

Digital Diplomacy: The Role of Media in Constructing National Images

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Abstract:

Digital media plays a crucial role in modern diplomacy, enabling countries to build national images subtly. This study aims to examine the role of digital media in diplomacy. By using case studies, including the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs use of Weibo and Bilibili, and the digital diplomacy tactics of the United States and Russia, etc., the research illustrates how digital platforms facilitate broader public engagement, prompt response to international issues, and direct interaction between diplomats and the general public. It's found that digital media significantly enhances the transparency and immediacy of diplomatic communication, helping build a more reliable and comprehensive national image. This research also stresses the need for improved digital literacy with the development of digital diplomacy. Taken together, the strategic use of digital media is indispensable for countries aiming to strengthen their international presence and influence public opinion globally.

Keywords:

Digital Diplomacy, Media, Case Studies, Extensiveness, Timeliness, Interaction, Digital Literacy

1. Introduction

One of the most authoritative databases worldwide, as of July 2024, 5.17 billion, or 63 percent of the world's population, were social media users. [1] Digital media, which includes social media and a wide array of websites, has become an indispensable part of the modern generation. The general public from different countries sees what is happening worldwide through digital media. Governments know that if they want to occupy an advantageous position in international competition, it's crucial to show their national image on digital media, which is more informal and acceptable to the general public than traditional diplomacy. Based on that, governments consciously use digital to help the general public worldwide gain information about different countries and build national images of themselves. Based on the background, we propose our research question: How does digital media effectively build national image?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Traditional Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy*

Historically, diplomacy was characterized by private, government-to-government communications. [2] However, the introduction of public diplomacy marked a significant shift. [3] The work of Mowlana argue that effective public diplomacy involves strategic engagement with both domestic and international audiences to foster mutual understanding and influence public opinion which provide a basis for understanding public diplomacy. [4] Public diplomacy emphasizes the influence of domestic and international public on foreign policy and the efforts of governments to directly engage with foreign public. [5] It highlights the strategic importance of communication and cultural exchange in fostering mutual understanding and shaping the image of a nation abroad. [6]

Digital technologies and social media platforms have transformed traditional public diplomacy practices. [7] Kunczik and Weber examines how digital tools facilitate interactive, dialogic engagement, enhancing transparency and immediacy in diplomatic communication. [8]

2.2. *Media Diplomacy & Digital Public Diplomacy*

With the development of mass media, the concept of media diplomacy emerged. Media diplomacy refers to states' strategic use of media to communicate and negotiate with foreign public and governments. [9] It encompasses a range of activities, from information dissemination to direct engagement with international audiences, aiming to influence public opinion and policy outcomes. [10] The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has further transformed the diplomacy landscape, giving rise to digital public diplomacy. [11] Digital public diplomacy specifically focuses on using digital tools to conduct public diplomacy, emphasizing the shift from unidirectional communication to interactive, dialogic engagement facilitated by digital media. [12] Digital public diplomacy enhances transparency, immediacy, and interactivity in diplomatic communication, allowing for more effective engagement with international audiences. [13] This view is supported by Xiong, who analyzes the Twitter activities of Chinese diplomats, demonstrating the strategic use of social media to construct a positive national image and engage with foreign audiences. [14]

Comparative studies offer valuable insights into the practices of digital diplomacy across different countries. Previous studies provide case studies on the United States and China, respectively, highlighting these nations' different approaches and strategies. [12] Additionally, works provide insights into the unique challenges smaller or less influential states face in utilizing digital media for diplomatic purposes. [14]

While many studies highlight the progress of digital diplomacy, others also point out the significant challenges it faces. Previous studies introduce the concepts of algorithmic awareness and digital literacy concepts, emphasizing their importance in digital diplomacy. [15] They argue that misconceptions about algorithms and digital technologies can impact the success of digital diplomacy initiatives. Similarly, previous studies discuss the complexities of digital diplomacy in a fragmented media environment, where algorithmic biases and misinformation can undermine diplomatic efforts. [14]

The existing literature provides a comprehensive overview of the opportunities and challenges of using digital media to build a reliable national image in diplomacy. Integrating traditional public diplomacy theories with contemporary digital practices offers a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms can enhance or hinder diplomatic efforts.

Research gaps remain despite the growing literature on digital media and public diplomacy. Most current research focuses on the effectiveness of communication on specific digital media platforms. More systematic analysis of the overall characteristics of digital media platforms is needed, which hinders the optimization of digital diplomacy strategies. Besides, existing research often focuses on the activities of major Western powers, such as the United States.

Based on these, we put forward our research question: How does digital media effectively build national image?

3. Methods

Comparative case study. Our method is to report on the state of qualitative case study research on digital diplomacy. A case study is a particular strategy for qualitative empirical research that allows an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context [15]. The articles published in journals that matched our definition of qualitative case studies served as our source. The study analyzes six typical cases of changes in the diplomatic strategies of China and other countries in today's highly developed digital media landscape. The selected instances demonstrate how these platforms have fundamentally changed the trend of information dissemination and public participation. Although these cases differ in methods and results, they all have one thing in common: the use of digital media to influence domestic and international audiences. Selected cases are representative and demonstrate the role of digital media in building a national image.

4. Findings

4.1. Extensiveness

To begin with, extending the audience of diplomacy to a wide-ranging general public through digital media helps build a reliable national image. In the past, diplomacy means official and formal. It needs the participation of the general public. However, with the help of digital media, the general public can look through and talk about significant events happening worldwide. Diplomacy is no longer a game between government and government. iResearch, one of the earliest third-party institutions research on the Internet, writes that digital media help create all-news global networks for broadcasting every significant development in world events, generate growing mass participation in political processes, and transform the goals and means of foreign policy. [16]

Digital media makes diplomatic progress more transparent to the general public. For example, digital media coverage of negotiations and summit meetings among leaders transformed traditional, primarily secret, formal, professional diplomacy. [16] The general public can observe state leaders' stances, body language, and even micro-expressions when covered on digital media. The general public can judge and establish the national image of their and other countries based on their observation and judgment. It is much more reliable than just listening to the official institution's

voice. The general public, who uses digital media such as Twitter and Facebook, is more involved in the diplomatic process. Statistics confirm that the number of Americans who said they got most of their national and international news online grew 67% in the last two years in 2008. [18] In the past, the general public, lacking professional diplomatic background and knowledge, could only establish national images by what the foreign ministry spokesman said. But now, digital media provides a golden opportunity for the general public to build their countries' and other countries' national images more reliably by looking through and critically thinking about enormous amounts of information on digital media.

Case 1: The social media platforms of The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs garner a large amount of attention

Digital media allows people to access the latest statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons through various social, news, and video platforms, meeting public demand and exerting a significant influence among groups that previously paid little attention to these statements. In 2018, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons began using social and video media besides official media coverage, including Douyin, WeChat official accounts, Kuaishou, Bilibili, etc. The audience following the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons expanded beyond the traditional groups of political news enthusiasts, industry professionals, and middle-aged and elderly individuals to include younger demographics and various interest groups. These new followers pay attention to and understand the statements and disseminate and create related content, leading to a rapid increase in views, likes, shares, and saves of the spokespersons' videos, gradually making the information accessible to the general public. For example, when the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson joined Douyin in 2020, its first short video garnered over 14 million views and more than 620,000 likes. It attracted over 740,000 followers within 5 hours of its release. [19]

Case 2: The personalized expression of Chinese spokespersons bridges the gap with the public

The social nature of digital media allows the accounts of spokespersons to blend official seriousness with a personal style, effectively bridging the gap with the general public. The individual attribute adds a degree of individualized expression to the spokesperson's tweets while respecting objective facts, complementing the value of severe official information, and making the spokesperson's image more well-rounded and three-dimensional. In addition to conveying essential linguistic symbols, our Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons, such as Lijian Zhao's intense gaze and Shuang Geng's smile, also use non-verbal symbols that provide the public with endless interpretive possibilities, creating a memorable and profound image. The unique three-dimensionality and vibrancy of each spokesperson are also well displayed. This approach brings them closer to the public and more conducive to shaping the national image.

4.2. Timeliness

Meanwhile, responding promptly to international focus through digital media helps build a reliable national image. The competition between countries is changing from weapon war to message war. The faster a country receives, analyses, and sends messages globally, the more likely it will gain the initiative in message war. Digital media is like an intelligent weapon. Governments can insert propaganda into digital

media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, create a trend, and disseminate a message faster and cheaper than any other medium. [20] Without the help of digital media, the messages sent by countries will likely be delayed. It has been a long since the general public learned about different opinions about an international focus issue. Digital media helps the general public, who pays attention to the global situation, to know the diverse voices on the same international focus issue as quickly as possible. Some foreign countries use viewpoints of third-party media, amplifying voices that are advantageous to their side. [21] In other words, some messages that are spread through digital media have been processed by other countries. However, it also represents the national state from a side view. Building national images by directly comparing different stances and actions of various countries on the same issue is much more reliable than just hearing the voice from one side.

For instance, in 2008, America enforced a ban on ZTE, one of the largest mobile retailers in China. Digital media from China and America both responded to that issue immediately. However, the opinions of them were different. The New York Times (2018) describes ZTE as having a “criminal record,” posing a threat to US national security, and being backed by the Chinese government, which indirectly proves the legitimacy of the ban. China Daily shapes ZTE as a strong image of a large company that values legal regulations and core technology development, attempting to win the support of international public opinion. [22] Both America and China tried to gain the dominant power in public opinion on this matter through digital media. Comparing the different emphases of reports on digital media, we can build a more comprehensive national image of China and America. With the help of digital media, the general public can upgrade the national image on time, which is more reliable by learning about the newest dynamic of a country.

Case 1: Lijian Zhao promptly countered the unfavorable international comments about COVID-19 in China through Twitter

Due to the delayed nature of news, the timeliness of information conveyed by newspapers and television could be stronger. The development of digital media has helped countries to respond immediately to hot topics and quickly express their national stance. After the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, in response to increasingly unfavorable international comments against China, Lijian Zhao, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued five tweets as soon as possible in both Chinese and English questioning the transparency of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. These tweets raised questions about the timing of the appearance of the first patient, the number of infections, and the names of hospitals. They called for the United States to make its pandemic data transparent and apologize for its absurd accusations against China in recent days. [23] The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson’s strong counterattack in this incident defended China’s dignity and confidence with a firm stance, becoming a qualified “Chinese business card.”

Case 2: The media negotiations between the United States and Russia over the Syrian chemical weapon incident

Digital media helps countries grasp critical moments in international disputes and promptly release news reports to gain a voice for their nation. During the media negotiations between the United States and Russia over the chemical weapon attack that occurred in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria, in August 2013, Russia made full use of digital media at three critical moments: when the chemical weapon incident was disclosed (August 21), during the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg (September 4-6), and

when the Geneva agreement was reached (September 13-14). [24] By doing so, Russia proved the correctness of its stance and ultimately fostered a favorable public opinion.

4.3. Interaction

Enhancing a two-way interaction between diplomats and the general public through digital media helps build a reliable national image. With the help of digital media, the general public can receive messages sent by official institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in one way. However, digital media allows the general public to interact with diplomats directly. For example, Lijian Zhao, the former Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, has nearly ten million fans on Twitter. [25] The more and more general public can express opinions about specific international issues and interact with him. Lijian Zhao could see the general public's comments on Twitter and reply to some valuable ideas. [25] Digital media provides the general public with a sense of equal communication and also increases their willingness and enthusiasm to participate in international discussions.

The general public can effectively gain information about global events by asking targeted questions. After that, they build the national state of a country based on the words the diplomats express on digital media. Chen, the Chinese Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, strives to avoid one-way output and emphasizes two-way interaction on Twitter. [25] He raises questions to the general public at the end of the article after presenting basic facts, guiding them to think independently, identify points, and actively interact with the audience in the comment section. [26] By interacting with diplomats directly through digital media, the general public asks targeted questions based on their thoughts, which can build a reliable national image.

Case 1: Donald Trump promoted the development of highly interactive Twitter diplomacy

Social media platforms have robust interactivity, allowing government officials to bridge the gap between themselves and the public, domestically and internationally. Former U.S. President Donald Trump, known for his "Twitter Diplomacy," posted tweets daily, reaching up to 123 in one day. [27] He frequently interacted with the public, much like a fireside chat, enriching his communication with the people. This helped enhance the foreign public's goodwill towards him and his country and further influenced the shaping of the national image of the US. [27]

Case 2: Chunying Hua's tweet promotes friendly cooperation between China and Japan

Digital media breaks down national borders, promoting friendly interactions, mutual trust, and mutual assistance among people from different countries and cultures. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Chunying Hua published a friendly article in Chinese and Japanese on foreign social media platforms. Chunying Hua wrote in Japanese to express China's stance and determination to work together with the world. In addition to writing this phrase in Chinese and Japanese, many Japanese media outlets mentioned that the accompanying image depicted flower buds waiting to bloom in spring. Though not proficient in Chinese, many Japanese netizens used English, web translation, or directly quoted Chunying Hua's original words from Twitter to convey their gratitude. This was another genuine interaction between China and Japan since

the outbreak of COVID-19, and similar scenes have repeatedly occurred, reflecting the mutual support between China and Japan during the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

Digital media has become increasingly popular with the rapid development of technology. It is increasingly influential to build a reliable national image with the help of diplomacy. Based on the extensiveness, timeliness, and interaction nature of digital media, it helps extend the diplomacy audience, responds timely to the international focus, and enhances a two-way interaction between diplomats and the general public. The competition between countries through digital media is unnoticeable but powerful. A comprehensive national state that is more reliable can significantly improve international status. Digital media gradually becomes a part of diplomacy. Only when more and more governments and the general public are aware of the importance of digital media can the national states of each country be built more reliably. At the same time, the complexity and negative impacts of digital media deserve further research in the future.

Certain limitations exist in this study's research process: first, in terms of research methods, this study mainly adopts the case analysis method, selects a few research cases, and uses subjective viewpoints. Future research needs to combine more data for quantitative analysis. At the same time, regarding research content, the focus is mainly on the digital media diplomacy strategies of significant countries such as China, neglecting the study of countries with less international influence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Y. R. Zhang; Methodology: Y. R. Zhang; Software: Y. R. Zhang; Validation: Y. R. Zhang; Formal analysis: Y. R. Zhang; Investigation: Y. R. Zhang; Resources: Y. R. Zhang; Data Curation: Y. R. Zhang; Writing – original draft preparation: Y. R. Zhang; Writing – review and editing: Y. R. Zhang; Visualization: Y. R. Zhang; Supervision: Y. R. Zhang; Project administration: Y. R. Zhang; Funding acquisition: Y. R. Zhang

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