BRICS Issue-Narrative on Culture: Strategic or Trivial?

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BRICS ISSUE-NARRATIVE ON CULTURE:
STRATEGIC OR TRIVIAL?

Abstract
BRICS, a diplomatic platform comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, aims to create a fair and more democratic multipolar world order. Following their claim to uphold multilateralism, the BRICS group encourages people-to-people interactions. The cultural diversity of the BRICS members challenges the group to convey a coherent and substantive identity-narrative. However, strategic narratives are not only developed to give shape to culture as identity; they also influence the discursive environment about cultural activities. This article adopts a strategic-narrative analysis to assess BRICS’s commitment to cultural activities. It aims to answer whether and how the BRICS issue-narrative on culture is strategic or trivial with reference to the group’s commitment to multilateralism. Using a documentary analysis, the reading identified four mutually reinforcing narratives that give shape to the BRICS cultural agenda. A critical analysis of these narratives showed that BRICS issue-narrative on culture is, in its current form, trivial.

Key words: BRICS, Culture, Multilateralism, Soft Power, Strategic Narratives

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Introduction
The BRIC investment theme coined by Jim O’Neill of Goldman Sachs (2001) shaped the imagination of four emerging market economies; Brazil, Russia, India and China. Building on the acronym’s popularity, the four rising powers commenced informal dialogue in 2006 and celebrated their first official BRIC summit in 2009. South Africa was invited as a member in 2010, which led to the formation of BRICS (with ‘S’) in 2011 (Singh 2014). The BRICS group aims to create a more fair and democratic multipolar world order (BRIC 2010, #2). Following their claim to uphold multilateralism, the group pursues economic collaboration, jointly advocates for global governance reform, seeks international security and encourages people-to-people interactions. The BRICS group has professionalized its collaboration over time, with the high-profile success of the New Development Bank as its major achievement (BRICS 2014a). The cultural diversity of the BRICS members challenges the group to convey a coherent and substantive identity-narrative, despite the proliferation of aspirations, objectives and working groups. This resonates with the observation that ‘the differences between the BRICS are accentuated more than what they have in common’ (Ribeiro and Dwyer 2015, 12). However, strategic narratives are not only developed to give shape to culture as identity. They also influence the discursive environment about cultural activities. Narratives about cultural cooperation have the potential to provide the group with soft-power leverage (Nye 1990) in their promotion of people-to-people interactions. The match-making processes of different cultures and civilizations set out the groundworks for sustainable development, or in Throsby’s words ‘culturally sustainable development’ (1995, 201; italics in the original). ‘Culture’ as a concept in Throsby’s framework ‘encompasses both the idea of cultural development in its own right, according art and culture an independent and valued role in their terms within society, and culture as a set of attitudes and practices that can be instrumental in supporting, constraining and/or contributing to economic and social development in the widest sense’ (Throsby 1995, 202). The article examines culture as a set of attitudes and practices, while recognizing the necessary alignment of culture as an issue/policy area, culture as identity and culture as civilization.

The BRICS group signed in 2015 the Agreement between the Governments of the BRICS States on Cooperation in the Field of Culture to shape the dialogue on cultural policy. The five parties stated in this cultural agreement that they are ‘convinced that cultural dialogue contributes to the progress of nations and better mutual understanding of cultures, facilitating rapprochement of peoples’ as they are ‘being firmly committed to the BRICS values in the spirit of openness, inclusiveness, equality, respect for cultural diversity, and
mutual respect and learning’ (BRICS 2015a, introduction). In general, cultural policies are under prioritized in times of economic hardship (Holden 2013; Throsby 2010). While the ‘rise and fall’ of the BRICS group is feverishly discussed (Kiely 2016; Liu 2016), it has not affected BRICS’s commitment to cooperation, including in the area of culture. Instead, BRICS’s story is presented as a success by judging the Xiamen Agreement adopted in 2017, which predicted ‘the second golden decade of BRICS cooperation and solidarity’ (BRICS 2017, #5; the first ‘golden decade’ was presumably in 2006-2016).

This article adopts a strategic narrative analysis of BRICS’s commitment to culture. It aims to answer whether and how BRICS issue-narrative on culture is strategic or trivial with reference to the group’s overall commitment to multilateralism. A strategic issue-narrative on culture would improve the probability of the political actor to accomplish its objectives. A trivial issue-narrative challenges the plausibility of this. This article does not empirically study the actual public support for BRICS’s issue-narrative on culture. More modestly, it analyses the formation process of BRICS issue-narrative on culture using a narrative lens. A narrative framework is beneficial for the study of BRICS’s commitment to culture because

viewed through the lens of narrative, particular patterns, relationships, predictable trends, notable characters (both good and bad), and surprising outcomes emerge in inquiries relating to the themes of transnationalism and globalization, and in relation to cultural policy, that might not otherwise be evident through a different kind of analysis.  
(DeVereaux and Griffin 2013, 3).

The formation of cultural issue-narratives in a global cultural landscape results in unique opportunities and challenges, and a strategic narrative analysis helps to explain how persuasion is pursued and why it is – or is not effective.

Situated in the ‘narrative turn’ in international relation studies, strategic narratives are ‘representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 5; see also Roberts 2006). Strategic narratives is based on the concept of ‘narratives’. A narrative contains a character or actors, setting/environment/space, conflict or action, tools/behaviour and a resolution or suggested resolution/goal (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2017, 7). The strategic-ness of narratives is pursued in order to legitimize policies and achieve a positive perception of the political actor. This article specifically focuses on the issue-narrative that gives meaning to cultural cooperation. Issue-narratives are ‘strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 7). The formation of strategic narratives is independent from
the real world. However, strategic narratives can shape the meaning of this reality, and when persuasive, can affect and condition the behavior of domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 89). An attractive cultural issue-narrative is soft power. This idea is supported by the notion that ‘[s]trategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century’ (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014, 71; italics in the original) and ‘cultural policies are narratives’ (Devereaux and Griffin 2013, 4). The promotion of cultural cooperation complements BRICS’s narrativized commitments on economic cooperation, global governance reform and international security.

A strategic cultural issue-narrative aims to soften the pursuit of hard-power tactics, while it is also pursued to give intra-BRICS cooperation an attractive brand. The complex media environment of the 21st century (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013; Castells 2013) requires a new approach to diplomatic affairs because the ‘traditional diplomacy of yesteryear is disappearing’ and politicians will have to find ‘a brand niche for their state, engaging in competitive marketing, assuring customer satisfaction, and most of all, creating brand loyalty’ (van Ham 2001, 6). Brands are ‘socially constructed texts which mediate meanings between and amongst consumers and producers’ (O’Reilly 2005, 582). In building brand loyalty for the BRICS concept, the commitment to culture should be strategically communicated to the narrative’s audiences. An attractive cultural issue-narrative could positively affect BRICS’s identity-narrative in a changing international order, because branding is a ‘practice of aesthetic self-creation’ to hide the group’s vulnerabilities (Steele 2010, 4; Muhr 2016 thesis one, on discourse and social transformation). Therefore, cultural cooperation is not pursued as an end in itself, but multilateralism as a practice is (Pouliot 2011). This idea of a means-ends calculation is typical for ‘rationalist literature concerning order and constructivist understandings of international relations’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 89).

This article begins by setting out what a strategic cultural issue-narrative is. It will then go on to identify BRICS’s issue-narrative on culture by means of a documentary analysis of the BRICS joint communiqués. The remaining part of the paper explains why BRICS’s cultural issue-narrative is mainly trivial in the group’s overarching commitment to multilateralism.

**Issue-narrative on culture**

Communicating issue-narratives on culture is beneficial for rising powers because they are changing their performance internationally. A strategic cultural issue-narrative provides an
opportunity to address expectations and assumptions arising from their identity-narrative as rising powers and their mission to reorder the world. A well-formed narrative can improve the group’s legitimacy because ‘[[like branded products, branded states depend on trust and customer satisfaction,’ and ‘describing it as “friendly” (i.e., Western-oriented) and “credible” (ally), or “aggressive” (expansionist) and “unreliable” (rogue)’ will impact the powers’ agency (van Ham 2001, 3). Acknowledging the instrumentality of cultural issue-narratives, how to pursue effective storytelling about cultural collaboration? How much emphasis should be placed on cultural uniformity and on cultural diversity? A coherent and convincing cultural-narrative should ‘contain informational content that captures an audience’s attention and be clearly understood to be convincing,’ ‘contain a degree of ambiguity’ and ‘must appear consistent with events as they are known by the narrative’s audiences’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 110-114). An attractive cultural issue-narrative empowers multilateral cooperation ‘presuming that [their] aim is a meaningful dialogue in which all of [them] must become engaged if [they] wish to overcome the barriers of predictable reactions and exoticism’ (Borges in Ribeiro et al. 2015, 209). The formation of a cultural-narrative is challenging because the process is restraint by a narrative environment of symbolic, institutional and material practices (Somers 1994, 616). Notably, the symbolic politics of cultural-narratives can be contested; the implementation of cultural policies may result in counternarratives; and the material practices might tell a different story (i.e. cultural marginalization).

Cultural issue-narratives developed by multi-state organizations relate and interact with the individual states’ cultural issue-narratives. The BRICS members are actively engaged in cultural events, including Brazil’s hosting of the ‘2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games and China’s rapid expansion of Confucius institutes’ (Holden 2013, 23). Empirical studies evaluating these events are steadily increasing (for example see Cornelissen 2010). There is soft power in the pursuit of arts, media, culture, sports and tourism. While this type of national events beneficially influences the national brand of the BRICS members, the narrativized events are not a result of intra-BRICS cooperation. A collective cultural-narrative arrives by means of a joint process, perpetuated by BRICS-led events, meetings, alliances and working groups. Therefore, the ‘future hinges on what the present anticipates, on how established and emerging powers portray the coming world and how they intend to act on their present understandings’ (Schweller 2014, 1). The more strategic narratives and political behavior intersect, the smaller the ‘say-do’ gap is. This then supports the instrumental value of issue-narratives to successfully conceptualize cultural policies, as well as give form to the
construction and maintenance of cultural cooperation.

A compelling and persuasive cultural issue-narrative can bring order in a seemingly random group of political actors. Order in this view is not aiming for cultural assimilation. Rather, it seeks an acceptable platform that accommodates a group’s cultural diversity while advancing dialogue on shared concerns. However, forging collective narratives in multilateral formats is challenging (see case studies about the European Union and NATO, Chaban et al. 2017; Thiel et al. 2013). The EU faced this challenge when it was searching for a common brand in light of competing and sometimes conflicting national narratives. Van Ham argues that ‘[k]nowing that “Europe” will never inspire affection in its citizens similar to that enjoyed by the nation-state, the EU is in the midst of a campaign to brand itself as a beacon of civilization and prosperity in an otherwise disorderly and disoriented world’ (van Ham 2001, 5). A strategic cultural issue-narrative could improve brand loyalty for the BRICS group. The BRICS-brand is embodied in cultural practices and narrative coherency and persuasiveness could improve the legitimacy of the group while overcoming the limited investment-narrative (i.e. BRICs as emerging market economies). The engagement of non-state actors in cultural activities, targeted through a narrative of inclusive participation, can further illuminate whether and how BRICS issue-narrative on culture will be shared and/or contested. The cultural-exchanges are aimed at a public approval of a BRICS cultural-order. However, the cultural activities are government-led, which may result in cultural exclusion politics and contestation respectively.

In the diplomatic sphere, cultural cooperation is traditionally pursued by means of cultural diplomacy programs. Cultural diplomacy is ‘an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad’ (Cull 2008, 33). The creation of a coherent and strategic cultural diplomacy agenda is complex, due to ‘the context of the changing architecture of international relations in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world’ (Ang et al. 2015, 371). Additionally, the validity and usefulness of cultural diplomacy is contested and ‘politicians and diplomats, have [...] regarded cultural diplomacy as a lesser tool of diplomacy’ (Mark 2009, 2). Cultural diplomacy is normally a state-led practice (Ang et al. 2015, 368) but multilateral organizations such as the European Union have used it too as a foreign policy tool (Rynning 2003). The BRICS group does not have a formalized cultural diplomacy program. Be that as it may, the BRICS group increasingly emphasizes culture as an important policy in their joint communiqués. A strategic narrative analysis will reveal how the documents are ‘recruited into alliances of
interests so as to develop and underpin particular visions of the world and the things and events within that world’ (Prior 2011, 67).

Next, I discuss the commitments and action plans of the BRICS group with respect to cultural cooperation.

**BRICS Issue-Narrative on Culture**

A documentary analysis was adopted to identify and assess BRICS issue-narrative on culture. The BRICS leaders expressed consideration for cultural collaboration since the 2nd BRIC summit in 2010. This proposal was then formalized in the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Culture in 2015 and led to the formation of the Cultural Action Plan in 2017 (covering 2017 to 2021). For the identification of BRICS’s cultural issue-narrative, I included cultural commitments in the arts, sports, media, film, cultural heritage, tourism, education and youth interactions because they, each in their own way, enhance people-to-people interactions (which is considered an important pillar in the Xiamen Agreement). This approach to culture is not all-embracing, given the ‘alternative views of the activities, relationships and processes which this complex word indicates’ (Williams 2013, 81). I do not seek whether the BRICS’s strategic narratives on culture have a causal impact in actual practices. Instead, I study the narrative’s potential ‘verisimilitude,’ which emphasizes plausibility rather than ‘empirical verification and logical requiredness’ (Bruner 1991, 4). The reading helps to illuminate how “documents deploy discursive or rhetorical devices – to create plausible accounts and to construct believable versions of reality” (Coffey 2013, 372). This process examines form and function of cultural aspirations in relation to BRICS’s commitment towards multilateralism. Table 1 presents several key commitments of the BRICS group in the field of cultural cooperation.

**Table 1**
The engagement of audiences is elicited using action-oriented activities, including the organization of BRICS Film Festivals and a BRICS Cultural Festival, the alliances of libraries, museums and galleries, and the establishment of a BRICS Cultural Council. Furthermore, the members aspire cooperation ‘in preventing illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property of their states, and exchange relevant information in this regard’ (BRICS 2015a, #3). A textual reading of these cultural commitments resulted in the identification of four mutually reinforcing narratives.
First, the documents present BRICS’s approach towards culture as a public demonstration of good or desirable multilateral practice. The documents establish and emphasize the link between culture and sustainable development (see for example, BRICS 2014, #59) and indicate a message of ‘best practice’ The commitments to culture are calculatedly narrated as part of BRICS’s overarching mission purpose to advance a fair and more democratic multipolar world order. People-to-people interactions are pursued to ‘garner more popular support for BRICS cooperation’ (BRICS 2017, #6). Therefore, the narrative is exemplary as well as procedural and therefore aligned with the group’s commitment to multilateralism.

Second, ‘connectivity’ is a key narrative in BRICS’s commitments to culture. Connectivity between the five-member states would positively spillover in ‘policy coordination, infrastructure connection, trade, [and] financial integration (BRICS 2015b). In particular, cultural appreciation would positively influence business and labor mobility (BRICS 2015b, II.7.3). The cultural commitments in this connectivity narrative do not present a significant change to other national or diplomatic cultural programs. Culture is encouraged and performed through a variety of high and low forms of art, through preservation of cultural heritage as well as through training and educational exchanges. There is nothing radical about BRICS’s cultural narrative, which reinforces the win-win rhetoric present in the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership (BRICS 2015b). The aspiration of win-win partnerships aims to innovate the cultural paradigm in international affairs by democratizing the global cultural landscape. It also suggests that culture ‘affect economic efficiency, via the promotion of shared values within the group which condition the ways in which group’s members undertake the economic processes of production’ (Throsby 2001, 63; italics in the original). Cultural connectivity is sought after for its assumed benefits in economic cooperation.

Third, ‘mutual understanding’ is an important narrative in the cultural commitments of the BRICS. In particular, the BRICS group recognizes the ‘contribution and the benefits of cultural exchanges and cooperation in enhancing [their] mutual understanding and friendship’ (BRICS 2014, #59). In the group’s mission to re-order the world (Li 2016), legitimacy and success can only stem from a genuine dialogue among stakeholders from the five member-states. Disappointed with asymmetric globalization, the BRICS cultural platforms offer non-intrusive, free-from-Western influences, public spaces. Cultural differences are not an obstacle for their cooperation. Rather, these differences are presented as an ‘asset’ in their advocacy of multipolarity (see BRICS 2017, #61). The celebration of cultural diversity is necessary in the development of a peaceful, inclusive and sustainable international order. The
commitments demonstrate both national pride as well as compatibility of the different cultures (i.e. ‘to cultivate common values on the basis of diversity and sharing’ - BRICS 2017, #61). The differences between the members are respected but need to be bridged to allow for an imagined collective identity-narrative. To do so effectively, the BRICS members have to genuinely ‘embark on an Anderson-inspired communal trajectory, invest in identity-building measures, and hope that this will allow them to exploit their shared temporal dimension and common developmental momentum to build a multipolar order’ (Brütsch and Papa 2013, 327; Anderson 2006). The commitment to enhance mutual understanding suggests a lack of existing cultural exchanges. Mutual learning is aimed to overcome this divide, while respecting the ‘cultures and civilizations’ of the members (BRICS 2017, #6). Fostering mutual understanding is in those cases a sharp increase of earlier cultural interactions, especially in the case of geographically-separated Brazil and South Africa. Therefore, the narrative of mutual understanding gives culture a facilitator role to enable non-intrusive dialogue.

Fourth, cultural cooperation produces narrativized ‘alliances’ between the five parties. An alliance is linguistically more binding than dialogue or cooperation. The BRICS Action Plan adopted in 2017 aims to ‘advance practical cultural cooperation and the establishment of the BRICS Alliance of Libraries, Alliance of Museums, Alliance of Art Museums and National Galleries as well as Alliance of Theaters for Children and Young People’ (BRICS 2017, #61). Culture is thus seen as a non-threatening issue area and cooperation can therefore be cemented by alliances. The formation of a cultural issue-narrative is used to try to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of people (Freedman 2006, 81). The Xiamen declaration envisions that the people-to-people interactions will make ‘BRICS partnership closer to [their] people's hearts’ (BRICS 2017, #6). Additionally, the theme of the BRICS Cultural Festival in 2017 is ‘celebrating culture and bridging hearts’ (Zhang 2017). A cultural narrative may have, if successful, a soft appearance, but it is nevertheless shaped to gain a lead on the opponent. Bargaining and coalition-building would be perceived as a natural development when the hearts of the BRICS peoples are bridged.

Taken together, this analysis suggests that BRICS issue-narrative on culture is shaped as a supporting story-line for BRICS’s commitment to multilateralism. The four mutually reinforcing narratives that give shape to the BRICS cultural agenda include: 1) culture as a message of ‘best practice’ in multilateralism; 2) culture as connectivity, i.e. the spillover potential of culture in business and economic partnerships; 3) culture as a facilitator of mutual
understanding, in light of the celebrated cultural diversity; and 4) culture as alliance. The four narratives together suggest the political instrumentality of the cultural agenda.

Discussion
The cultural-narratives aim to provide the parties with leverage in the strategic design and implementation process of the public policy. However, BRICS’s issue-narrative on culture is unconvincing due to its high degree of ambiguity. BRICS’s cultural commitments are framed in non-committable language; the parties ‘encourage,’ ‘shall promote,’ ‘shall encourage’ and ‘may develop’ (BRICS 2015a). These are expressions which can be considered as ‘empty signifiers’ (Laclau 1996). The narratives are too ambiguous, which undermines their plausibility and taken-for-grantedness. The establishment of cultural ‘alliances’ challenges this interpretation, as this type of agreement is linguistically more binding. But soft power should not be kept ‘in reserve’ as it would render it meaningless (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014, 73). Instead, ‘soft power assets are always on display’ and at times communication may advance its instrumental purpose (Ibid.). The ambiguity of the cultural-narratives has strategic value as long as the commitments in the Cultural Action Plan are being implemented and the narrativized events are coherently emplotted to advance the BRICS agenda. In other words, ‘abstract words help veil the operation of power with aesthetic content, but they also create, eventually, further vulnerabilities’ (Steele 2010, 12). A high degree of ambiguous language makes the BRICS issue-narrative on culture potentially trivial.

The commitments to culture lack legitimacy in the objective sense (Dimitriu and de Graaf 2016, 7), due to the emphasis on the members’ (i.e. mentioned as ‘Parties’ in the agreements) sovereign rights. The agreement declares that it will ‘not affect any rights and obligations of each of the Parties under any other international treaties to which they are parties’ (BRICS 2015a). The cultural-narratives allow state actors to behave as they see fit. In particular, Stuenkel argues that the announcements of cultural cooperation ‘must be read with caution’ because a ‘significant number of ideas (particularly in the people-to-people section) either never occur or are abandoned after one edition (Stuenkel 2017). Legitimacy is also lacking in the subjective sense, due to the semi-authoritarian identity-narratives of two of the BRICS members, Russia and China. To gain credibility ‘one needs to have a reputation for providing trustworthy, accurate information’ (Mor 2011, 393). The sovereign principle overrules, when necessary, the multilateral aspirations in the cultural-narratives. This makes for isolated success stories and a fragmented cultural policy-design. The narrative is developed with the intention to overcome global cultural asymmetry, by categorizing good
and bad characters. The BRICS group embodies the ‘good’ while advocating inclusive cultural cooperation, and the ‘bad’ are those who obstruct a fair cultural agenda. But if cultural freedom or cultural diversity is restricted in some of the BRICS countries, it is questionable if the ‘bad guys’ are only those actors who are suspected of cultural imperialism (i.e. the contested West).

Multilateralism is not advanced if BRICS’s commitment to culture is perceived as a narrative of ‘the rest’ versus ‘the West.’ The BRICS group needs to accommodate in their narrative cultural specificities and commonalities. This approach presents a communication paradox: ‘Cultural diplomacy is supposed to advance the national interest by presenting the nation in the best possible light to the rest of the world; [while] it is expected (mainly by non-state actors) to promote a more harmonious international order to the benefit of all’ (Ang et al. 2015, 370). The cultural-narratives talk about a deepening of friendships and the promotion of people-to-people interactions. The former constructs through language the notion of horizontal relations while the latter can be interpreted as a strategic tool to improve the individual members’ knowledge and expertise (BRICS 2017, #6). BRICS’s cultural-narratives highlight therefore power relations (i.e. rising powers) which are embedded in a geostrategic/realist perspective as well as the desire for horizontal relations, which is embedded in a cooperative, multi-polar perspective. A compelling cultural issue-narrative could respond to the perceived threat of rising powers, as it is their mission objective to advance a multipolar world order (Kegley and Raymond 1992). A strategic cultural issue-narrative could improve BRICS’s aspiration of a stable multipolar world order, by imagining a peaceful world re-ordering that is reassuring. The ability of the BRICS cultural issue-narrative to strategically influence the discursive environment of power transformations is challenging because the group is perceived both as a challenger of the West and a beneficiary of the existing liberal order (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2017, 291). The difficulties in the negotiation of a coherent cultural-narrative ‘shows the pragmatics of negotiating power transition in terms of both concrete policy and overarching, strategic narrative’ (Ibid.). Therefore, it is questionable whether BRICS issue-narrative on culture can overcome the contradictions embedded in the narratives.

The communication of cultural issue-narratives is deployed to soften the identity-narrative of rising powers. This argument assumes that norms, values and language matter in international relations. The procedural character of the cultural-narratives hides the political stakes involved in cultural cooperation. Cultural issue-narratives might indeed soften the identity-narratives of the rising powers, yet for different reasons. First, the rise of China
regionally and internationally has produced geopolitical tensions. While engagement in cultural cooperation reinforces BRICS’s commitment to people-to-people interactions, it also balances China’s rise (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2017, 290). Second, cultural cooperation provides for the relative smaller members of the BRICS (in particular South Africa) an opportunity to gain more influence in the global cultural landscape. The ‘causal factor’ (Devereaux and Griffin 2013, 9) in BRICS issue narrative on culture is the assumed spillover effect between improved people-to-people interactions in the cultural sector, to other, more crucial concerns including global governance reform and economic partnerships. This statement assumes strategic intent of the political actors to causally relate culture with politics and economics, which is empirically difficult to prove (as emphasized by Krebs and Jackson 2007). However, the textual reading of the BRICS joint communiqués suggests a narrative causality within the text between motives, cultural events and objectives. In this perspective, the strategic value of the cultural-language can only be assessed in the long term.

The BRICS group pursues a playful linguistic game by mentioning the compatibility of the different civilizations. The BRICS group comprises of the Buddhist, Hindu, Buddhist, Orthodox, African and Latin American civilizations (according to the categorization in Huntington 1993). While Huntington foresaw the ‘clash of civilizations’ in a post-Cold War order (Huntington 1993), the BRICS members have co-opted this term and are reversing the anticipated clash. In comparison to Western domination, the BRICS members present themselves as better equipped to bring about a peaceful (cultural) coexistence. This follows the ‘strategy of coexistence’ which coordinates ‘a world in which countries and regions with different world views, religions, political systems and approaches to national development can coexist’ (de Coning, Mandrup, and Odgaard 2014, 4). This strategy is advanced by the BRICS to contain great powers while allowing for a multipolar world order to flourish (Ibid.). The adopted phrases smoothen the narrativized tensions between the different cultures. The Cultural Joint Action Plan promotes technical cooperation and exchanges (BrazilGovNews 2017) and ‘[a]wareness of cultural influences is essential for transferring concepts, technology, or ideas’ (Harris, Moran, and Moran 2004, 74). A strategic cultural issue-narrative tries to advance mutual understanding but it can also lead to cultural contestation. In particular, ‘[i]f narratives provide a way of understanding the world and locating oneself within the broader culture, then a movement that seeks to alter the structure of society also seeks to challenge the understanding of people within that society and, necessarily, the narratives that underpin those understandings’ (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 321). The construction of a shared cultural issue-narrative is restrained by existing narratives of cultural
rivalry and conflict among the BRICS members. Cultural coexistence between India and China or China and Russia will not spring to life due to a few BRICS-approved cultural events. The aspired sustainable development requires a long-term commitment to cultural policies to achieve narrative consistency and avoid a say-do gap. Moreover, the success of the BRICS issue-narrative on culture depends on the coherency and persuasiveness of parallel narratives in the areas of global governance, international security and economic partnerships.

Despite the proliferation of cultural commitments, events and meetings of relevant stakeholders, BRICS’s cultural narrative does not appear ‘consistent with events as they are known by the narrative’s audiences’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 114). The formation of BRICS issue-narrative on culture may be considered trivial due to a development of parallel events. Institutional developments including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the One Belt One Road Initiative gain momentum and affect the hype around the BRICS (Humphrey 2015). The BRICS story is making place for a ‘beyond-BRICS’ paradigm effectively and China’s assumed prioritization of these new development strategies is casting a shadow on the BRICS group (Cooper 2017). It is unclear whether BRICS issue-narrative on culture is a protectionist (nationalistic) story, a counter-hegemonic move or a Chinese-driven tactic. In particular, the encouragement of ‘traditional friendships’ (BRICS 2017, #6) is unconvincing. Taken into consideration the different historically-shaped identities and interests of the BRICS members, it requires ‘selective appropriation’ (Somers 1994, 616) of events to suit the overarching narrative’s ‘promise of success’ (Dimitriu and de Graaf 2016, 7). The selection process might be too (culturally) demanding in the case of a shared BRICS cultural issue-narrative.

For the cultural-narrative to be attractive and persuasive, the BRICS group should ‘get smart’ and combine ‘the tools of both hard and soft power’ (Nye 2009, 160). Each BRICS member has different sticks and carrots to its disposal. The group ought to find together a smart synergy of its cultural currency and ‘become an organic bloc that works towards collective actions that benefit all’ (Li and Marsh 2016, 2986). The soft-power worth of BRICS issue-narrative on culture is then a sum of the different BRICS cultural programs, in addition to the national soft power assets (Gallarotti 2016; Stuenkel 2016). To seek synergy in different cultures is a process of negotiation, which process should preferably avoid that ‘one side is perceived as getting a larger portion of the pie’ (Harris, Moran, and Moran 2004, 77). Of the different strategies that the BRICS group can pursue, cultural synergy is more compelling than cultural dominance, cultural accommodation, cultural compromise or cultural avoidance (Harris, Moran, and Moran 2004, 146-147; see also Adler 1997). However, the
‘demands placed on the actor by the group for pro-social behavior increasingly violate the initial preferences and beliefs of the actor’ (Johnston 2001, 499). Therefore, BRICS cultural issue-narrative is promoted as a synergic model but arrives probable at the expense of cultural accommodation or cultural compromise by some of the BRICS members.

Inclusiveness is an important BRICS-value for cultural cooperation. This is illustrated in article 2 of BRICS Agreement on Culture which promotes the facilitation of ‘exchanges of scientific and research workers, academics, experts and students in the framework of programmes of interest’ (BRICS 2015a, #2). This type of citizen-participation speaks to a 21st century global cultural-landscape where cultural ‘[f]lows are not two-way but multidirectional and multipolar’ (Pieterse 2015, 140; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013). A strategic BRICS cultural issue-narrative embodies inclusive participation if it evolves from an elitist narrative into a citizen-supported project. The BRICS group does imagine a cultural mechanism in which ‘the events could not only be held in the high-class venues but also in a wide range of communities’ (Zhang 2017). However, well-imagined cultural narratives may backfire because cultural cooperation is primarily pursued under a government-umbrella. At the end, ‘narratives of culture can be biased toward seeing these areas of life as something open, generous, and exchange-oriented to the exclusion of their narrower, more egoistic or procedural aspects’ (Devereaux and Griffin 2013, 10). The emphasis on inclusive participation in cultural cooperation can be easily perceived as cheap talk and trivial in comparison to the other areas of BRICS-cooperation.

**Conclusion**

This article set out to answer whether and how BRICS issue-narrative on culture is strategic or trivial with reference to the group’s overall commitment to multilateral cooperation.

Culture as an area of cooperation has become important for the five parties, by judging the increased emphases in the joint communiqués. BRICS issue-narrative on culture combines four mutually reinforcing narratives: 1) culture as a message of ‘best practice’ in multilateralism; 2) culture as connectivity, i.e. the spillover potential of culture in business and economic partnerships; 3) culture as a facilitator of mutual understanding, in light of the celebrated cultural diversity; and 4) culture as alliance.

Overall, this study argues that the formation of BRICS issue-narrative on culture is trivial. This triviality is situated in the non-committable language of the cultural-narratives. The language used is too open for interpretation. While purposefully constructed to benefit the sovereign state, its meaning fails to convey narrative verisimilitude. For example, the
narrative assumes the compatibility of BRICS’s cultures and civilizations. Language can constitute social transformations, but more is necessary to soften political differences. In addition, the narrative fails to be legitimate due to China’s and Russia’s lack of credibility in the area of cultural diversity and cultural freedom. Hence, strategic-ness depends on the reputation of the actors, the political context, and the actor’s ability to narrativize the events. The formation of a cultural issue-narrative has to strike a balance between cultural specificities and commonalities. However, it is challenging to positively align individual states’ and multi-state organizations’ strategic narratives. For example, BRICS issue narrative on culture is arguably trivial due to the development of Chinese narratives (i.e. narratives accommodating the Chinese One Belt One Road Initiative). While a synergic model of multilateral cultural practices can be constructed, this might come at the expense of progressive narratives by a member state. In terms of inclusiveness, it is questionable whether the group’s issue-narrative on culture is providing a tangible and convincing demonstration of best practice in multilateralism.

More research by means of a longitudinal study could evaluate whether the BRICS group has advanced an ‘enlightened cultural policy in the modern age’ that effectively has sought a ‘cooperative coalition in the pursuit of society’s cultural objectives, a partnership where public agencies, NGOs and the corporate sector have an incentive to act together rather than independently’ (Throsby 2001, 148). Taken into consideration the competition in the cultural and creative sectors and the politics of cultural policy, the formation process of a strategic cultural issue-narrative will remain a challenge for the BRICS group in the near future.

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**Conflict of Interests**
The author declares no conflict of interests.

**Bibliography**


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Table 1. BRICS Cultural Commitments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment</th>
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<tr>
<td>We will embrace cultural diversity and promote people-to-people exchanges to garner more popular support for BRICS cooperation through deepened traditional friendships. We will expand people-to-people exchanges in all dimensions, encourage all fabrics of the society to participate in BRICS cooperation, promote mutual learning between our cultures and civilizations, enhance communication and mutual understanding among our peoples and deepen traditional friendships, thus making BRICS partnership closer to our people's hearts. (Xiamen Declaration 2017, #6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We emphasize the importance of people-to-people exchanges to promoting development and enhancing mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation among BRICS peoples. We agree to deepen cooperation in such fields as culture, education, science and technology, sports and health as well as among media organizations and local governments, to strengthen the third pillar of BRICS cooperation and foster a meaningful resonance of the BRICS partnership amongst its peoples. (Xiamen Declaration 2017, #60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We value cultural diversity as a precious asset of BRICS cooperation. We stress the role of culture and cultural diversity in promoting sustainable development, and encourage BRICS countries to engage in cultural exchanges and mutual learning to cultivate common values on the basis of diversity and sharing. We welcome the formulation of a BRICS action plan to advance practical cultural cooperation and the establishment of the BRICS Alliance of Libraries, Alliance of Museums, Alliance of Art Museums and National Galleries as well as Alliance of Theaters for Children and Young People. We look forward to the success of the BRICS Culture Festival to be held later in mid-September 2017 in Xiamen. We will continue our work on the establishment of a BRICS Cultural Council to provide the necessary platform to enhance cultural cooperation among BRICS countries. (Xiamen Declaration 2017, #61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We recognize the important role of culture in sustainable development and in fostering mutual understanding and closer cooperation among our peoples. We encourage expansion of cultural exchanges between people of BRICS countries. In this context we commend the hosting of the first BRICS Film Festival in New Delhi on 2-6 September 2016. (Goa Declaration 2016, #100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and labour mobility … promote greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of each other’s culture; explore areas of practical cooperation in this regard, including to implement the agreement on cultural cooperation. (The Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership 2015, II.7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering the link between culture and sustainable development, as well as the role of cultural diplomacy as a promoter of understanding between peoples, we will encourage cooperation between BRICS countries in the cultural sector, including on the multilateral basis. Recognizing the contribution and the benefits of cultural exchanges and cooperation in enhancing our mutual understanding and friendship, we will actively promote greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of each other’s arts and culture. In this regard, we ask our relevant authorities responsible for culture to explore areas of practical cooperation, including to expedite negotiations on the draft agreement on cultural cooperation. (Fortaleza Declaration 2014, #59).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We encourage expanding the channels of communication, exchanges and people-to-people contact amongst the BRICS, including in the areas of youth, education, culture, tourism and sports. (Delhi Declaration 2012, #48).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperate in the cultural field according to the agreement of the BRICS leaders. (Sanya Declaration 2011, New proposals to explore #1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We affirm the importance of encouraging the dialogue among civilizations, cultures, religions and peoples. In this respect, we support the “Alliance of Civilizations”, a United Nations’ initiative aimed at building bridges, mutual knowledge and understanding around the world. We praise the Brazilian decision to host, in Rio de Janeiro, in May 2010, the 3rd Global Forum and confirm our intention to be present at the event, in appropriate high level. (2nd BRIC Summit 2010, #25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We reaffirm our commitment to advance cooperation among BRICS countries in science, culture and sports. (2nd BRIC Summit 2010, #29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Emphases are author’s)