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Understanding soft power discourse in the National Library of Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents research that sought to understand how the National Library of Australia engages with soft power in its *Annual Report 2019-20*. Driving the analysis was the research question: How is soft power discourse reproduced and enacted in the National Library of Australia's *Annual Report 2019-20*? The research recognises the significance of Australia's soft power, cultural diplomacy, and regional relationships to national interest in the context of a library's contributions to these areas.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a qualitative discourse analysis, with constructivist and interpretivist perspectives. A critical discourse analysis was undertaken, applying a discourse-historical approach.

Findings - The findings suggest that the National Library of Australia primarily engages with soft power discourse through the construction and preservation of an Australian national identity. National identity is framed as key to the Library's collection development, with Australian knowledge prioritised.

Originality/value – This study extends on research addressing the roles of galleries, archives, and museums in cultural diplomacy, but rarely examines soft power and libraries explicitly or in a contemporary context. It contributes to broader understandings of libraries in international relations and the role they can play in soft power attraction and cultural diplomacy.

Keywords – National libraries, Soft power, Cultural diplomacy, Critical discourse analysis, Discourse historical approach, National identity

Introduction

National libraries are considered integral to the construction of a nation-state's identity, as they preserve cultural and documentary heritage and communicate narratives of political and historical legitimacy (Byrne, 2007, pp. 17-18). As libraries, and other cultural institutions, engage in public and cultural diplomacy, international partnerships, and cultural-political discourse (Prieto-Gutierrez, 2015; Prieto-Gutierrez & Segado-Boj, 2016), the capacity for soft power agency in their roles is evident (Mariano & Vårheim, 2021). Indeed, the intangible values, institutions, and policies promoted through soft power are considered attractive to adopt because they are recognised or represented as having political legitimacy or moral authority (Nye, 2004, p. 6). Increasingly, libraries' contributions to international relations and soft power are recognised, though literature explicitly addressing this phenomenon is limited (Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), 2018; Harris & Thaler, 2020; Mariano & Vårheim, 2021).

This research paper contributes a study of the National Library of Australia (NLA) and its soft power discourse to the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature. It aims to contribute an understanding of the discursive role of libraries in soft power and international relations. It is undertaken from a LIS perspective, while drawing on the International Relations concept of 'soft power,' and by extension, public and cultural diplomacy. Soft power is increasingly considered significant to representing Australia's interests in the Asia-Pacific region (Grincheva, 2019, p. 745). Regional relationships between galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) may strengthen political bonds and cultural understanding (ALIA, 2018). Thus, the purpose and significance of this research's contribution lies beyond addressing substantive gaps in the research related to libraries and soft power. It seeks to provide insight and increased understanding of an Australian knowledge institution's engagement with soft power discourse. Insights gained from this research may be useful for libraries, library funders, and the community to understand how the NLA, and potentially other national and state libraries, can contribute to international relations.

This introduction proceeds to outline key definitions and the research question. It is followed by a review of the literature. In this paper, 'discursive' refers to how social practices, subjects, or constructs may be constituted or expressed through discourse (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2017; Solomon, 2017). Discourse is considered as both a social practice itself *and* as

a representation of social practice (van Leeuwen, 1993), the latter being knowledge formation (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014, p. 174). Power is approached “as constituted through discourse” (Solomon, 2017, p. 501).

Key definitions

Originally popularised by Nye (1990; 2004), soft power involves indirect or co-optive behaviour that uses “attraction rather than coercion or payments,” to set the agenda and influence preferences. Traditional understandings of power have emphasised hard power and such understandings focus on military and economic influence as tangible resources that can be measured in ‘hard’ or quantifiable terms (McClory, 2015, p. 8). Conversely, soft power resources include political values, culture, and foreign policy to shape other’s preferences and draw attraction (Nye, 2004, p. 11). Thus, soft power is associated with “intangible resources like institutions, ideas, values, culture, and perceived legitimacy of policies” (2011, p. 19). Such intangible resources bring cultural diplomacy into soft power discourse (Kim, 2017, pp. 294-295), whereby creative and knowledge pursuits are cultural exports. Here, the promotion of culture to international audiences sees culture become a tool for advancing “Australia’s interests, soft power and influence” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), n.d.). Cultural diplomacy, then, is the promotion of national culture internationally, to build support for national ideas, interests, values, policy, and institutions (Maack, 2001, p. 50), positioning them as legitimate and attractive.

Research question

Building on constructivist and interpretivist perspectives toward soft power, language, and identity, this research was guided by the following question:

- How is soft power discourse reproduced and enacted in the National Library of Australia’s *Annual Report 2019-20*?

This question positions the findings to contribute an understanding of soft power’s imprecise and qualitative aspects. This includes how the NLA discourse reproduces soft power narratives, informed by concepts of national identity and values (Nye, 1999). The interpretivist and constructivist orientation of the proposed research challenges the demand for causal explanations of soft power, instead enabling a discursive understanding (Lamont, 2015, p. 20, p. 26). Consequently, this study aims to consider soft power discourse through the language surrounding national identity, culture, and memory. Through this, it contributes

to an understanding of the soft power agency of national libraries, and their possible role and impact in international relations more broadly.

Literature Review

The research literature addressing the topic of 'libraries and soft power' is limited, as indicated in literature reviews by Mariano and Vårheim (2021) and Author[s] (Date). Most research literature on soft power and GLAM institutions addresses museums and cultural diplomacy (or museum diplomacy) (Cai, 2013; Davidson & Pérez-Castellanos, 2019; Flamini, 2014; Kong, 2015), and in some instances focuses on soft power attraction (Grincheva, 2014, 2019). Rarely does the existing literature explicitly describe libraries as being engaged in soft power behaviour. LIS research that broaches soft power or cultural diplomacy, implicitly or explicitly, are primarily historical case studies (Black, 2016; Harris & Thaler, 2020; Maack, 1986, 2001; Prieto-Gutierrez, 2015; Prieto-Gutierrez & Segado-Boj, 2016; Witt, 2014; Yi & Thompson, 2015). With most literature focused on non-library cultural institutions, there are substantive research gaps from an LIS perspective.

Soft power

Despite the intangible qualities of soft power, the existing grey literature often focuses on providing causal explanation and quantifying measurable soft power indicators (McClory, 2015; Singh *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, issues surrounding the measurement of soft power remain the subject of research literature (Hayden, 2012; Seong-Hun, 2018). In the GLAM sector, Grincheva's (2019) digital humanities pilot program applies geographic information systems (GIS) to visualise museum's influence and visibility globally. GIS are used as a tool to map "specific measurable indicators" of soft power (2019, p. 730). Given the emphasis on causal mechanisms, measuring, and mapping, the interpretive and contextually situated meaning may be missed in analysis.

The International Relations literature presents critical approaches to understanding soft power, reframing Nye's theoretical insights around soft power attraction. Mattern (2005) and Solomon (2014) consider, respectively, soft power's discursive and affective qualities, and Solomon (2014) indicates that exploring these may contribute to reframing mechanisms of soft power attraction. Hayden (2012) also contributes to reframing soft power around language and identity. Soft power attraction is considered as a relational and shared experience, one which cultivates and is constitutive of both an agent's and target's identity

(Hayden, 2012, pp. 45-46). Solomon (2014), Hayden (2012), and Mattern (2005) thus establish that soft power attraction is constructed as a narrative-based process. Solomon (2014, p. 737) determines that “the effectiveness of discourses of attraction lies in the affective investments by audience in narrative identities constructed by states’ soft power efforts”. Thus, the theoretical frameworks around narrative and identity that are established in this literature underpin this study’s analysis of a library’s discursive practice in soft power.

National Libraries

National libraries, as cultural institutions, contribute to preserving, recording, and communicating a nation’s cultural, historical, and documentary heritage (Byrne, 2007, p. 17), among other functions. This positions national libraries as contributors to the construction of national identity (2007, p. 18). The International Relations literature describes the relationship between soft power and national identity (Aukia, 2019; Kim, 2017, p. 314). National interests, informing soft power behaviour, may encompass values considered important to a sense of national identity and which are thought worth promoting overseas, such as human rights or democracy (Nye, 1999, p. 23).

National libraries’ contributions extend to the international context, whereby the values and culture attached to national identity are shared through cross-cultural and overseas partnerships and collaborations. Byrne (2007) describes the role and history of libraries in international librarianship and indicates the significance of national libraries in this area. Byrne (2005, pp. 115-116) also provides an Australian perspective, detailing the international contributions and engagement of Australian libraries, including “exporting expertise” and a longstanding engagement in the Asia and the Pacific region. As Mariano and Vårheim (2021) describe however, there is a gap in LIS research using soft power or library diplomacy as a theoretical framework, despite this framework’s use in museum studies.

Several authors have studied the discourse surrounding national libraries (Galligan, 2000b; Hrančak, 2018; Pacios & Pérez-Piriz, 2019). Galligan (2000a, 2000b) has analysed the role of the NLA by examining the cultural politics that accompany it. Galligan’s (2000b) analysis includes investigating power relations within the NLA’s discourse in policy documents to reflect how Australia’s cultural heritage is framed. Hrančak (2018) and Pacios and Pérez-Piriz (2019) both analyse libraries’ mission statements. The discourse and content analysed provides insight into these libraries’ identity, function, and purpose. The socio-cultural

discourse which Hbranchak (2018) analyses highlights the role of a national library in constructing and preserving national identity and memory. Likewise, Pacios and Pérez-Piriz (2019) identify the preservation of cultural heritage and memory as a widely held function in the national libraries included in their study.

Method

This research has a qualitative and inductive design, with a methodology informed by a critical discourse analysis (CDA). The study adopts Wodak's and Reisigl's (2009, p. 96) *Discourse-Historical Approach*, with reference to Mullet's (2018, p. 122) *General Analytical Framework for CDA*, van Leeuwen's (2009) *Social Actor's Approach (SAA)*, and Gee's (2011) *Discourse Analysis 'Toolkit'*. This CDA contributes to LIS research beyond the "socio-political and historical context" (Wodak & Reisigl, 2009, p. 93) of the NLA, by building on the assumption that discourse produces (Wadas, 2017, p. 534) and is a form of action (Bryman, 2016, p. 535). The analysis provides insights into a national library's institutional and socio-cultural discourse, which is then linked to action, in its contribution to soft power attraction. Thus, the analysis extends understandings of how library practices, that revolve around access to cultural knowledge, identity, and collections, may contribute to soft power and cultural diplomacy.

A CDA provides several contextual levels of theoretical triangulation, which is a key principle of the discourse-historical approach. This saw the NLA discourse being studied at micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, a method suggested by Vromen (2010, p. 264). The micro level analysis involved examination of the linguistic features of the text of the discourse itself, including its use of vocabulary and structure. Meso interpretation focused on the text's social production, relating language to broader ideological and political contexts. Macro connected the text to broader social science themes. Meso and macro contexts were significant given the wider socio-political context of soft power and soft power's own ideological context whereby it attracts power through strategic and compelling narratives (McClory, 2015, p. 116).

Initial stages of analysis saw the social, cultural, and historical context of the *Annual Report 2019-20* established as a background to the text. The *Annual Report 2019-20* was the

latest annual report available at the time of undertaking this research. Within the findings of this paper, direct quotations from the NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20* have been formatted as block quotations, rather than integrated directly into the text, regardless of their length. This aims to distinguish the specific text of the *Annual Report 2019-20*, from the texts used to examine its social, cultural, and historical context.

Discursive strategies and tools were adapted from Wodak and Reisigl (2009) and Gee (2011). Discursive strategies are an “intentional plan of practices ... adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal” (Wodak & Reisigl, 2009, p. 94). Discursive strategies were operationalised (or realised) through linguistic devices in the NLA discourse, such as evocation and membership categorisation. Linguistic devices were used to analyse the micro-level aspects of the immediate text and relate these back to the meso- and macro-levels. Four macro-strategies, specific to discourse on national identity, were used in the analysis of the text (Wodak & Reisigl, 2009, p. 18). These were: constructive, preservative, transformative, and destructive strategies. Additional sub-strategies were integrated into the analysis. These were: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification/mitigation. The macro strategies helped to reflect soft power's ties to concepts of nation branding and identity, presenting an attractive, persuasive, and legitimate conception of the nation's culture, political values, and foreign policy.

Finally, a socio-diagnostic critique was conducted. Drawing on the contextual knowledge gained as researcher, the discourse analysed was considered in its socio-political and cultural circumstances. The scholarly literature informed the interpretations of discursive activities, established meaningful understandings, and directed analysis and dissemination toward practical application (Bryman, 2016, p. 18; Wodak, 2009, p. 312). This was not a ‘pure’ inductive approach and pre-existing theoretical knowledge was recognised in interpretation. The theories drawn on in the discussion primarily responded to the socio-political function and agency of national libraries (Byrne, 2007, pp. 16-20) and national identity (Anderson, 2016).

Theoretical assumptions

Several theoretical assumptions drive the methodology and the understanding of soft power discourse in this research. First, soft power is approached as language based, where the construction of national identity may contribute to soft power attraction (Aukia, 2019, p. 307). Soft power is understood as produced through identity discourse, with discursive strategies constructing attractiveness (Aukia, 2019, p. 307; Pan *et al.*, 2020, p. 55). Aukia (2019, p. 307) and Mattern (2005, p. 588) both connect soft power to discursive narratives of identity and language, challenging the emphasis Nye places on soft power as a resource to be wielded, as hard power is. That is, Nye considers soft power “as a tangible tool that can be amassed and deployed through concerted effort” (Mattern, 2005, p. 588). Thus, the research methodology adopted builds on a discursive understanding of soft power, recognising the construction and promotion of national identity as significant to soft power. This contributed to the selection of a national library, the National Library of Australia, as the subject of this study.

Second, the NLA is positioned as a soft power actor with agency. Agency is understood to be relational where an actor, an entity that can hold agency, has the capacity to influence another actor’s actions or agenda (Braun *et al.*, 2019, p. 788). Soft power agency is understood as a relational process where attraction is “codetermined” between an agent and target (2019, p. 722). This is a discursive and affective social process, “constituting what actors are as social beings, that is, their social identities and capacities” (Solomon, 2014, p. 722).

Finally, the annual reports of an institution, such as the NLA, are understood to include persuasive discourse to communicate value, impact, and legitimacy. Agar’s (1985, 164) definition of an institution, as “a socially legitimated expertise together with those people authorised to implement it” highlights the need for institutions to persuade stakeholders of the legitimacy of their role as a social actor. Thus, institutional discourse advances “certain social values and ideas” and these discourse events both shape and are shaped by institutions (Mayr, 2015, p. 766).

Findings

The findings of this research are structured across two key soft power themes. The first is national identity, whereby, the NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20* is primarily focused on building soft power attraction through the construction and preservation of national identity. The second is regional relationships, and this reflects the NLA's engagement in Asia and the Pacific.

National identity

The national collection is considered a heritage and cultural asset (NLA, 2020a). In the NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20*, the collection is framed as a contribution to understandings of Australia's cultural heritage, while legitimising national identity narratives. While the NLA primarily connects its collections to a national audience, the NLA also engages with Australia's cultural heritage internationally. The annual report begins with praise for the *Beauty Rich and Rare* exhibition, which was commissioned by the NLA, with content primarily sourced from their collections (Australian Embassy: United States of America, 2020; NLA, 2020b). In the NLA Chair's report, the exhibition is described as the

first major Australian exhibition to be presented at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (NLA, 2020a, p. 3).

The overseas display of *Beauty Rich and Rare* is considered as

illuminating the natural beauty of Australia through the eyes of Sir Joseph Banks (2020a, p. 3).

Through this description begins a contribution to the construction and preservation of Australia's national identity. A preservative strategy is realised through the presupposition of sameness, with Australian history and shared cultural heritage being constructed as a central theme early in the discourse, through a historical lens of exploration and naturalism (2020a, p. 3)

This sharing of Australian cultural heritage internationally corresponds with ALIA's recognition that cultural relationships between GLAM institutions can position libraries as soft power assets. The understanding that arises from these relationships can "strengthen political bonds and enhance public engagement" (ALIA, 2018, p. 3).

National identity is constructed as both unified and diverse, jointly communicating sameness and multiplicity. A constructive discourse strategy, relying on a presupposition of sameness, is used to build a sense of unified national identity and commonality. Unity is seen in references to

“the Australian community” or “the Australian people,”

which are also examples of a nomination strategy, used to categorise [national] membership (NLA, 2020a, p. 14). The following text, setting out the purpose of the NLA, exemplifies the construction of national identity through this presupposition of sameness and nomination of membership:

the Library collects documentary resources relating to Australia and the Australian people so that the Australian community—now and in the future—can discover, learn and create new knowledge (2020a, p. 14).

The nomination strategies here are situated alongside an intention to provide for common and shared knowledge ambitions. The NLA (2020a, p. 14) expresses ongoing involvement in Australia’s knowledge developments, revealed through the deictic expressions “now” and “in the future,” offering temporal parameters of engagement.

A further example of the construction of national identity through sameness, while also engaging with Australian’s knowledge needs, is the NLA’s description of its response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This is expressed as moving

immediately to providing nourishment for the Australian soul (2020a, p. 6).

Here, *soul* reflects Australia’s intellectual and creative expression and may also communicate its enduring or lasting quality. This response resonates with Stephensen’s (1986, p. 98) observation, in the work *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, that “written history and literature provide a civilised nation with a national soul and a coherence”. Indeed, national libraries have historically been considered ‘a portrait of the national soul (Manguel (2006) cited in Gaunt, 2010, p. 100). The “strong national focus” of the NLA (2020a, p. 52) and its strategic priorities ‘endow us with a national idea, and thus embody the national soul’ (Stephensen, 1986).

The NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20* juxtaposes national identity, expressed as unity and sameness, alongside cultural diversity. While diversity and national identity have often been framed as adversaries, with one highlighting difference and the other commonality, Levey (2018) suggests they can both promote the value of belonging and serve to provide recognition. In the NLA's annual report, cultural diversity is a frequent theme and, like national identity, is applied through constructive discourse strategies. The NLA (2020a, p. 14) describes the reach of its digital platforms for creative and research endeavours as

contributing to Australia's rich, diverse and enduring culture and heritage.

A predication strategy is used to construct national identity as diverse while also relying on evocation to elicit the notion of an abundant and lasting cultural memory. This evokes an impression of creative, literary, and cultural dialogues having been reconciled to enhance an Australian narrative built on inclusivity and belonging. The Australia Council for the Arts (2018, p. 11), in a *Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs Soft Power Review*, recognises "our cultural diversity is a soft power strength". In the NLA's annual report, this is constructed as significant to national identity and cultural heritage, contributing to the national image and values promoted as soft power discourse.

Engagement with Asia and the Pacific

A theme consistently shared across the NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20*, and Australian grey literature on soft power, is engagement with Asia and the Pacific. Australian knowledge of regional neighbours is framed as significant to the NLA's collaborative efforts, however, it does not receive the same attention in the NLA's collecting priorities. After Australiana collecting, the NLA's next priority is overseas works, especially from the Asia-Pacific region (NLA, 2020c). The purpose of overseas collecting is to

enrich the Australian community's understanding of its place in the world (2020a, p. 15).

Constructive and nomination strategies are again found, establishing identity through national belonging as part of "the Australian community" (2020a, p. 14). These strategies also construct a sense of (or "enrich") Australia's regional identity and relationships. As the NLA's collecting and cultural activities have the purpose of benefiting Australian's knowledge, knowledge sourced from Asia and Pacific collections may support cultural diplomacy and

understanding of this region. This in turn supports the NLA in its “role as a trusted knowledge institution” (2020a, p. 39).

The NLA’s regional collaborative initiatives and relationships reflect soft power efforts described by ALIA and Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The NLA (2020a, p. 36) states that it aims to

collaborate with partners in the Pacific region to improve knowledge of and access to Pacific cultural heritage resources contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

This follows ALIA’s (2018, pp. 2-3) response to the Australian Government Soft Power Review which describes a soft power role for Australian libraries as “with colleagues in the Asia-Pacific to progress the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. An example of such efforts is the Pacific Virtual Museum Pilot Program. The Pilot Program

is led and implemented by Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library of New Zealand

in a collaborative effort with the NLA (2020a, p. 36). This government initiative, funded by DFAT, is explicitly aligned with regional commitments in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (DFAT, 2019; NLA, 2020a, p. 36).

The strategic direction of the NLA’s overseas collections diverges from the NLA’s (2020a, p. 14) descriptions of international collaboration, which emphasised commitments to regional development. The NLA’s collecting directions, however, prioritise “Australia and the Australian people” in content. The NLA does note its overseas collections and describes notable acquisitions of 2019-20 that includes overseas material. One example is the archived

“ephemera and websites relating to COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific” (2020a, p. 137),

The annual report primarily refers, however, to the current *Collecting Strategy 2020-21 – 2023-24* which would “significantly reduce overseas collecting that does not have Australian content”. While overseas collecting would still retain a “curatorial focus on Indonesia, China and the Pacific” (including Timor-Leste) (2020c, p. 1), the previous *Collection Development Policy (2016-20)* had covered Japan, Korea, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, and East Timor (Snowden, 2020).

The NLA's annual report communicates the reduction of overseas collecting with a rationale for these developments. The report explains

The level of overseas collecting has been decreasing for several decades...[and] this long-term trend will continue (2020a, p. 20).

This is communicated as foremost owing to

the Library's increased responsibilities for collecting born-digital Australiana (2020a, p. 20)

and

making our Australian collections accessible to the wider community (2020a, p. 20).

While the availability and constraints of international resources are also provided as explanation for the decrease, the responsibility towards Australian collecting and access is echoed throughout the report. Referring to the NLA's (2020c, p. 1) current *Collecting Strategy 2020-21 – 2023-24*, the annual report affirms

the Library's first responsibility, as outlined in the National Library Act 1960, is to develop a comprehensive collection relating to Australia and the Australian people.

Before this statement, the NLA (2020a, p. 20) asserts a

commitment to ensuring that its collection reflects the diversity of the Australian community ... and to preserving and providing access to this national heritage in perpetuity.

The reasoning behind reduced overseas collecting, expressed in the annual report, returns to the NLA's focus on national identity, through both unity of cultural heritage and diversity of community.

In 2020, the NLA's decrease in overseas collecting saw concern, largely from academics and journalists (Aspinall, 2020a,; Koslowski, 2020; Morris-Suzuki, 2020; Snowden, 2020; Spigelman, 2020), that their collecting focus was "turning inward" (Aspinall, 2020b). This was considered as neglecting knowledge Australia might use to build cultural diplomacy

and soft power (2020a, 2020b). Aspinall (2020b), a professor at the Australian National University, researching politics in Southeast Asia, argued for the significance of overseas collecting priorities, determining “the collection is a foundation stone of decades of effort to build sustained and deep knowledge of Asia at Australian universities”. The NLA’s (2020a, p. 20) annual report also affirms the

Library’s Asian collections have been carefully built over decades.

The knowledge building the NLA aims to support, however, is centred on Australian collecting. The NLA (2020a, p. 15) endeavours to support Australian’s to

participate fully in the creative and knowledge economies, using Australian content.

Aspinall (2020a; 2020b), however, reflects on both the historical and contemporary significance of the NLA’s Asia collecting to explain its significance to Australian knowledge. The NLA has been developing its collections and resources relating to the Southeast Asian and South Pacific areas since the 1940s and 1950s (Aspinall, 2020b; Burmester, 1981). This was situated in a period of “national reconstruction” in Australia (Galligan, 2000b, p. 166). It followed the Second World War, where gaps in information on Southeast Asia and the Pacific (2000b, p. 166) and the need to “build deeper knowledge of the region in which Australia is located” were recognised (Aspinall, 2020b). The NLA’s emerging “international presence” in the late 1960s furthered its interest in Asia, with systematic acquisition, resource sharing, and regional cultural development initiatives (Bryan, 1991, p. 195).

Academics and journalists offering comment resolutely warned that the NLA’s decision is “counter to our national interest” (Koslowski, 2020), and an “alarming” (2020) and “drastic” (Morris-Suzuki, 2020) decision. The NLA’s annual report communicates national interest as a function of the NLA. Referring to the *National Library Act 1960*, it describes this function as:

to make library material in the national collection available to such persons and institutions, and in such a manner and subject to such conditions, as the Council determines with a view to the most advantageous use of that collection in the national interest (2020a, p. 52).

This, however, remains in one of two contexts. Either, first, Australia's national identity or second, international librarianship developments. First, the annual report refers to

a desire for national strategic discussions around collection developments (2020a, p. 38).

The discursive strategies described in this paper indicate the national interest of collection development is framed around the construction and preservation of Australia's national identity. Second, the NLA (2020a, p. 35) aims to

represent Australia's interests

as a member of the International Internet Preservation Consortium (IIPC). IIPC members include national libraries, and the NLA's participation in this consortium furthers international librarianship developments. Neither of these two explicit references to national interest pertain to supporting Australian's regional knowledge and understanding from collection sources. The NLA aims for its collections to

enrich the Australian community's understanding of its place in the world (2020a, p. 15).

Thus, consideration needs to be given to the extent that "understanding Australia requires that we understand our Asian context" (Aspinall, 2020a).

With the decision to reduced overseas collecting, soft power discourse resides primarily in the NLA's efforts to provide access to Australia's cultural heritage and national memory, contributing to the identity this constructs and preserves. Culture and memory provide the means for legitimising national identity, the nation-state, and the soft power attached to these. Soft power attraction relies on the target perceiving national values, culture, and foreign policy ideals as legitimate (Nye, 2004, p. 11; 2021, p. 201). Trove is an example of an NLA initiative supporting these aims, **in representing a national brand and showcasing national cultural heritage (Dellit & Oats, 2018)**. Trove is an online Australian database which aggregates Australian documentary resources, including historic newspapers, images, and archival material. It is hosted by the NLA in collaboration with Australia's state and territory libraries and other GLAM institutions. The digital access and value Trove provides is highlighted extensively in the *Annual Report 2019-20*. While the Australian Library

and Information Association (ALIA, 2018, p. 2) identifies “growth of digital access” as a key contribution from Australian libraries toward soft power, responses to the NLA’s collecting decisions largely framed soft power vis-à-vis Australia’s national interest in the Asia-Pacific.

Discussion

The findings of this research align with existing research literature recognising a relationship between national identity and soft power. This literature describes how soft power is enacted discursively to produce attraction, through language (Aukia, 2019; Mattern, 2005) and affective investment (Solomon, 2014). The following discussion considers the historical and contemporary function of a national library in Australia to help establish the relationship between national identity and soft power. This is followed by consideration of how the institutional discourse of libraries, and other GLAM institutions, reproduces national identity and collective memory which informs its soft power discourse. The discussion then addresses how identity and cultural heritage might enact shared values conducive to soft power and multilateral partnerships. This is within the context of the NLA’s historical collection development and Australia’s regional relationships.

Function and agency of national libraries

Libraries have historically played a key role in delivering knowledge, as recognised in the nineteenth century tradition of seeing public libraries as civilising institutions (Black *et al.*, 2009, p. 2; Gaunt, 2010, pp. 35-36). Valtysson (2012, p. 157) affirms that “the power to *choose* the cornerstones of our knowledge, and more importantly, to facilitate *access* to them has for a long time been one of the major roles of libraries”. Indeed, the NLA’s national collection is intended to support Australians in discovering, learning, and creating knowledge, through “documentary resources relating to Australia and the Australian people” (2020a, p. 14). This emphasis on Australian collecting, as a speciality, follows MacCullum’s (1899) “nationalistic vision” for Australian state libraries, whereby “the library acted as an archival custodian of the culture of the nation as whole” (Gaunt, 2010, p. 93). This is further seen in the NLA’s historic strategic plan, *Service to the Nation: Access to the Globe (1993-1998)*, establishing its role as “to record the Australian cultural heritage, to provide a 'crucial resource in the formation of our culture and national identity' and 'a foundation for further advancement of the nation'” (Galligan, 2000b, p. 164). In this document, the NLA is positioned as both a

‘service institution,’ supporting client’s access to knowledge, and a ‘cultural institution,’ with a strategic role in developing Australia’s knowledge economy and the national interest (2000b). The NLA’s strategic discourse, as discussed in the findings of this report, continues to negotiate and legitimise an Australian cultural sphere and identity.

The use of the term ‘national’ in Australian nineteenth century libraries and other cultural institutions has contested meaning (Gaunt, 2010, pp. 95-97). Davison (2006, p. 94) maintains that the term national was not initially adopted to define (or construct) national identity in cultural institutions, but rather to serve the national purpose, this being to provide enlightenment and access to knowledge that was conceived as global. While this function remains, a shift from knowledge as global to knowledge as national presents changes to the construction of identity (2006, p. 94). Castells’ theorising on the construction of identity positions identity as a stronger source of meaning than a social actor’s role. That is, while a social actor’s role would organise its function, it is identity that drives meaning (Castells, 2009, p. 7). In this context, meaning is the purpose a social actor assigns to their actions (2009, p. 7). In the findings of this research, the NLA’s function remains knowledge based, as it has been historically. The construction and preservation of national identity, however, presents as the rationale for the discursive action that the NLA takes as part of its national role.

Identity and memory

The findings of this research indicate the significance of national identity to the NLA’s role, function, and discursive action. In the International Relations literature, the social construction of identity is understood to inform soft power attraction (Hayden, 2012; Solomon, 2014), as part of an “actor’s ideological and cultural appeal to others” (Mattern, 2005, p. 587). In the LIS context, Byrne (2007, p. 21) describes the agency of libraries in identity formation and determines that “by providing access to information, libraries contribute to...the self-image of a community or society”. While national identity is often understood as internally exercised, it is significant to soft power as a means of cultural diplomacy. Libraries, museums, and cultural institutions have promoted national identity to foreign publics as a means of cultural influence (Mariano & Vårheim, 2021). Historical accounts often reveal such an approach to cultural influence as cultural imperialism, with influence flowing in one direction, from agent to target (2021). Mariano and Vårheim (2021), however, have found some cases where library’s “educational, creative and innovation

values” can be tools for multilateral partnership and cultural diplomacy. That is, these values can see soft power that extends beyond being a one-way flow of information, broadcast to foreign audiences (Melissen, 2005, p. 13), to a soft power that recognises shared values, exchange, and understanding (Nye, 2004, p. 111). Cultural heritage can provide the context for foreign and public diplomacy efforts (Schreiber, 2017, p. 46). Cultural heritage becomes a tool for strengthening soft power, providing a means for states to legitimise identity, making norms and values appear more attractive (2017).

Libraries hold social agency that carries symbolic power, exercised in the role they play in identity formation (Byrne, 2007, p. 17). This may be a university library’s construction of institutional identity or, as Byrne (2007, p. 18) discusses, a national library’s role in nation and state identity formation, establishing historical and cultural legitimacy. This fits Castells’ (2009, p. 8) description of a “legitimising identity,” as it serves the purpose of extending and rationalising a social actor’s authority. Castells’ (2009) recognises legitimising identities as corresponding with theories of nationalism, such as Anderson’s (2016) imagined communities. While theories of nationalism is outside of this paper’s scope, Anderson’s work does highlight the significance of social construction required to legitimise national identity. Analysing Australian state libraries’ historical collecting, Gaunt (2010, p. 2) found a “desire to collect and promote its cultural and social history,” through collections that “symbolise and promote national identity” (2010, p. 2). The NLA’s (2020a, p. 51) function, concerning its collections, is tied to national interest and the construction of national identity. Through collecting priorities, national identity can contribute to the values and ideals that Australia considers significant to the national interest and worth promoting through soft power (Nye, 1999, p. 23).

In national libraries, the emphasis on identity may reflect the transition from the *milieu de mémoire* (environments of memory) to *lieu de mémoire* (sites of memory) (Gaunt, 2010, p. 4; Nora, 1989). ‘Environments of memory’ are the living expressions of memory. Conversely, ‘sites of memory’ refers to the reproduction of collective memory by, for example, modern institutions, through such means as language, collection, archive, monument, or anniversary (Nora, 1989). Even early library buildings have historically been treated as monuments, as a declaration of knowledge and nation (Black *et al.*, 2009, p. 344). Though focused on museums, Bennett (1993, p. 74) describes how diverse artefacts “come

to serve as symbols of the essential unity of the nation". The relations between artefacts are "organised by discourses about nationalism" (Gaunt, 2010, p. 94), which Bennett (1993, p. 77) terms a "nationing rhetoric". Bennett (1993) considers the purpose of cultural heritage as to "enfold diverse histories into one". The NLA is recognised as having held a "position of influence" and having "exerted considerable power" in the cultural field (Galligan, 2000a, p. 100). The findings of this research affirm the NLA's continued role and influence in constructing a national past and identity through cultural heritage collecting.

The emphasis on identity in soft power attraction has seen soft power explored as a process with narrative, linguistic, and affective characteristics (Solomon, 2014). Solomon (2014) explains how

The attraction of soft power stems not only from its cultural influence or narrative construction, but more fundamentally from audiences' affective investments in the images of identity that it produces.

The affective dimension of soft power emphasises "national properties such as cultural richness," which includes a rich cultural heritage (Jhee & Lee, 2011). In contrast, soft power's normative dimensions are found in behaviours and actions that observe "international norms which strengthen legitimacy of a country" (2011). It is in the NLA's (2020a, p. 14) efforts to support contribution to

Australia's rich, diverse and enduring culture and heritage

in which this affective dimension lies. Cultural and creative strengths can reinforce normative efforts to project "international credibility and influence" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2008, p. 266). National libraries, as cultural and knowledge institutions, have potential to promote a soft power appeal through affective investment in these strengths. The promotion of soft power appeal is seen an affective "social construction of identity" (Solomon, 2014, p. 721).

The NLA's Trove platform provides an avenue to advance international promotion and access to Australian creative and cultural material (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2008, p. 266). While the annual report primarily focuses on access for Australians, ALIA's (2018, p. 2) *Submission in response to the Australian Government Soft Power Review*

presents the NLA's Trove platform as an example of soft power influence through digital access. That is, digital access to collections may promote Australia's culture and heritage internationally, projecting the voices of Australian creators' globally. This aligns with the Foreign Policy White Paper's emphasis on "a stronger nation brand" and "digital engagement," recognising new technologies and digital access change how "influence is exercised" (DFAT, 2017).

Australia and Asia and the Pacific

The NLA's Asian and Pacific collecting policies have already been a source of public debate historically (Horton, 1996). These debates reflect a shift in understandings of the library's collecting purpose, from a global and world knowledge (historically) to knowledge as national, reflecting and representing a national identity (Davison, 2006, p. 94). The findings of this paper indicated the NLA's collecting is centred around knowledge building. The extent to which knowledge building contributes to a soft power context, and how it reproduces and enacts soft power discourse, depends on where collecting priorities are directed.

The 1993-1998 strategic plan, *Service to the nation: Access to the globe*, described the NLA's intent to "release funds over several years by reducing its collecting and processing of printed materials from overseas" (Horton, 1996, p. 157). Warren Horton, the NLA's Director-General at that time, emphasised access of Australians to global knowledge was still being upheld and the NLA's Asian and Pacific collections remained a high priority (1996, p. 157). Horton was responding to accusations that the NLA's collections reflected an alignment with the Australian government's political agenda, including "foreign policy, trade and humanitarian objectives" (1996, p. 158). Horton noted that the NLA's strategic plan, not collection policy documents, had this objective. He further stated that this quote refers to the NLA's international presence, not their collections, and that political agenda has had no influence on the direction of the NLA's collection policy (1996, p. 158). These concerns over the NLA's overseas collecting policy, national interest, and foreign policy persist, extending into a critique of collecting responsibilities for knowledge on Asia and the Pacific region. Historic (Horton, 1996) and contemporary (Spigelman, 2020) commentary exists that enquires whether Australian university libraries, instead of the NLA, are positioned to provide access to resources for this regional knowledge.

The NLA's overseas collecting prioritises Asia and the Pacific region, framed within the context of enriching Australia's regional relationships and identity (NLA, 2020a, p. 15). As described in the findings, commentary from outside the NLA, on the decision to reduce overseas collecting, saw concern over the possible impact on Australia's strategic knowledge and the effectiveness of Australia's soft power promotion (Aspinall, 2020b).. Byrne (2016, p. 116) describes how the 2008 *Australia 2020 Summit* recognised strategic gaps around Australia's "understanding and knowledge of the Asia region, its languages and cultures". The Summit report listed ambitions for 2020 within the theme of "ties with the Asia-Pacific region" and described a new outward looking paradigm (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2008, p. 389). Outward engagement is considered as an opportunity to learn from other countries and cultures (2008, p. 80). The challenge of promoting Australia's cultural activity globally is recognised as requiring a balance between national and international engagement (2008, p. 266). The report establishes the need to "re-imagine" the diversity of Australia's culture "as outward looking" to support multilateral foreign policy in the Asia region (2008, p. 386). The soft power skills and capabilities required for these ambitions place cultural diplomacy and creative endeavours at the forefront of curating a national vision with international appeal (2008, p. 266). While this is reflected in the NLA's annual report, tension between inward and outward looking engagement persist in collecting priorities.

The balance between outward and inward engagement in soft power may be considered blurred. Sharing identity, values, culture, and policy internationally requires promoting and cultivating creative and cultural endeavours within Australian communities. The Summit report (2008, p. 266) suggests the domestic benefit of establishing Australia's international credibility and influence is the message of "national values, achievements, and confidence" communicated to Australians. It remains, however, as Heriot states in response to DFAT'S *Soft Power Review*, that "Australia's soft power outreach needs to be purposeful and appropriate in a given context, and demonstrate cultural awareness, a deeper understanding of the target environment, or both" (Heriot, 2018, p. 7). Where attraction is cultivated through credibility, cultural knowledge can support soft power that is "not obviously self-referential" and produces shared identification with and investment in values, between agent and subject (Hayden, 2012, p. 239). Thus, cultural knowledge may support soft power as a two-way narrative, rather than one-way export. The discourse reproduced

and enacted in these narratives remains significant in cultural and knowledge institutions, including libraries. As libraries, such as the NLA, contribute to national identity, cultural exchange, and knowledge creation, the soft power discourse they enact may have a greater impact on soft power attraction than has been recognised.

Research implications

This research has aimed to further understandings of how national libraries can contribute to soft power, cultural diplomacy, and exchange. It has potential to support Australian libraries in strengthening their role in international relations and cultural diplomacy, especially in the Asia and the Pacific region. Further research is required to build on the findings and generate greater opportunity for their application. The study has not explored the diachronic change of libraries soft power discourse (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 91), instead focusing on discourse specific to the NLA's 2019-20 annual report. Future research could examine the historical trajectory of discourse on soft power and cultural diplomacy in national libraries to better understand the contexts it exists in and its future directions. This may contribute to the strategic direction of national libraries, engaging as cultural ambassadors, as agents or instruments of cultural diplomacy and foreign policy (Mariano & Vårheim, 2021).

Research exploring other library types could also highlight other means of soft power attraction in libraries, with less emphasis on cultural diplomacy. Academic libraries are one such area given higher education's positioning as a means of soft power influence and attraction (Li, 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Lo, 2011). This is seen in the internationalisation of higher education (Bislev, 2017; Lo & Pan, 2021; Tyler & Van Leuven, 2020), library partnerships and exchanges (ALIA, 2018, pp. 4-5), and open access (Ren & Montgomery, 2015). Further research in these areas may extend beyond a soft power framework to emphasise the role of university libraries in knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2017), with care taken in distinguishing between soft power and knowledge diplomacy concepts (Knight, 2018).

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how soft power discourse is reproduced and enacted in the NLA's *Annual Report 2019-20*. The purpose of the research was to contribute an understanding of the role of libraries in soft power through a critical discourse analysis. It also extends existing literature that understands soft power discursively. This research is a starting

point to informing how Australian libraries consider national interests and international partnerships, with consideration to cultural diplomacy.

The major findings encompassed two key themes from analysis of the annual report: first, Australia's national identity, and second, regional relationships in Asia and the Pacific. Within these themes, cultural knowledge was recognised as strategically significant to the NLA's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Soft power discourse was found to emphasise the construction and preservation of national identity, especially in collecting priorities. Cultural heritage can then provide the means for soft power appeal through affective investment in Australia's national identity. The annual report indicated that Australian knowledge of Australian content was prioritised in collection policy and this was found to be an affective investment in national identity. The discussion highlighted how national identity can be used as a means for soft power, but often requires other tools, such as cultural diplomacy, to ensure multilateral understanding and exchange.

The second key theme in the findings was regional relationships. Asia and Pacific collections were considered in the context of the NLA's decision to reduce overseas collecting as a priority. The findings once again centred on the significance of knowledge, especially cultural knowledge, to soft power. The potential for strategic gaps in Australia's soft power and cultural diplomacy in the absence of this knowledge were a key consideration, especially given the importance of shared cultural understanding to building cultural diplomacy and facilitating reciprocal exchange.

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