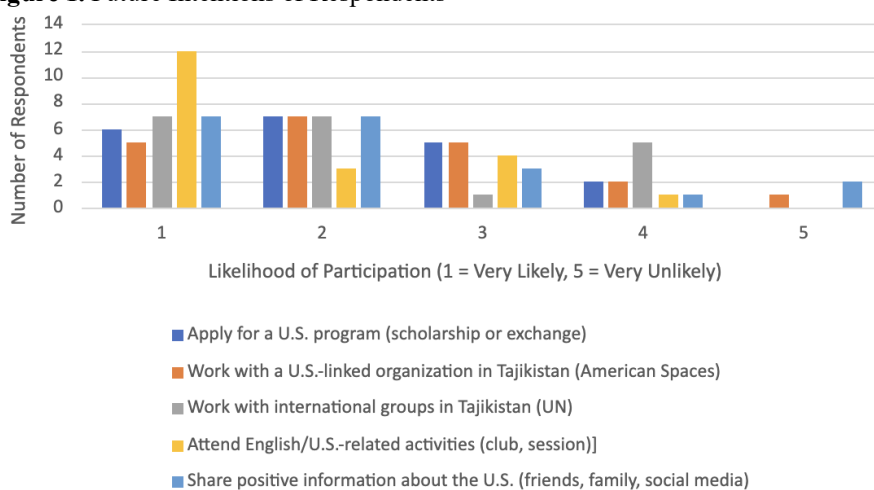
To protect the identity and safety of youths, all responses were anonymous and voluntary, and questions were designed to avoid sensitive or politically risky topics.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Results

Respondents expressed the greatest willingness for lower-commitment activities, including cultural participation and English-language learning (mean = 1.7). Willingness was lower for exchange programs (mean = 2.15) and for international or information-sharing actions (mean = 2.2), and lowest for institutionalized U.S.-linked programs (mean = 2.35), as summarized in Figure 1.

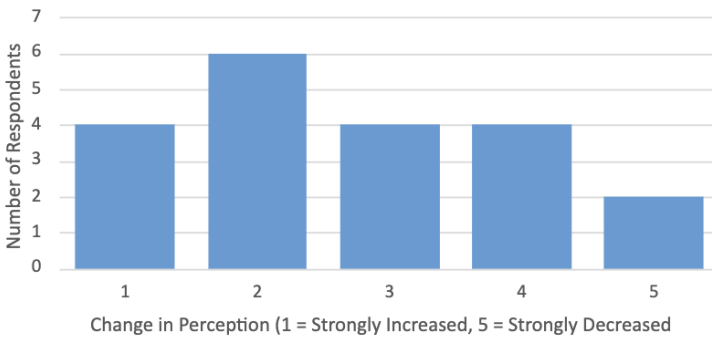
Figure 1. Future Intentions of Respondents



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

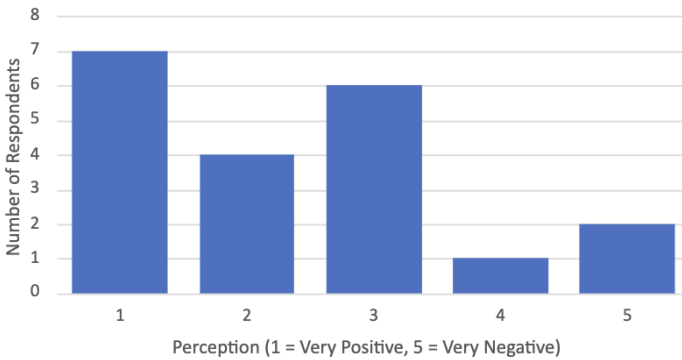
Overall perceptions of the United States remained generally positive, with modest improvement reported over the past year, though responses varied across individuals (Figure 2, Figure 3).

Figure 2. Shift in Perception of the United States Over the Past Year



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

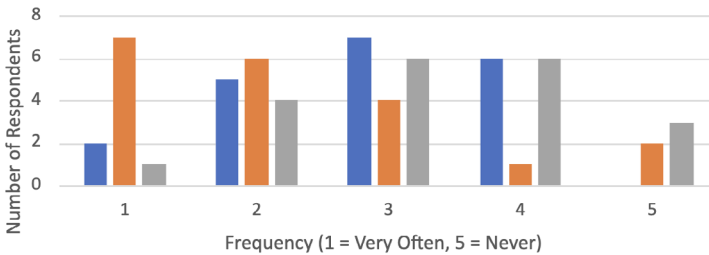
Figure 3. Perception of the United States Today



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

U.S media consumption of U.S. cultural content, including movies, music, and influencers, leads as the primary mechanism of reported engagement, which indicates a left-skewed graph, followed by interpersonal contact, and lastly news exposure (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequency of Mechanisms of Engagement



- Interpersonal Contact: Met or Talked with Someone from the U.S.
- Media Consumption: Watch or Follow U.S. Movies, Music, or Influencers
- News Exposure: See U.S on TV or Social Media

Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

Table 2. Afghan and Tajik Youth Perceptions of the U.S. After Interpersonal Contact

Theme	Notable Quotes
Hospitality	“Meeting Americans helped me see the U.S. as a welcoming place... the conversations I had showed me that people are curious [and] respectful.”
Media vs. Lived Experience	“Before meeting [Americans], I only knew the U.S. from movies and news... talking to real people showed me that Americans care about other cultures.”
Humanization	“Meeting Americans helped me see the U.S. more clearly... it made the U.S. feel more real and human to me.”
Educational Aspiration	“Ман бисёртар хошиш пайдо кардам...” (I developed a stronger desire to study and work in America.)
Admiration	“بسیار خوب بود... نشان داد که چقدر مهربان و کوشش‌مند هستند... تحصیل در امریکا بسیار خوب است. Meeting Americans showed me how kind and hardworking they are, and that studying in the U.S. is very good
Stereotype Reversal	“At first I thought Americans weren't as friendly as I thought they were, but after meeting them, they were much more kind than I [previously] thought.”
Nuanced Perception	“I think most of [them] are ... kind and open-minded people... but the U.S. ... [and] everywhere in this world ha[s] its problems.”
Neutrality	“Nothing special [about meeting them].”

Source: Author's own elabora

Correlational Data

No statistically reliable association was observed between general perceptions and trust in the U.S. ($r = 0.376$, $p = 0.103$). Trust in the U.S. has a strong and significant correlation with future action ($r = 0.615$, $p = 0.004$) while sentiment has a moderate and significant correlation with future action ($r = 0.510$, $p = 0.021$). Trust has a larger and more significant correlation with future actions than sentiment.

Regression results show direct contact with Americans is positively associated with willingness to apply for U.S. programs ($B = 0.41$, $p \approx 0.058$). U.S. media exposure is positively and significantly correlated with willingness to work with international organizations ($B = 0.49$, $p = 0.018$). News exposure has no significant association with all future action outcomes, with associations ranging from slightly negative to slightly positive ($B \approx -0.21$ to 0.046 , $p > 0.3$).

Post-contact and Post-media Effects

After direct interactions with Americans, respondents most often described actions that involved personal effort or continued future actions, both of which are behavioral forms of engagement. Practicing English (mean = 1.7) and using U.S.-based applications (mean = 2.05) were the most common responses, and consuming U.S. media (mean = 2.2) and discussing the United States with family and friends (mean = 2.2) followed after. From our results, meeting Americans is highly correlated with future actions, especially those that are behavioral.

Following U.S. media consumption, respondents were more likely to report learning-oriented and affective responses, such as increased knowledge about American daily life, rather than behavioral engagement. Learning about American daily life (mean =

2.15) and feeling more positive about the United States (mean = 2.15) were the most common responses.

Media consumption is correlated with increased affective engagement, while direct contact is associated with behavioral engagement.

DISCUSSION

Although Afghan and Tajiki youths in Tajikistan generally retain positive perceptions of the United States, a clear gap emerges between perception and future action: youths express greater comfort engaging with the U.S. in passive roles and are more hesitant toward actions that require public affiliation (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3). Many respondents indicated greater comfort engaging with international organizations, such as the United Nations, than with programs directly affiliated with the United States (Figure 1). This pattern suggests that youths' hesitation is not due to disengagement from foreign institutions overall, but by more of a specific uncertainty toward directly engaging with the U.S.

We refer to this pattern as the “Familiarity-Action Gap” where the effectiveness of soft power can plateau at familiarity and, without trust in a country, positive perceptions fail to convert into meaningful participation, especially proactive and snowball forms of engagement. This is explained by correlational analysis as trust shows a stronger association with intended future actions than favorability. Interestingly, trust shows insignificant correlation with positive sentiment, meaning trust is not a linear extension of positive sentiment. The results point to limits in soft power strategies that solely focus on familiarity without building trust.

Direct contact emerges as the most consistent driver of two types of behavioral engagement. One clear pattern that stood out was the increase in active behaviors such as practicing English and using U.S.-based platforms after meeting Americans. These behaviors are consistent with prior work in intergroup contact theory, which links interpersonal interaction to cooperative and prosocial actions toward another group (Levy & Dovidio, 2021). Beyond individual behavior, sharing experiences with friends and family was a common reported future action, which suggests a snowball effect where one person's experiences are spread to social circles around them. The snowball effect is well-documented in previous studies, where intergroup contact from exchange programs had positive, and in many cases, even greater ripple effects on indirect participants (Olberding & Olberding, 2010). Moreover, direct contact is also linked to increased interest in pursuing education and work opportunities, following interpersonal interaction with one participant describing:

“Ман бисёртар хоҳиш пайдо кардам ки ба Амрико раваму таҳсилу кору фӯболияти худро ончо кунам”

(Translated from Tajik: “I have become increasingly interested in going to America to study and work there.”; Tajik respondent, ages 19-22)

While not generalizable, such responses provide qualitative support for the quantitative finding that direct contact is associated with greater willingness to pursue formal forms of engagement.

Media exposure is more closely associated with changes in understanding than action. Respondents more often described learning about American daily life rather than changing how they engaged with the U.S. However, these changes appear to remain largely individual and were rarely linked to sharing information, as in social diffusion or proactive behavior. Interestingly, statistical analysis shows media consumption has no correlations with any actions other than a strong association with willingness to work with international organizations, suggesting that U.S. media content may, in fact, redirect or correlate with engagement toward multilateral actors.

Notably, our data indicated that news exposure has no significant relationship with future actions. Overall, the form of engagement appears to shape how soft power actually materially affects action.

Because trust in the U.S. and direct contact with Americans display similar patterns of engagement, especially proactive and supportive actions, we turn to the qualitative responses to examine how these two factors relate. In written responses, many respondents described how interpersonal encounters with Americans reshaped their judgments of Americans' intentions and character. Respondents frequently described Americans as more "respectful" and "friendly" than expected, and that talking with them felt "real and human." These descriptions reflect judgments about reliability and goodwill, which are key elements of trust. Several respondents noted that meeting Americans helped them "see the U.S. as a welcoming place," implying that individual-level contact can shape broader perceptions of the country (Table 2).

"Before meeting them, I only knew about the U.S from movies and news but talking to real people showed me that Americans care about other cultures, value hard work, and are often very kind and respectful." (Afghan respondent, ages 15-18)

The contrast between prior media exposure and interpersonal interaction illustrates how direct contact can correct previous stereotypes driven by the media. In Central Asia, perceptions of the U.S. are often shaped by Russian and Chinese media as well as skepticism toward U.S. foreign policy. Our findings indicate that direct contact offered youths a way to form nuanced or more impressions of the U.S. outside these traditional narratives. Interestingly, several respondents linked trust in Americans to more favorable views of the U.S. overall. This suggests that trust built through interpersonal contact may extend beyond individuals, shaping broader national perceptions and helping bridge the "Familiarity-Action Gap" we defined earlier.

These findings suggest that soft power effectiveness may depend less on broad image-building and more so on mechanisms that cultivate individual-level relational trust that extends to trust in the corresponding country. This aligns with and builds upon existing intergroup contact theory, which emphasizes the role of sustained interaction in reducing prejudice and fostering cooperative behavior across different groups. It also suggests that macro-level influence from countries or populations may depend on micro-level trust formation processes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers valuable insights into current viewpoints of Tajik and Afghan youths of foreign influence in a critical region of Central Asia. Findings indicate nuances of soft power development in contested soft power regions and emphasize the importance of considering individual-level intergroup contact in larger foreign policy objectives.

Although Tajik and Afghan youth generally view the United States favorably, these views do not always correspond with a willingness to take future action. The findings indicate that trust appears to be more strongly associated with behavioral intentions than favorable perception in this sample, suggesting it may play a role in translating soft power exposure into action. Within this exploratory sample, direct interpersonal contact shows a stronger association with trust and higher-commitment actions than media exposure, which is associated with general familiarity. U.S. media exposure may redirect engagement toward multilateral organizations rather than U.S.-branded institutions.

U.S. popular culture is widely accessible and familiar to respondents, much more so than direct contact and news, particularly through movies, music, and influencers on online platforms. However, this familiarity tends to remain impersonal, and without personal connection, even large amounts of media output in places like Central Asia will still place the U.S. behind.

This study has some limitations as the findings are limited by a modest sample size and self-reported data, which may introduce bias and reduce generalizability. Future research should employ larger samples to explore policy impacts and specific soft-power pathways in greater detail.

The findings of this study bring important implications for both international relations research in soft power and policy considerations. Within this sample, trust appears to be the unique factor that is not linked with positive perceptions derived from media exposure, but instead with direct contact that helps form more personal relationships. These personal relationships critically correlate with increased supportive future actions, creating a positive feedback loop of cooperation and active interest.

The study introduces trust in a country as a unique mechanism that bridges familiarity and future cooperative actions into the framework of previous soft power studies, necessitating greater research in the specific types of trust in unique geopolitical hotspots. Specific policy recommendations include greater emphasis on youth-to-youth foreign exchanges to increase intergroup contact as compared to traditional cultural influence branding on social media and international platforms.

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Afghan and Tajik youths' perceptions of a rapidly changing and increasingly important geopolitical landscape, as well as of soft power and international relations theory. If these patterns hold in larger samples, interactions may be key to humanizing the U.S. beyond historical shadows that underlie previous U.S. foreign policy failures and disengagement from the region, potentially rebuilding a long-lost sense of trust.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19054853>, reference number 10.5281/zenodo.19054853.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

RB: research preparation, conceptualization, literature review, methodology, formal analysis, and writing.

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