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Audience Perceptions in the Global South: A Survey-Based Analysis of Beijing's Multidimensional Image in South Africa

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Abstract:

Focusing on the under-researched nexus of city image and Global South audiences, this study investigates Beijing's multidimensional perception in South Africa. Grounded in an integrated framework of soft power and city branding, it employs a stratified survey and regression analysis to reveal a structural *City Gap*, while Beijing is admired for technological and economic prowess, its image as a political center and inclusive metropolis remains weak, indicating a ceiling for performance-based legitimacy. Regression identifies media exposure and direct visits as key positive predictors. Crucially, a demographic divide emerges: younger cohorts show a significant *youth dividend* of favorable views, whereas higher education correlates with skepticism. The results confirm the two-step flow of communication, demonstrating the primacy of local media mediation over official narratives. The study concludes by advocating for a strategic pivot from broadcast publicity to *city citizen diplomacy*, emphasizing glocalized engagement to build genuine soft power.

Keywords: Beijing's image; City branding; Soft power; Global South; Sino-African relations; Public diplomacy

1. Introduction: The Geopolitics of City Image in Global South

As the global landscape shifts, the rise of the Global South has challenged Western-centric epistemologies in international communication. Within this context, China's *going global* strategy has triggered extensive scholarly debate regarding its soft power and national image. However, existing literature suffers from two significant limitations: a methodological over-reliance on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, and a geographical bias that prioritizes Western perspectives over those of

the Global South. This study addresses these gaps by shifting the analytical lens to the *city*—specifically Beijing—and examining its reception in South Africa, a pivotal node in Sino-African relations.

Global cities have emerged as critical actors in public diplomacy, often possessing distinct brand personalities that may diverge from their national counterparts. While Beijing serves as the political heart of China, its international image is frequently conflated with the monolithic narrative of the state. This reductionist view obscures the city's multidimensional identity as a hub of technological innovation, cultural heritage, and economic dynamism. Consequently, a *City Gap* exists—a discrepancy between a city's projected resources and its perceived reality abroad.

South Africa offers a unique vantage point for this investigation. As a strategic partner in BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative, South Africa's media ecology is characterized by a complex interplay of Western liberal values and increasing engagement with the *China Model*. Understanding how South African audiences navigate these competing narratives is crucial for decolonizing soft power research.

To systematically explore this, this study integrates soft power, city branding, and the two-step flow of communication into a coherent analytical framework. Utilizing a stratified probability survey (N=500), the research moves beyond descriptive reporting to investigate the determinants and mediation mechanisms shaping Beijing's multidimensional image in the South African public sphere. By revealing the structural tension between the city's economic appeal and its political reception, this inquiry offers empirical evidence for the limits of performance-based legitimacy and advocates for a strategic transition towards *City Citizen Diplomacy* in cross-cultural engagement.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Mirroring China's global ascent, scholarly inquiry has evolved from analyzing Western hegemonic framing (Yan, 1998; Xiang, 2013) to examining the mechanisms of state-led image construction (Ding, 2007).

2.1 The African Context and the *City Gap*

In the Global South, perceptions diverge from Western paradigms, often correlating inversely with development levels (Xie & Page, 2013). Within Africa, China's image is anchored in economic engagement (Alden & Large, 2018; Liang, 2012), oscillating between admiration for development models and anxieties regarding sovereignty (Sautman & Hairong, 2007; Taylor, 2009). Crucially, this narrative is not monolithic but mediated by local African agency and media infrastructures (Gagliardone, 2019; Li, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2018).

Despite this progress, a significant lacuna exists at the sub-national level. Existing Beijing-centric literature remains saturated with 2008 Olympics studies (Gjermano et al., 2007; Preuss & Alfs, 2011), which yield conflicting findings on brand

repositioning (Zeng et al., 2011) versus stereotype reinforcement (Syed, 2010). Scant research addresses Beijing's quotidian identity (Chen et al., 2014) or its specific reception in the Global South (Alden & Soko, 2005). Addressing these gaps, this study shifts the analytical lens from the nation to the city (Liu, 2012) and centers non-Western epistemologies (Thussu, 2018; Wasserman, 2020) to construct a more granular understanding of soft power.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: A Multi-Dimensional Model of City Soft Power

To systematically analyze the construction and reception of Beijing's image, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework synthesizing four theoretical strands: Soft Power, City Branding, Political Communication, and New Public Diplomacy. (See Figure 1)

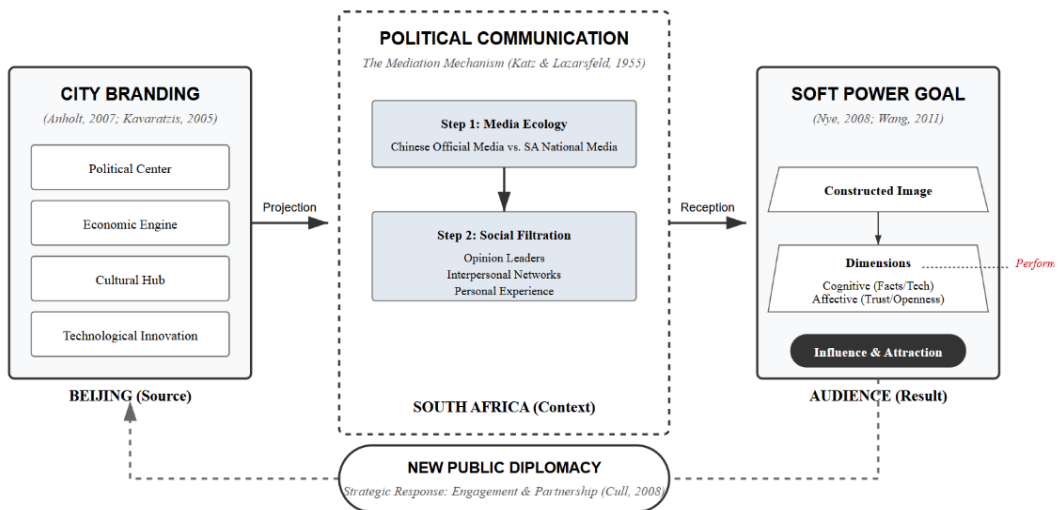


Figure 1 Integrated analytical framework on Beijing's image Source: Made by author

To systematically analyze the negotiation of Beijing's image in South Africa, this study synthesizes four interlocking theoretical strands. First, grounded in **soft power** (Nye, 2008), we conceptualize Beijing not merely as a capital but as a primary vehicle for projecting China's cultural and developmental narratives (d'Hooghe, 2015), treating soft power as a constructed outcome of resource conversion (Wang, 2011). Second, we employ **city branding** theory (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) to deconstruct this image into distinct dimensions (e.g., economic vitality vs. political centrality), enabling a granular assessment of performance legitimacy. Third, the **two-step flow of communication** (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) explains the mediation gap between projected and perceived images. The authors posit that Beijing's brand is filtered through the Global South's distinct media ecology—specifically local opinion leaders and domestic media (Wasserman, 2020)—rather than absorbed

directly from official Chinese sources. Finally, findings are interpreted through **New Public Diplomacy** (Cull, 2008), which serves as the framework's strategic feedback loop, advocating a shift from unilateral broadcasting to engagement-based *city citizen diplomacy* to overcome media skepticism.

The research questions of this paper mainly include:

RQ1: What exactly is the Beijing image among South Africans?

RQ2: What is South Africans' attitude towards Beijing concerning its status quo image, especially in terms of Beijing as a main center of politics, culture, technological innovation, and international exchange?

RQ3: In what ways can the image of Beijing be boosted in a sustainable fashion?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling Strategy

To empirically investigate the multidimensional image of Beijing in the Global South, this study employed a quantitative survey design targeting the general public in South Africa. The study utilized a **stratified quota sampling strategy** to generate a representative sample of the South African internet population. Quotas were strictly aligned with the latest South African census data regarding **gender** (50% male, 50% female), **age** (stratified into 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, and 45+ cohorts), and **region** (covering major provinces including Gauteng, Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal). This rigorous sampling frame mitigates the biases inherent in convenience sampling. The final valid sample consisted of 500 respondents (N=500), achieving a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of $\pm 4.38\%$.

3.2 Instrumentation and Reliability

The survey instrument was operationalized based on established city branding frameworks, primarily adapting Anholt's (2007) City Brands Index to the specific socio-political context of Sino-African relations. The dependent variable, *Overall City Image*, was measured using a single-item 10-point scale, complemented by multi-item Likert scales assessing specific dimensions including political, economic, cultural, and technological attributes. Key independent variables comprised demographic controls (age, education, income), direct interaction (visit experience), and an aggregate *Media Contact Frequency* index, which captured the intensity of information exposure across domestic, international, and Chinese channels. To ensure construct validity and mitigate potential cultural biases in question phrasing, a pilot study (N=50) was conducted prior to the main fieldwork. The psychometric properties of the scales were further validated through internal consistency analysis; Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the multidimensional city perception scale ($\alpha=0.84$) and the media consumption index ($\alpha=0.78$) both exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, confirming the instrument's reliability for inferential analysis.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0 in two phases. First, **descriptive statistics** were calculated to map the cognitive landscape of Beijing’s image. Second, responding to the need for explanatory depth, a **Multiple Linear Regression (MLR)** analysis was conducted. This inferential method allowed the study to move beyond descriptive reporting to identify the specific determinants—such as the "youth dividend" and media exposure effects—that drive public perception, while controlling for confounding demographic variables.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Beijing International Studies University and Kantar Media Research. All participants provided digital informed consent prior to the survey, which clearly outlined the study’s purpose, voluntary nature, and right to withdraw. Strictly adhering to data protection regulations, all responses were anonymized, and no personally identifiable information was stored in the final dataset.

4 Results

4.1 The Landscape of Beijing’s Image

Descriptive statistics reveal a distinct structural dichotomy in Beijing’s brand profile. As illustrated in Table 1, the city’s image is heavily anchored in material capabilities, with respondents consistently rating the Economic and Technological dimensions most favorably. In sharp contrast, perceptions regarding Political and Livability attributes lagged significantly, as the "Political Center" indicator received the lowest mean scores. This perception gap indicates that while Beijing is admired for its functional power and modernization, it faces a substantial deficit in normative appeal and governance.

Table 1 Comparison of China’s city recognition

(%)	Beijing	Shanghai	Tianjin	Chongqing	Guangzhou	Shenzhen
I have heard the city	87	88	46	34	51	66
I have known the city	35	29	5	5	14	10
I have been to the city	13	10	5	2	10	5

Regarding the information ecology shaping these perceptions, Table 2 demonstrates the dominance of local mediation. South African national media remains the primary information source (72%), significantly overshadowing Chinese official media (18%) and other international outlets. This reliance on domestic gatekeepers, coupled with

the prominence of social media as a secondary channel, underscores the "two-step flow" mechanism, suggesting that Beijing's image is filtered through local interpretive frames rather than absorbed directly from state-led narratives.

Table 2 Visiting rate, reason and time

Have you ever been to Beijing (%)	South Africa	Africa	Developing Country
Visiting rate	13	12.1	18
Sample size	500	1000	3500
Reasons for visiting Beijing			
Tourism	62	63	72
Business	38	52	41
Work	22	20	21
Relatives and friends visit (%)	17	12	15
Academic activity	9	17	13
Studying abroad	9	13	11
Diplomatic activity	5	3	6
Time of visiting Beijing (%)			
2013-2025	77	79	75
2009-2012	11	12	16
2002-2008	8	7	7
1993-2001	2	1	1

The overall score of South Africans on the city image of Beijing is 7.33 (between relatively good and very good, with a full score of 10 points), which is higher than the global level, but slightly lower than the overall African level (see Figure 2). In addition, the overall score of Beijing's image in South Africa is lower than that of developing countries. This means that the image of Beijing in South Africa is good. Nevertheless, in contrast to Egypt (7.64), it is supposed to be further boosted.

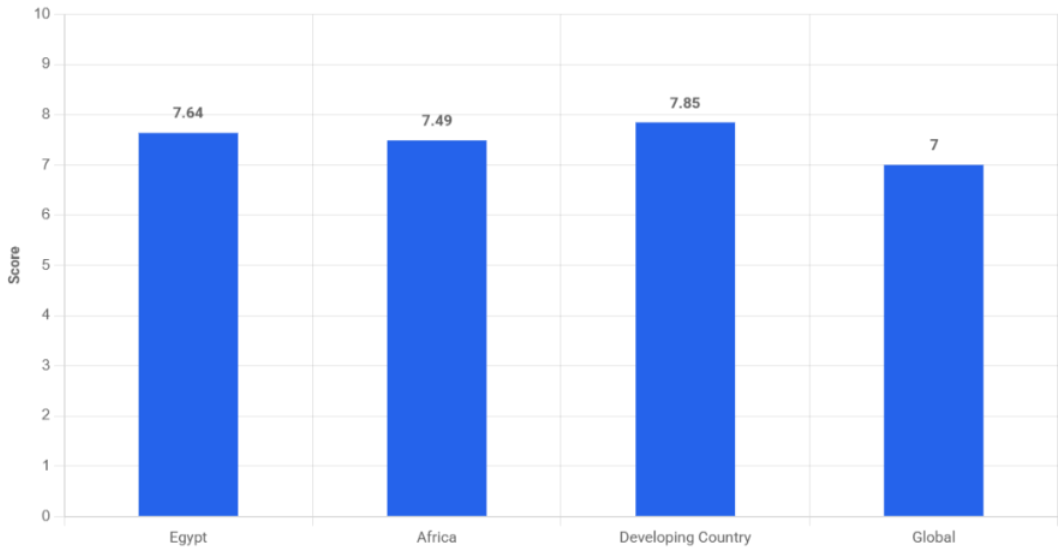


Figure 2 Score on Beijing's image Source: Made by author

From a global perspective, the overall score given by South African respondents is higher than that by respondents from developed countries. In order to eliminate the effect of education and income level, the author has adopted a weighted conversion algorithm to convert the average score into a percentage system, and obtained the following results (see Figure 3). The overall score difference between the two countries in Africa is not large, both of which are at a relatively low level among developing countries. Hence, Africa, especially South Africa, becomes a critical place for Beijing's international publicity.

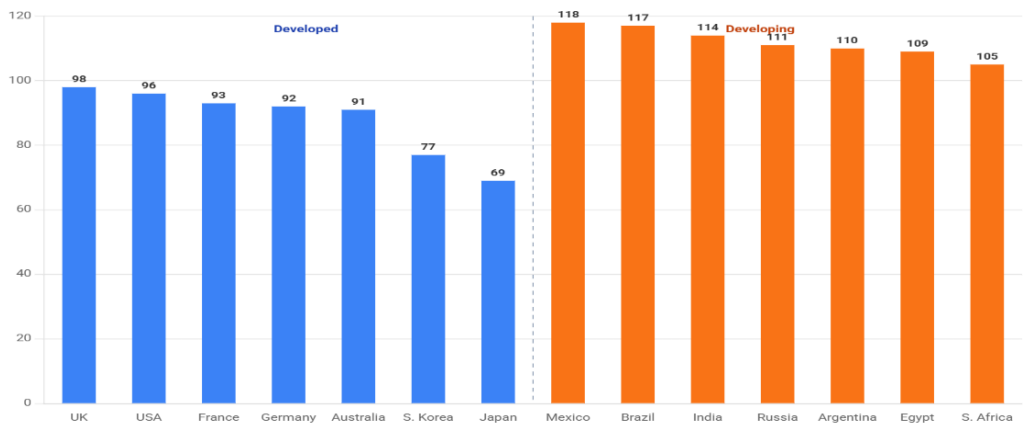


Figure 3 Weighted score of Beijing's image Source: Made by author

4.2 Determinants of Beijing’s City Image: A Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to isolate the explanatory factors of Beijing’s city image. (See Table3)

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Factors Affecting Beijing’s Overall Image

Variable	B	SEB	β	t	p
(Constant)	42.5	3.12		13.62	.000
Media Contact Frequency	4.85	0.35	.42	13.85	.000
Visit Experience	6.20	1.80	.14	3.44	.001
Age	-1.55	0.45	-.16	-3.44	.001
Income Level	1.25	0.58	.09	2.15	.032
Education Level	-0.95	0.46	-.08	-2.06	.040

Note: Dependent Variable: Overall Beijing Image Score. R² = .36.

The model proved statistically significant (F(5,494)=55.4, p<.001), accounting for 36% of the variance in public perception (R²=.36.). As detailed in Table 3, media contact frequency emerged as the strongest positive predictor (β=.42, p<.001). This result corroborates the “mere exposure effect,” suggesting that intensity of information consumption—regardless of the platform—is the primary catalyst for familiarity and affinity. Similarly, visit experience significantly bolstered image scores (β=.14, p<.001), indicating that direct engagement effectively bridges cognitive gaps and mitigates stereotypes perpetuated by distant reporting.

Demographic predictors revealed a nuanced stratification of opinion. Age was negatively associated with image evaluations (β=-.16, p<.01), suggesting that the younger generation is more receptive to Beijing’s narrative of technological modernity than older cohorts potentially influenced by Cold War frameworks. Socioeconomic variables presented a divergence: Income positively predicted favorable views (β=.09, p<.05), reflecting the appeal of economic opportunity among affluent groups. Conversely, education demonstrated a negative correlation ((β=-.08, p<.05), pointing to a critical elite phenomenon. This finding implies that while Beijing’s economic narrative resonates with the wealthy, its political dimensions face scrutiny from highly educated audiences, highlighting a structural tension in the city’s soft power projection.

4.3 Image of Beijing and Its Citizens

The three most prominent impressions of Beijing among South Africans are “advanced technology” (86%), “booming economy” (85%) and “rich culture” (82%). The score on the dimension of openness and tolerance is low (51%), and that on the dimension of “political center” is the lowest (only 45%). Therefore, Beijing is

prominent in “technology, economy and culture”, but poor in “politics and openness”, which is consistent with Africa in general. Compared with Egypt, which is also a part of Africa, the image of Beijing in South Africa is in a disadvantageous position except for the culture and modernity dimension (see Table 4). Beijing’s image needs to be further enhanced in South Africa. Publicity which combines “soft dissemination and hard dissemination” should be done in promoting Beijing’s politics and openness to effectively build Beijing’s image as a political center of an open and trustworthy China.

Table 4 Image of Beijing

Strongly agree/agree (%)	Global	Developed Country	Developing Country	South Africa	Africa	Egypt
Rich culture	80	76	85	82	82	81
Booming economy	80	73	86	85	86	87
Long history	78	75	81	77	77	77
Advanced technology	76	66	86	86	88	88
Modernity	67	55	80	76	71	65
Political center	65	65	66	45	57	68
Livability	57	43	71	69	70	70
Openness and tolerance	49	38	59	51	60	71

In terms of the image of Beijing citizens, the first impression of more than 70% of the South Africans on Beijing people is “pioneering and innovative” (South Africa, Egypt and Africa in general are all 72%), “diligent and dedicated” (70%) and “discipline-observing and law-abiding” (66%). The image of Beijing people in South Africa differs slightly from that in Africa in general in the “positive and optimistic” dimension. It lags behind the image in Egypt in almost every dimension, but leads the image in the world. The results confirm that Beijing citizens have maintained a positive image in South Africa. In the eye of South Africans, Beijing citizens are pioneering and hardworking, but lack “environmental protection awareness” (43%) and “enthusiasm and tolerance” (51%). (see Table 5). There is still a need to counter the stereotype of Beijing citizens painted by Western media in South Africa.

Table 5 Image of Beijing citizen

Positive evaluation (%)	Global	Developed Country	Developing Country	South Africa	Africa	Egypt
Diligence and dedication	66	54	77	70	75	81
Discipline-observing and law-abiding spirit	60	49	72	66	68	70
Obedience to the country	58	55	61	54	57	60
Manner in public	58	47	68	65	67	70
Optimism	57	46	68	63	69	76
Pioneering and innovative spirit	54	41	68	72	72	72
Honesty and trustworthiness	50	38	61	51	54	57
Enthusiasm and tolerance	45	35	58	53	62	70
Environmental protection awareness	35	21	49	43	51	58

4.4 Image of Political Center

4.4.1 Image of Government

As mentioned above, currently there is much room for improvement in the political impression of South Africans on Beijing. More than 60% of South Africans believe that the Beijing government is a “governance-efficient government” (63%) and an “innovative government” (60%), followed by “law-abiding government”, “responsible government” and “self-disciplined government”. The results of South Africa and Egypt are almost the same. There is only a certain deviation in “law-abiding government” as the Egyptian people agree with this dimension more (see Figure 4). Overall, the Beijing government maintains a positive, optimistic and responsible image, which is confirmed by the survey among respondents in South Africa and Egypt. As for South Africa, the Beijing government is expected to improve its image in South Africa by concentrating on promoting its integrity.

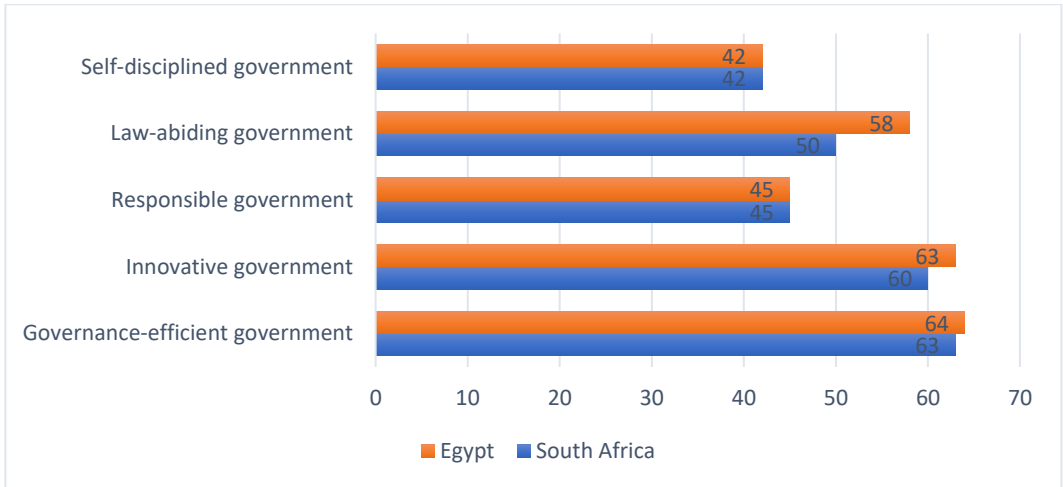


Figure 4 Image of Beijing government Source: Made by author

4.4.2 City Development Concept

In terms of the city development concept put forward by the Beijing Municipal Government, South Africans most agree with “technology-empowered Beijing” (52%), which is consistent with the Beijing’s overall impression. “Smart city” (50%) ranks second, while “livable city” (33%) and “environment-friendly Beijing” (33%) tie for third place (see Table 6). The choices of the South Africans are generally consistent with those by people from Africa and developing countries. Compared with Egypt, South African respondents agree more on the levels of “smart city” and “co-development between urban and rural areas”, but less in other dimensions. Therefore, it can be inferred that South Africans pay more attention to the application and development of technology in the construction of smart cities, and also care more about the top-level design of the government in the dimensions of livability and ecology.

Table 6 City development concept

%	Global	Developed Country	Developing Country	South Africa	Egypt
Technology-empowered Beijing	38	25	51	52	65
Smart city	36	23	49	50	33
Livable city	27	17	37	33	44
Environment-friendly Beijing	24	15	34	33	36

Co-development between urban and rural areas	19	14	23	22	19
International talent community building	17	13	22	16	29
High-quality development	15	12	18	18	21

4.4.3 Major Event

Among the large-scale events held in Beijing, the 2008 Summer Olympics has a profound influence. Eighty percent of South Africans are impressed by the Beijing Olympics, much higher than Egypt (60%) and the world (70%), and tie developing countries (76%). After the Beijing Olympics, the influence of mega events held in Beijing has been relatively weakened in South Africa. The “Beijing Film Festival” (30%) ranks second, and the “Beijing International Marathon” (27%) and “China-Africa Cooperation Forum” (27%) tie for third. It is worth noting that South African respondents’ awareness of the “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” (13%) and “Beijing International Horticultural Exhibition” (9%) is significantly lower than the global average (see Table 7). Mega event, as a major tool of diplomacy, needs to be promoted among South Africans.

Table 7 Large-scale events in Beijing

%	Global	Developed country	Developing country	South Africa	Egypt
2008 Beijing Summer Olympics	70	64	76	80	60
Beijing Film Festival	26	19	34	30	38
Beijing International Marathon	23	19	27	27	20
Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	17	15	18	13	23
China-Africa Cooperation Forum	16	11	21	27	31
Beijing International Book Fair	16	9	23	13	36
Beijing International Horticultural Expo	14	12	16	9	15
Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations	12	9	15	10	16

In terms of the evaluation of large-scale events, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games is still well received (59%), with scores higher than the level of Egypt and the world in general. Although South Africans do not have a high level of awareness of the “Beijing International Horticultural Exhibition”, they still think highly of this event (51%), which is significantly higher than the global average. In addition, South African respondents are fond of the “Beijing International Book Fair” (45%) (see Figure 5). Although the welcoming level is lower than that in Egypt, it still exceeds the world

average. This shows that generally African residents prefer soft activities such as sports and entertainment. For example, more than half of South Africans are satisfied with the “Beijing International Marathon” (53%). Sport and entertainment activities are still among the top lists for the construction of Beijing’s image and play a decisive role in the transnational transmission of Beijing’s image.

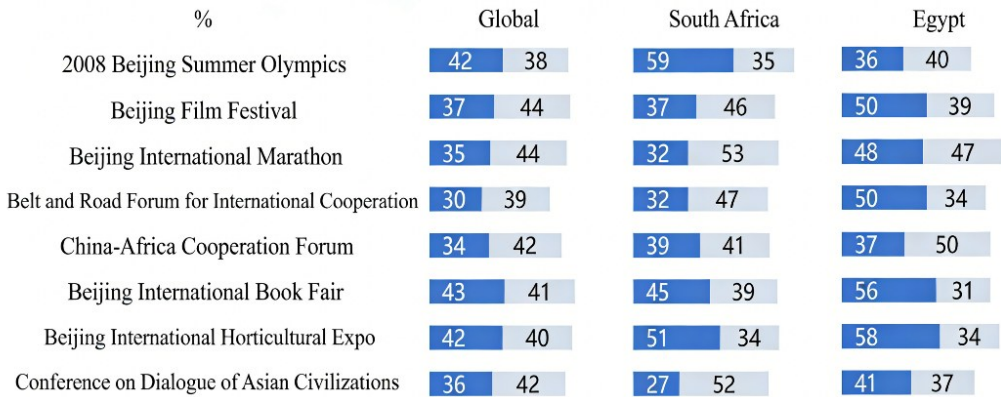


Figure 5 Feedback on large-scale events in Beijing Source: Made by author. (Blue bar stands for very good, and grey bar for relatively good)

4.5 Image of Cultural Center

In the impression of South Africans, the most renowned cultural symbol in Beijing is the famous monuments including the Great Wall (53%), followed by local food (48%) and traditional clothing (44%).

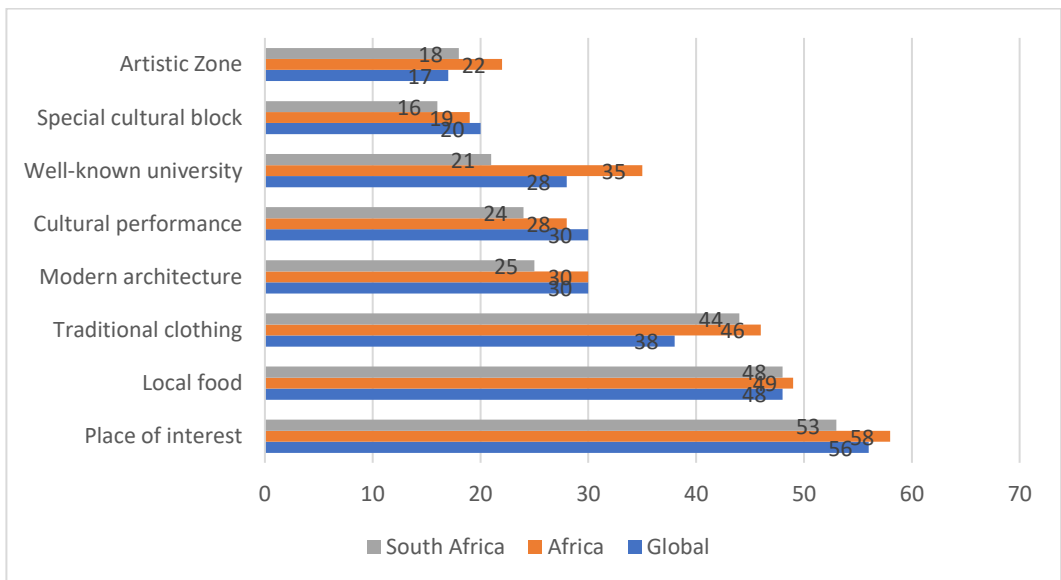


Figure 6 Cultural symbols in Beijing Source: Made by author

Compared with people from Africa and the world, South Africans give a low score in the four dimensions of modern architecture (25%), cultural performances (24%), well-known universities (21%) and special cultural blocks (16%) (See Figure 6), showing a tendency of “emphasis on tradition and nature, and ignorance of modernity and humanity”. In view of the “heterogeneity” characteristics presented by the respondents, in the process of making Beijing culture accessible in South Africa, it is particularly important to conduct “personal recommendation” for differentiated audience.

For the cultural landmarks in Beijing, the Great Wall ranks first by more than half of the South African respondents (54%), ranks second and third by 12% and 7% respectively. The Temple of Heaven ranks second, and the Forbidden City ranks third (see Figure 7). Therefore, the Great Wall, Temple of Heaven and Forbidden City constitute the cultural symbols that best represent Beijing. The Great Wall ranks the top possibly because of the Great Wall Platform, which is a TV broadcasting platform that is available in South Africa. It is worth noting that not many respondents from South Africa recommend the cultural landscapes such as traditional Beijing courtyard, 798 Art District, and Sanlitun, which means they need further promotion and publicity.

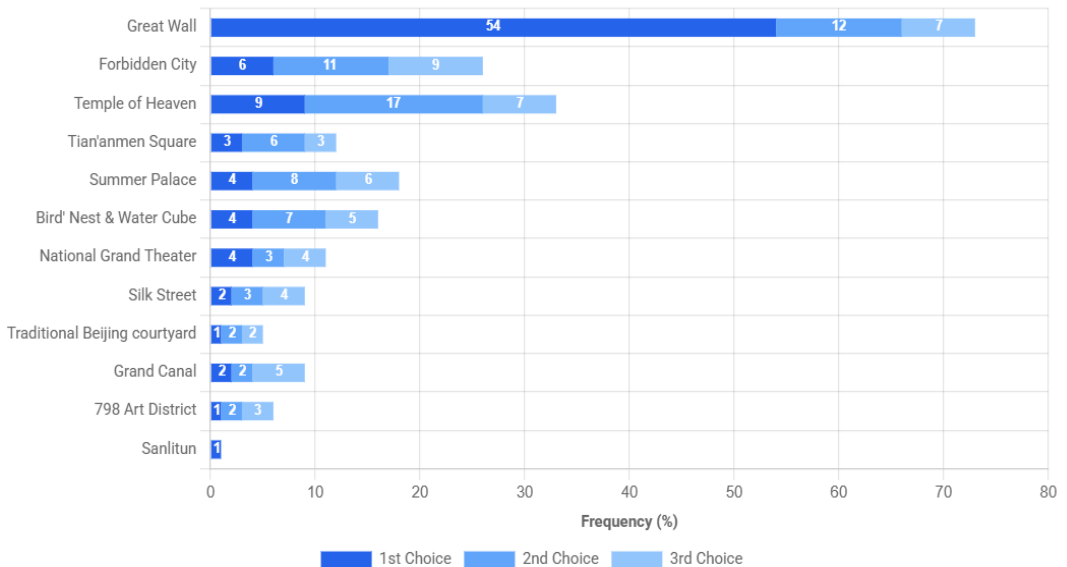


Figure 7 Recommendation of cultural landmarks in Beijing Source: Made by author

In terms of the recommendations for promoting Beijing as the cultural center, more than half of South Africans choose “protection of cultural heritage” (53%), followed by “promotion of food culture” (48%) and “emphasis on cultural and creative industries” (38%) (see Table 8). Compared with Egypt, Africa and the world in

general, these three choices are at the leading level, and South Africa maintains a high standard in other dimensions. It can be seen that South Africans pay high attention on Chinese culture, and they suggest that the dissemination of culture should be industrialized on a large scale. In addition, South African respondents give a higher suggestion on the “promotion of night economy” (26%), both exceeding regional and global averages, reflecting the importance South Africans attach to the economy and the pursuit of life quality. The findings above offer the specific advices for the promotion of Beijing as the cultural center.

Table 8 Suggestions for promoting Beijing as cultural center

%	Global	Africa	South Africa	Egypt
Establishment of top universities	20	32	25	39
Cultivation of cultural specialist	17	22	24	21
Improvement of citizen ethos	31	32	27	38
Holding of theatrical performances	29	36	30	41
Exhibition of cultural products	27	36	37	35
Promotion of food culture	35	36	38	34
Boost cultural and creative industries	29	36	38	34
Protection of cultural heritage	51	51	53	49
Promotion of night economy	19	22	26	19
Establishment of historical and cultural blocks	26	31	29	32
Construction of cultural venues	28	33	30	36

4.6 Image of International Exchange Center

The average score that South Africans give for the internationalization of Beijing is 7.3 (see Figure 8), showing a high degree of recognition. Although the score is slightly lower than the overall score by people from Egypt (7.4) and developing countries (7.8), it is obviously higher than the score by people from developed countries (6.5) and slightly higher than the global average score (7.2).

Half of South African respondents believe that “hosting various cultural and artistic events and sports events with international influence” (50%) is the best epitome of Beijing image as an international exchange center. It is followed by “clear and standardized multilingual guidance signs for foreigners” (47%) and “high tolerance for foreigners” (47%). It is worth noting that South Africans do not show strong recognition for the indicator of “large number of foreigners” (21%), which is lower than the overall level of people from

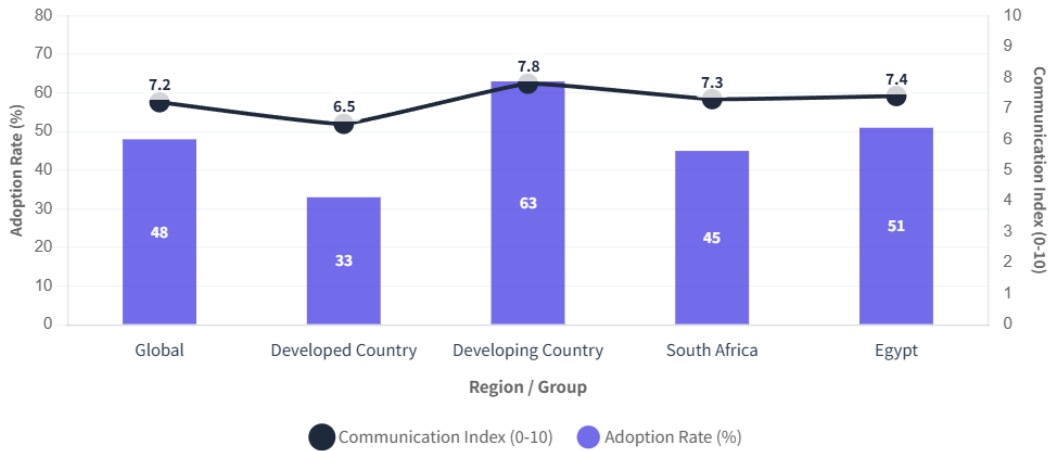


Figure 8 Image of Beijing as international exchange center Source: Made by author

Africa and the world (see Figure 9). It can be inferred that the national centripetal force of South Africans is slightly poor, so their adaptability to empathy communication strategies may not be too high.

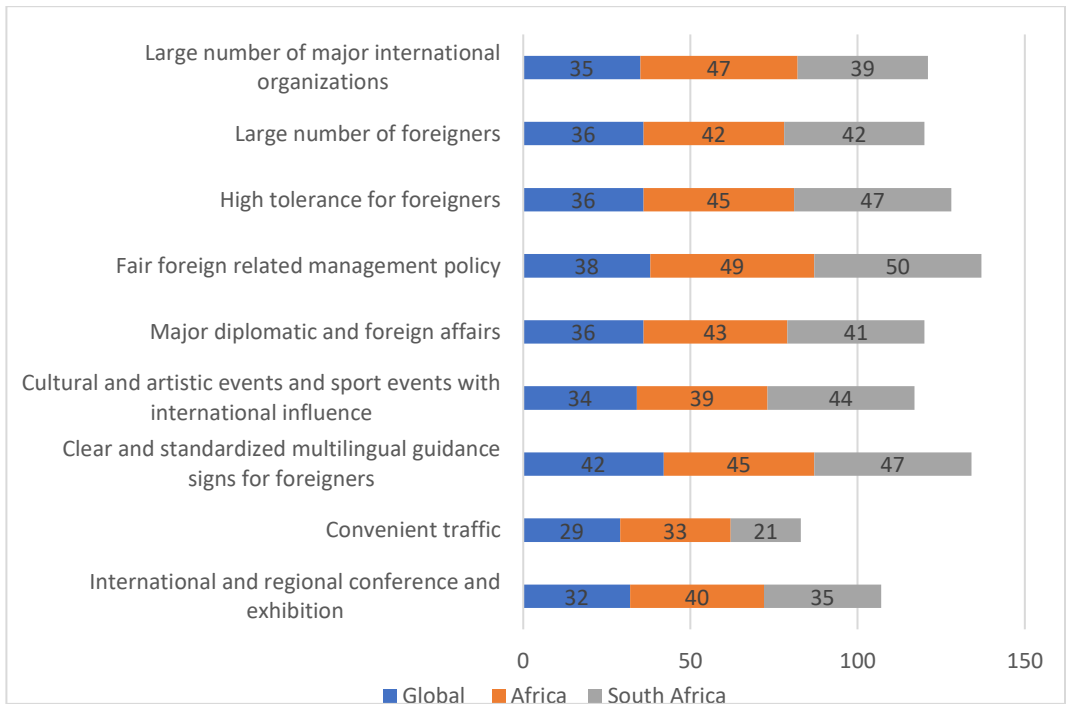


Figure 9 Indicator for Beijing as international exchange center Source: Made by author

In terms of the elements for promoting Beijing as an international exchange center, South African respondents believe that the most effective measure is the “wonderful travelling experience” (58%), followed by “safe and hygienic and convenient diet and eating environment” (55%) and “Clear and standard foreign language signs in public places” (54%) (see Figure 10). The finding above is basically consistent with that in Africa. People from Africa are more concerned about realistic problems such as hotel and transportation. Therefore, it can be inferred that Africans actually regard Beijing as a travelling destination, rather than an international exchange center with people from all over the world gathering, which presents a certain degree of cognitive deviation.

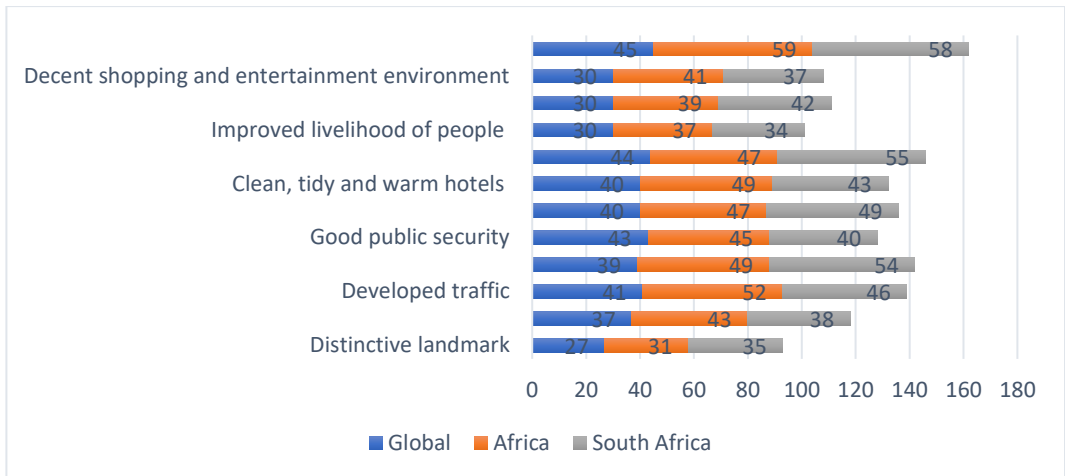


Figure 10 Suggestions for promoting Beijing as international exchange center

Source: Made by author

4.7 Image of Technology Center

The average score that South Africans give for the technological innovation degree of Beijing is 8.2, showing a high degree of recognition. Although the score is slightly lower than the overall score of people from Egypt (8.3) and developing countries (8.5), it is obviously higher than the score of people from developed countries (7.1) and slightly higher than the global average score (7.8) (see Figure 11).

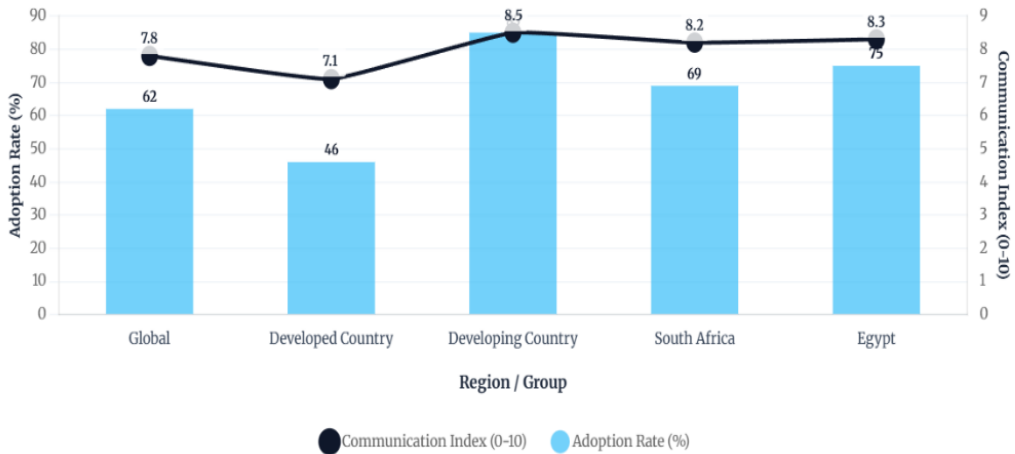


Figure 11 Image of Beijing as technology center Source: Made by author

The majority of South Africans believe that the technological advantage that Beijing enjoys is “numerous technology companies” (58%), followed by “wide application of technology in public places” (56%) and “high Internet coverage” (54%) (See Figure 12). The feedback by South African respondents is consistent with that by Africans in general. In addition, African residents maintain a strong interest in the frontiers of Internet technology applications in Beijing, such as bike sharing and mobile payment.

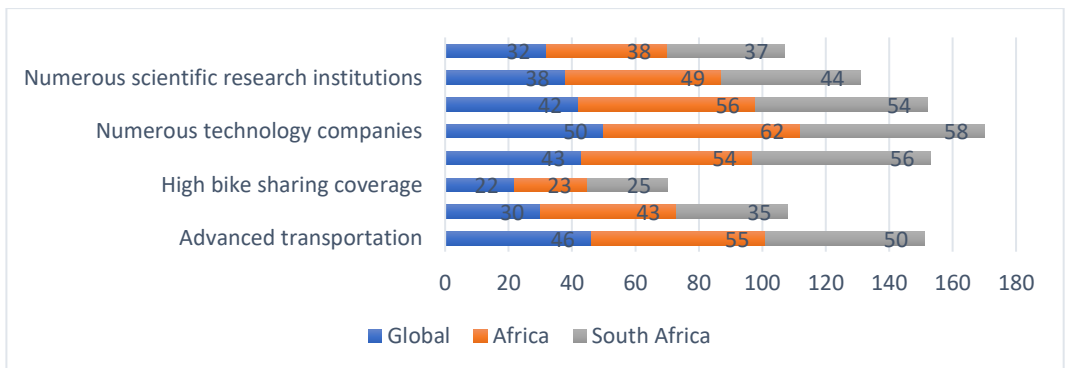


Figure 12 Technological symbol of Beijing Source: Made by author

4.8 Image of Livable Capital

The average score that South Africans give for the livability of Beijing is 7, which is the same with the global average, significantly higher than developed countries (6.1), but lower than Egypt (7.8) and developing countries (7.8) (see Figure 13).

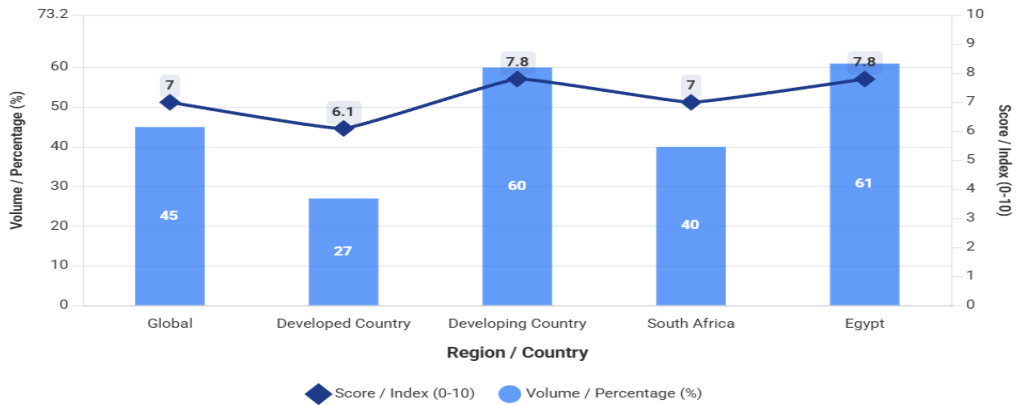


Figure 13 Image of the livability of Beijing Source: Made by author

South African respondents point out that Beijing's livability is mainly reflected in "high economic development" (67%), "plentiful opportunity" (59%) and "high degree of civilization" (48%), which is generally consistent with that in Africa and higher than the global average in all dimensions (see Figure 14). Compared with Africans in general, South Africans have lower requirements for health, convenience and sustainable development.

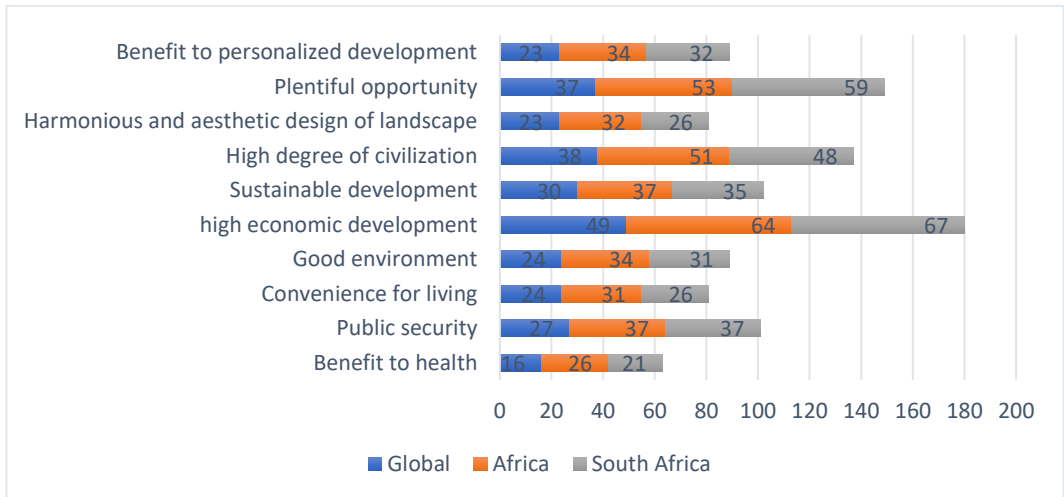


Figure 14 Livability indicator of Beijing Source: Made by author

In terms of problems in the Beijing image which also indicate directions for Beijing's international publicity, South Africans emphasize the "low national awareness" represented by etiquette (67%), focusing on dimensions such as "low democracy and freedom" (17%), "poor food quality" (17%), "crowded population" (17%), and "low air quality" (17%). The score by South Africans is slightly higher than that by Africans

in all dimensions, and is significantly higher than the global average except the air quality issue that gets global attention (See Figure 15).

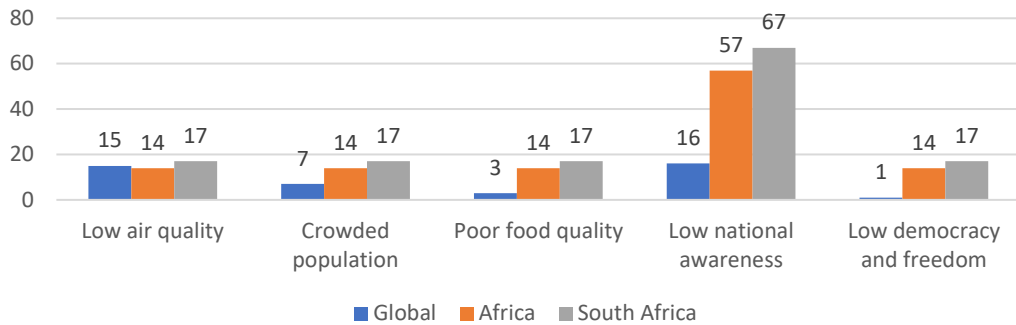


Figure 15 Livability problem in Beijing Source: Made by author

4.9 Beijing's Exposure and Audience Perception Channel

The exposure of Beijing to South Africans is almost on the same level with that of developing countries, with 36% of South African thinking it is "high". The number is higher than the global average and slightly higher than Egypt, which is also in Africa (see Table 9). More than 55% of South Africans have some knowledge of the global exposure of Beijing. It can be inferred that South African respondents are no strangers to Beijing.

Table 9 Exposure of Beijing

	Global	Developing Country	South Africa	Egypt
Very high	14	18	18	21
High	32	35	36	34
Moderate	37	32	30	27
Low	17	15	16	18

South African respondents' knowledge of Beijing mainly depends on their national media (71%), and their dependence level is highest in both Africa and the world (see Table 10). Therefore, South African media has become a vital part in perfecting Beijing's image. Secondly, South Africans rely on "their own observation" (50%) and "communication with others" (48%). The number is higher than the global average. Hence, South African respondents display a high level of independence and autonomy. Interpersonal communication and group communication have thus become significant directions for the promotion of Beijing.

Table 10 Perception channel of Beijing

%	Globa l	Develop ed Country	Developi ng Country	Afric a	Sout h Afric a	Egy pt
National media	56	57	54	59	71	48
Chinese media	19	16	22	22	18	26
Media in other countries	27	20	34	39	30	47
Self-observation	38	33	44	42	50	34
Communication with others	34	28	40	39	48	30
Experience in activities organized by China	15	11	19	17	13	22
Experience of buying or using Chinese products	32	19	45	46	38	53
Experience of visiting Beijing	11	10	12	8	10	7

In terms of media channels, South African respondents' knowledge of Beijing mainly relies on traditional media (76%), and their dependence is highest in both Africa and the world, followed by television, website (68%) and social media (64%) (see Figure 16). Newspaper (51%) and movie (46%) also gain a strong developing momentum. The level of paper media is also the highest in the world. New media and traditional media are competing with each other, making the media ecology in South Africa complicated.

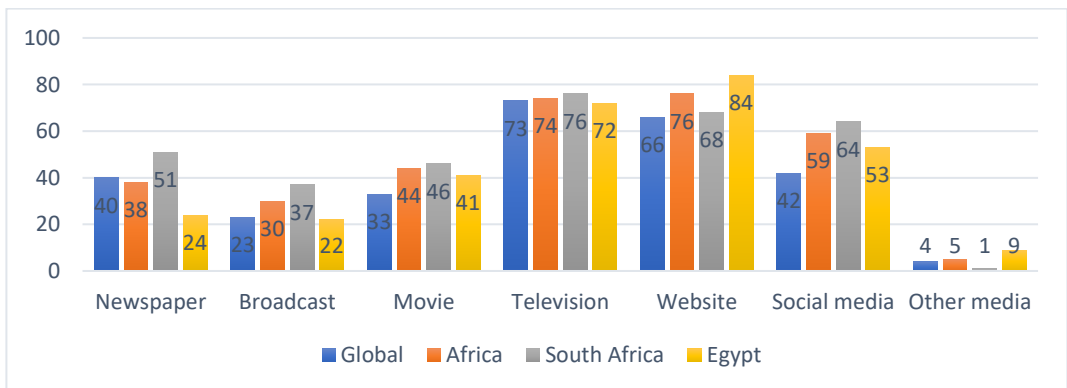


Figure 16 Media channel of perception of Beijing Source: Made by author

In terms of direct information channel, South African respondents' perception of Beijing mainly stems from "events organized by the Chinese Embassy" (55%), "product sales activities" (50%), and "tourism year" (47%) (see Table 11). The number is almost in line with that in Africa, but different from the global average. The

“Year of Culture” fails to become a crucial information source for African audiences to recognize Beijing, and the effectiveness of the “Confucius Institute Activities” (29%) also needs to be improved in South Africa.

Table 11 Perception Channel of Information of Beijing

%	Globa l	Develop ed Country	Develop ing Country	Afri ca	South Afric a	Egy pt
Year of Culture	49	46	51	31	32	30
Activities organized by overseas Chinese cultural centers	47	45	48	52	44	57
Events organized by the Chinese Embassy	47	39	52	56	55	56
Tourism year	44	43	45	37	47	32
Show	10	27	47	34	40	30
Product sales activities	34	19	43	59	50	64
Activities organized by Confucius Institute	33	30	36	31	29	32

5. Discussion

5.1 The City Gap and the Limits of Performance Legitimacy

The findings confirm our theoretical proposition regarding the multidimensionality of city branding (Anholt, 2007). Descriptive data reveal a structural dichotomy in Beijing’s image: while the city is highly regarded as an “Economic Engine” and “Technological Hub,” it faces a significant deficit in the “Political Center” and “Livable City” dimensions. This divergence suggests that Beijing’s current soft power in the Global South relies heavily on what Zhao (2015) terms performance legitimacy—attraction based on economic efficiency and material modernization. However, the significantly lower ratings in political governance indicate a ceiling effect for this model. Theoretical implication suggests that resource-based attraction (hard power assets projected as soft power) has limited convertibility; without shared values or normative resonance, economic admiration does not automatically translate into comprehensive emotional affinity.

5.2 Mediated Perception and the “Critical Elite” Paradox

The regression analysis provides robust empirical support for the two-step flow of communication within a cross-cultural context. The finding that Media Contact Frequency is the strongest predictor of positive image ($\beta=.42$) confirms the mere exposure effect. However, this must be interpreted alongside the finding that South African audiences rely predominantly on domestic media rather than Chinese official

channels. This implies that Beijing's image is actively mediated—and often reframed—by local gatekeepers.

Crucially, the regression reveals a Critical Elite phenomenon, evidenced by the negative correlation between Education Level and image scores ($\beta = -.08$). Contrary to the assumption that higher education fosters cosmopolitan openness, South African elites—who serve as opinion leaders in the two-step flow—appear more skeptical of Beijing's political narrative. This challenges the traditional public diplomacy model which often assumes that *telling the story* is sufficient. Instead, it highlights a credibility deficit: while the general public consumes the “modernity” narrative, the opinion leaders filter it through a critical lens of democratic values, limiting the depth of Beijing's soft power penetration.

5.3 The Youth Dividend and Digital Soft Power

A distinct contribution of this study is the identification of a generational divide. The significant negative correlation between age and image perception ($\beta = -.16$) indicates that the younger generation (18–35) views Beijing far more favorably than older cohorts. Theoretically, this suggests a shift in the locus of attraction. Unlike older generations whose perceptions may be tethered to Cold War geopolitics or traditional media frames, younger audiences appear to connect with Beijing through a depoliticized, technological lens. Beijing's projection of “Digital Modernity” (e.g., TikTok, mobile payments, smart city infrastructure) resonates with the developmental aspirations of African youth. This finding refines Nye's (2008) soft power concept in the digital age: for the Global South youth, technological capability is emerging as a primary source of cultural attraction, potentially superseding traditional cultural resources.

5.4 From Publicity to Engagement: A Strategic Pivot

The positive impact of visit experience ($\beta = .14$) validates the New Public Diplomacy paradigm (Cull, 2008), which prioritizes relationship-building over broadcasting. The data show that direct engagement effectively dismantles stereotypes. However, given that only a minority have visited, the reliance on mediated communication remains high. Consequently, to address the skepticism of the Critical Elite and leverage the Youth Dividend, Beijing's strategy must pivot from unilateral broadcasting (publicity) to **City Citizen Diplomacy**. This entails empowering non-state actors—universities, tech companies, and artists—to serve as brand ambassadors, facilitating a peer-to-peer dialogue that bypasses the friction of state-level narratives.

6. Conclusions

The findings portray Beijing's global image as a complex and dynamic construct within key Global South contexts. Its formation relies less on official discourse and more on the interplay of media narratives, personal experiences, and deep-seated socio-political discourses. For Beijing—and by extension, cities representing non-Western powers—constructing an enduringly positive image relies on embracing the

role of a global platform for shared learning and cooperation, rather than merely serving as a symbol of national achievement. The goal of international city branding should transcend promotion itself, dedicating efforts to cultivating a form of **city citizen diplomacy** that positions the urban space as a stage for enhancing transnational understanding and addressing common challenges in an increasingly multipolar world.

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