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Nation branding in times of refugee crisis: Digital media practices of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions

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Abstract

Although immigration and related policies are among crucial factors building a country's reputation, in-depth studies comparing nation branding strategies of countries facing high influx of refugees are lacking. This holds especially true when it concerns nations with different geopolitical, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics. There is also a growing need to widen our knowledge on digital nation branding and how it can be applied to respond to crisis situations as the refugee dilemma. This empirical study aims to fill these gaps focusing on Belgium and Sweden as an insightful comparative case study. The study's objectives are: (i) comparing similarities and differences between the countries' approach to managing their (digital) nation brand; ii) studying the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis. Data were collected via in-depth interviews with sixteen representatives of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions. Our findings reveal differences between branding strategies of Belgium and Sweden resulting from their different contextual characteristics. What characterizes both nations' strategies is the increased importance of using digital media and the need of adapting to their market logics. Although the mid-2010s refugee crisis has not changed the countries' general digital nation branding strategy, but rather brought sensitive topics into sharp focus, it did lead to communication challenges that the institutions had to face. The Swedish institutions seem to be more active and structured in countering them. We conclude that well-established nation branding strategies are useful tools for governments to base on before, during and after crisis events. The example of Sweden shows that crises can act as an opportunity to reinforce a nation brand.

Keywords: nation branding, digital media, migration, refugee, crisis

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Introduction

During the last decade, European countries have faced an unprecedented inflow of asylum applicants. The refugee movement became an urgent topic on the European agenda, influencing the political, social and cultural public spheres. Due to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (d’Haenens & Joris, 2019) of 2015-2017, many countries found it pivotal to manage their international reputation related to migration and asylum policies. The movement took place alongside rapid digital shifts that increased asylum seekers’ common access to the Internet and mobile services, opening new possibilities for states to reach out to a wider audience, newcomers included, in public communications.

The mid-2010s refugee crisis was highly mediatized and politicized, also in Belgium and Sweden. Although the countries have a relatively similar number of inhabitants (Belgium: 11,2 million inhabitants, Sweden: 9,7 million; Eurostat 2015), Sweden received a much higher number of asylum applications (in 2015, respectively 35,476 versus 162,877). In both countries, the crisis raised strong political and social reactions. Seen from a nation branding and crisis communication perspective, it is insightful to analyze if and how Belgium and Sweden have reacted to the refugee crisis and incorporated the topic in their nation branding tactic.

Comparing precisely Belgium and Sweden is an important case study because of multiple reasons. Firstly, both countries have faced strong immigration since the Second World War, becoming multicultural societies (Puschmann *et al.*, 2019), making migration one of the most dominant topics in their national public debates (De Cock *et al.*, 2018). Since the 1970s, the Swedish state has praised itself for pursuing an ultimate pro-immigration and humanitarian policy. The country has the highest scores on integrating newcomers (MIPEX, 2020), while a majority of Swedish society has a positive attitude towards immigrants (European Commission, 2018). The literature positions Sweden as a good example in migration policy and integrating newcomers for other European countries (De Cock *et al.*, 2018; Puschmann *et al.*, 2019). Belgium, on the other hand, scores worse than Sweden in the MIPEX ranking, while its society shows a less favorable attitude towards immigrants. During the last decades, the Belgian government has pursued a more dissuading policy towards reception of immigrants and refugees (Puschmann *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, despite a similar number of inhabitants, both countries have different geopolitical characteristics. Sweden is a relatively large country with a small population and one official language – Swedish. Belgium is a small country with proportionally seen a dense population and a regional division into French- and German-speaking Wallonia, Flemish-speaking Flanders and both French- and Flemish-speaking Brussels-Capital Region. With three official languages, the country characterizes a distinctive language policy.

Also, contrary to Belgium, Sweden has a long history in managing the country’s image, dating back to 1945 when the Swedish Institute (SI), a public agency with the primary task to promote interest in Sweden around the world, was established. To coordinate the country’s

long-term nation branding activities, the Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad ('Nämnden för Sverigefrämjande i utlandet', NSU) was launched in 1995. The council's aim is to promote a coherent image of Sweden via cooperation of different national institutions, the Swedish Institute and Government Offices of Sweden included. One of the first official documents created on the country's branding, 'Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad' (launched in 2013), presented the Swedish brand to be associated with four main values: innovation, openness, care and authenticity, to be obtained in four fields: sustainability, creativity, innovation and society. Sweden's main objective is described as: "(...) in a world with major challenges, for Sweden's free and open society to function as a hub for innovation and co-creation" (Sharing Sweden, n.d.). The document points also to "connectors" as the strategy's most important target group, defining them as active actors spreading information in large networks, also those on social media. At the same time, Sweden's official visual branding identity system was announced. With time, the country became one of the leaders in nation branding, obtaining high positions in international rankings of nation brands (Bengtsson, 2011). In 2017, the council published its "Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad 2.0". Sweden's core values and communication areas remained the same, but the documents' authors pay attention to new aspects arisen since the previous publication, stating that "(...) Sweden has been affected in recent years by negative rumors and in some cases outright disinformation, particularly in the areas of migration and integration" (Sharing Sweden, 2017a, p. 2). The other noted trend is the digital transformation which has increased cross-border communications and cooperation. Such an established nation branding strategy and history in promoting the country's image seems to be lacking in Belgium. Scholars and practitioners (Cincă & Hîrtie, 2010; ab Iago, 2006) point to Belgium's image deficit and lack of integrated approach to nation branding. Also, the country scores worse than Sweden in international nation brand rankings (see for example Ipsos, 2022).

All these similarities and differences described above make the comparison of Belgium and Sweden an interesting case regarding managing a nation brand, especially in times of refugee crisis. Additionally, the focus on digital nation branding is key. Due to the expanding Internet and mobile use worldwide, online media have become a popular channel among countries to conduct promotional and information campaigns aimed at international audiences. Scholars note, however, that despite the extremely increased importance of the Internet as a strategic platform of communication and branding (Dinnie, 2009; Popa, 2016), the academic research of digital nation branding remains limited (Chung *et al.*, 2020). It is precisely this study's aim to widen the knowledge on digital nation branding and how it can be applied to react to crisis situations.

Upon our knowledge, in-depth studies comparing nation branding strategies of countries facing high influx of refugees are lacking, especially when it concerns nations with different geopolitical, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics. Additionally, to our knowledge, no previous research focused on analyzing specifically digital nation branding practices responding to the refugee crisis. Our study therefore aims at broadening the knowledge at the crossroads of governmental digital media use, nation branding and migration

studies.

This empirical study is based upon a comparative analysis of digital nation branding practices of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions during the mid-2010s refugee crisis. The two main objectives are: (i) comparing similarities and differences in managing the countries' (digital) nation brand, and (ii) studying the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

To obtain the study's objectives, we pose the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the main similarities and differences between approaches of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions to managing their countries' (digital) nation brand?

RQ2: What is the Belgian and Swedish governments' strategy towards responding to the mid-2010s refugee crisis in their official digital nation branding communications?

RQ3: To what extent has the mid-2010s refugee crisis influenced digital nation branding strategies of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions according to governmental experts?

Methodologically, our study builds upon in-depth interviews conducted with sixteen representatives of Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions involved in promoting the countries' image.

In what follows, we illuminate the concept of nation branding in general and digital nation branding in particular, focusing on nation branding as a crisis communication tool. Subsequently, we discuss Belgium's and Sweden's migration and asylum policy. In a next step, based on the in-depth interviews data, we compare Belgium's and Sweden's nation branding practices, and particularly their digital variant, and how these were conducted during the mid-2010s refugee crisis. We end by presenting implications on how a refugee crisis can be incorporated in the digital nation branding tactic of countries with different geopolitical, social, cultural, state structural and linguistic characteristics.

Nation branding and managing a country's image

Managing a country's image is an important historical concept (Olins, 2002). But while countries have competed for centuries using military and economic forces, nowadays they also do so by using soft power tools such as media and communication to get "others to want the outcomes that [they] want" and "to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

Building and shaping a country's image is highly connected with nation branding and public diplomacy processes. The literature proposes a myriad of definitions and approaches to both terms (for a general overview see e.g. Szondi, 2008). Overall, we see that public

diplomacy derives from policy-related advocacy and cultural relations and aims at gaining related objectives within foreign opinion leaders, cultural and political elites. Nation branding, on the other hand, originates with its managerial focus from corporate branding in order to obtain economic benefits, targeting the general, both internal and external public (Cassinger *et al.*, 2016). What is common in both processes is their aim – gaining competitive advantage over other nations (Kaneva, 2011; Pamment *et al.*, 2017). We position this study's scope within the nation branding paradigm, which we explain in more detail below.

Branding relates to producing complex signs which represent “an immaterial value that identifies a product or a particular organization and that marks it as possessing a differential advantage customarily attached to a symbol, design, or name” (Varga, 2013, p. 827). With the emergence of new countries in the 20th century, trends of globalization, mediatization, migration and transnationalism, governments found it important to build and maintain their nation brands and be competitive on the global market in order to attract tourists, investors, talents, to expand export of local products and brands, to gather attention of foreign audiences, to improve international relations and to create a feeling of pride among the domestic audience (Anholt, 1998; Aronczyk, 2008; Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018; Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

Nation branding, a term coined by Anholt in the mid-1990s, aimed to answer those needs, giving countries possibilities to manage their image using soft power logics while building upon the notions of brand management, public diplomacy, trade, investment, tourism, and export promotion. In line with the modern principles of market economy and liberal democracy, nation branding perceives states as commercial enterprises whose governments, similar to companies' representatives, use specific marketing and selling techniques to influence market capitalization (Aronczyk, 2008; Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2010; Kaneva, 2017; Olins, 2002; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011). Nation branding techniques have a broad range: “from ‘cosmetic’ operations, such as the creation of national logos and slogans, to efforts to institutionalize branding within state structures by creating governmental and quasi-governmental bodies that oversee long-term nation branding efforts” (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118).

To increase countries' competitiveness, Anholt (2007; 2010) proposes the concept of competitive identity which combines the notions of nation reputation, identity, politics, and economics. The author indicates six national competences within the nation brand hexagon through which a country builds its reputation on the global market: tourism, exports, governance, society, investment and immigration, culture, and heritage. As Anholt (2007) states, a nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the six indicated areas.

In this work, we refer to nation branding as activities performed by state actors (governments) in cooperation with branding specialists, designed to position a country in a certain way to gain benefits such as attracting tourists, talents, workforce, investors, export opportunities, etcetera. Nevertheless, it is important to note the complexity of the term, reflecting on the difference between a ‘nation’ and a ‘state’, especially when comparing

Sweden and Belgium. Although, as Bolin and Miazhevich (2018) note, both terms are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. ‘State’ refers to a “political-administrative unit with sovereign rule over a geographic territory”, while ‘nation’ “can also have an ethnic meaning and is caught up in commonplace ideologies and political feelings” (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018, p. 531). In the case of our study, where we focus on activities performed by governments, and as we analyze Belgium with its strong regional division and complex state structure, it would be perhaps more applicable to use the term ‘state branding’. However, in order to stay in line with the pioneers within the field of study (Anholt, 2007; Olins, 2002) and the current literature, we keep reference to ‘nation branding’.

Digital nation branding

As branding is a communication practice (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018), governments use different communication channels to reach their institutional goals, to shape and promote their country’s image. Media play an integral role in nation branding processes as technologies, organizations and entities with their own agency and agenda in the creation of meaning as sign systems (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018). Moreover, the technological character of specific media influences a way of forming a message, addressing, and reaching target audiences, as well as reception and interpretation of message content (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2015).

During the last decades, the appearance and rise of new technologies has enormously influenced the communication public sphere, nation branding included. It was especially the emergence of Web 2.0, an online domain focused on user-generated content, with social media sites such as Facebook (launched in 2004), YouTube (launched in 2005) and Twitter (launched in 2006) that brought revolutionary changes to the communication world. The introduction of Web 2.0 technologies created new channels for branding countries, such as blogs, social media profiles, viral advertising, brand advocacy programmes, or the first ever embassies in Second Life, created by the Maldives and Sweden in 2007, raising high media attention (Bengtsson, 2011; Dinnie, 2009).

New technologies reshaped the relation between information’s sender and receiver, transforming the traditional one-way top-down communication process into dialogue where the target group acts as a “criticizing court” (Popa, 2016, p. 96) and an active participant responding to a sender’s message in real time (Cull, 2011; Dinnie, 2009). A brand is not a product communicated only by the sender, but rather a result of the public’s perception of it (Kavaratzis, 2004) and thus “[t]aking into account the role which the target audience plays in the branding process, the adaptation to trends and its communication needs is important” (Popa, 2016, p. 96). Digital media, and especially social media, allow governments and branding managers to listen to their audience, to share accessible, relevant information and to promote competitive advantages of their countries faster, cheaper, and to a broader, both internal and external public, taking into consideration their needs and direct role in this interactive process (Cull, 2011; Dinnie, 2009; Popa, 2016). Nation branding and public diplomacy conducted via digital media allow creating closeness with the public by sharing

authentic and credible messages (Popa, 2016) where audiences can reflect their own identity and see the sender as “someone like me” (Cull, 2011, p. 3). In order to successfully promote a country’s competitive advantage in the digital communication sphere, it is necessary for governments to stay consistent, unified and constant in their communications across different governmental departments. Thanks to branding, governments can obtain “an organizational culture of communications consistency and simplicity, through the unified promotion of approved key messages and visuals” (Marland *et al.*, 2017, p. 128).

We understand digital nation branding as positioning a country and promoting its specific image towards both an internal and external public using digital communication technologies in order to gain certain objectives. Similarly to Popa (2016), we believe that promoting a country’s competitive advantages online has nowadays become an integral and much significant part of nation branding strategies. However, it is not exclusive, and promoting a country using also traditional media still applies (marketing mix).

Managing a country’s brand in times of (refugee) crisis

Transnational crises crossing geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries are an inevitable element of today’s reality based on global interconnectedness (Olsson, 2013). As the previous research shows (Olsson, 2013; Pamment *et al.*, 2017), nation branding and public diplomacy play an important role as crisis communication tools to remediate such events. The related literature focuses, however, mainly on analyzing crises caused by war, terror attacks, natural disaster, pandemic, and their impact on reputation of places as tourist destinations (Avraham, 2009; Taecharunroj & Avraham, 2022), with few exceptions such as analyses of the so-called Cartoon Crisis in Denmark, the roundabout incident in Sweden and their impact on the country’s image (Cassinger *et al.*, 2016; Kjaergaard Rasmussen & Merckelsen, 2014; Olsson, 2013).

Parsons (1996) distinguishes three types of crises: (i) immediate crises, with little or no warning; (ii) emerging crises, which develop slowly and can be limited or halted; (iii) sustained crises, which often last for longer time, even years, and are often sustained by rumor and misinformation. We consider the mid-2010s refugee movement as an example of the last type of crisis. In all of them, sustained campaigns based on well-thought strategy (focusing on what will be told and to whom) and open communication play a pivotal role in managing the situation (Parsons, 1996).

Olsson (2013) suggests three core tasks of public diplomacy as a crisis communication tool. The first is (i) sense making – the actors’ ability to recognize and understand the issue and its nature, possible outcomes, as well as to identify relevant stakeholders. The second task asks for (ii) networking – the actors’ engagement in transnational networks in order to facilitate stakeholder communication, focusing on today’s new media landscape and two-way communication. Here, an important part is played by so-called boundary spanners, defined as “persons or units mediating between an organization and its external environment” (Olsson,

2013, p. 226). Finally, Olsson mentions (iii) messaging – the actor’s ability to create and share messages that are relevant for stakeholders and resonate with their norms and values. Vaxevanidou (2017) adds a central message and a central authority coordinating various bodies as key elements of promoting a country’s competitive advantages during times of crisis.

It is important to note that while governments are expected to rapidly and effectively communicate with geographically and culturally distant stakeholders during a crisis (Olsson, 2013), promoting a positive image of a country in such a tense situation is challenging, while its success depends on several factors, not only marketing aspects (Avraham, 2009; Kjaergaard Rasmussen & Merckelsen, 2014). As we discussed, creating a dialogue and the public’s involvement are key in today’s interconnected world in order to effectively promote a country and its brand. However, the task is not easy for governments which often lack an established strategy to communicate with a foreign public at the transnational level (Olsson, 2013). At the same time, to reinforce the message, governments’ communications need to be consistent. All these challenges become even more complex during crisis times “as they require swift and unplanned communication with new sets of stakeholders, many of whom the government had never before needed to deal with” (Olsson, 2013, p. 220). This especially applies to the mid-2010s refugee crisis where asylum seekers, with their access to the Internet and mobile phones, became for governments a new audience to communicate with.

As already noted, in Anholt’s model (2007; 2010), immigration is a crucial factor in building a country’s reputation. However, literature studying this aspect of countries’ competitive identity and the impact of the mid-2010s refugee crisis on countries’ reputation remains scarce. Previously conducted research on the link between migration and place image focused rather on the role of a country’s reputation in the migration decision process for skilled workers and in improving the recruitment of international talents (Nadeau & Olafsen, 2015; Silvanto *et al.*, 2015; Yousaf *et al.*, 2021). Up till now, how countries deal with the influx of asylum seekers during a crisis period regarding their nation brand has not been studied in-depth.

In one of the first and few studies examining countries’ public diplomacy and nation branding responses to the 2010s refugee movement, Pamment *et al.* (2017) show by the cases of Norway and Sweden that public diplomacy and branding, traditionally aimed at attracting tourists, talents, investors etcetera, can be used to dissuade undesired publics. The research conducted by Gammeltoft-Hansen (2017) on Denmark and other Nordic countries confirms that indirect deterrence policies aimed to decrease the number of asylum applications can act as a form of deliberate negative nation branding or national reputation management.

Belgium and Sweden during the mid-2010s refugee crisis

The refugee situation from the mid-2010s onwards has brought implications on political, cultural and social spheres in Europe. In Sweden, the government’s primarily welcoming

attitude towards refugees became more restrictive with time, marked by the introduction in 2015 of the Temporary Asylum and Family Reunification Law launching border controls. The aim of the government's indirect deterrence practices was to show Sweden and its policies as unattractive to asylum seekers, which can be perceived as a form of deliberate negative nation branding (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). Pamment *et al.* (2017, p. 326) note that “the refugee crisis created a communicative challenge for [Sweden] because of contradictions between well-established public diplomacy and nation branding strategies, and the exigencies of the crisis”. In fact, Sweden's nation brand values of openness and care have been highly challenged.

Puschmann *et al.* (2019) write that Belgium's immigration and integration policy during the mid-2010s refugee crisis seemed to be “a one-man show” with Theo Francken, then the Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration, and Administrative Simplification, in the spotlight. Francken, holding the Secretary position between 2014 and 2018, promoted a more negative discourse regarding asylum applicants, criticizing the EU's alleged open border policy. Francken's attitude towards newcomers, often regarded as too restrictive, suggested a shift in Belgium's migration policy from very liberal to very strict. Puschmann *et al.* (2019, p. 27) note, however, that “(...) there seems to be a large discrepancy between Belgium's actual migration and asylum policy and the way Francken and his administration frame and report on it (...)”, as “Belgium has become in fact more liberal toward refugees than under Francken's (liberal) predecessor”. That was confirmed by the increased number of granted asylum permits and reception centers giving shelter to asylum applicants in Belgium.

Methodology

Our study has a dual purpose. Firstly, we aim to analyze and compare Belgium's and Sweden's strategies of managing their (digital) nation brand. The second goal is to study the countries' digital nation branding and communication management regarding migration and asylum topics since the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

Data to answer our research questions were collected via in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted online between March 2020 and June 2021. In total, sixteen governmental experts took part in the interviews. The sample consisted of a diverse group of interviewees in terms of gender, profile, and years of professional experience. First potential participants were contacted based on the authors' research conducted online (seeking contacts to different governmental institutions involved in promoting the countries' image) and then, once direct contacts started to be established, through snowball sampling. All interviewees were firstly contacted via email to present the aim and scope of the study. From the Belgian side, the sample included (digital) communication specialists, community managers, web content managers, editors, campaign coordinators and heads of relevant units at: the Federal Public Service Chancellery of the Prime Minister (PM), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Service Public de Wallonie (SPW) – Public Service of Wallonia, Wallonia Export and Investment Agency (AWEX), Wallonia-Brussels International (WBI), Vlaanderen

(Flanders), and City of Brussels. The Swedish informants included digital communication strategist, editor and heads of relevant units at the Swedish Institute (SI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

The difference in the number of interviewees on the Belgian (thirteen interviewees) and Swedish (three interviewees) side is supported by the geopolitical and state structural characteristics of the countries. Since the 1993 reform when Belgium became a federal state, the Belgian regions manage not only their domestic affairs, but also foreign policy and sub-state diplomacy, while all governments on the federal and regional level are equal in power (Criekemans, 2010). Such an administrative structure does not apply in Sweden which is a unitary state. Also, as it was confirmed during the interviews, Wallonia, Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region conduct their own promotional and branding campaigns independent of the federal state. Due to this context, it was necessary to conduct more interviews with representatives of the Belgian institutions to give an in-depth insight in the distinctive and more regional assigned competences related to managing reputation in a federal state.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They were run in English, with one exception – one interview was conducted, on a Belgian interviewee's demand, in French. Prior to the interviews, the authors prepared a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions covering the countries' general (digital) nation branding strategy and related production practices, as well as the governmental authorities' digital branding and communication activities since the mid-2010s refugee crisis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, data were coded by using an open coding technique, focusing on primary thematic coding, and comparing techniques to look for similarities and dissimilarities between the different countries and institutions under study. Based on the coding, several recurring themes were identified, as well as similar/different branding and communication patterns between Belgium, Sweden, and their institutions.

Results

Branding Sweden – one council, one strategy

The interviews confirmed that the Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad (NSU) constitutes the main base of managing Sweden's brand. As the SI informant said, the strategy is their "starting point for any communication initiative", both offline and online. The document was well-known among the interviewed Swedish representatives, and they could point to its objectives and Sweden's values presented there. One of the strategy's main merits is its long-term character, as the SI informant explained: "It is reviewed on a regular basis, but the idea is that it should last over a long time. It gives a broad framework and leaves a lot to each organization's creativity and needs". As confirmed by the Swedish representatives, all the institutions working under the umbrella of NSU have one common and agreed approach to promoting Sweden. However, what was also noted as the strategy's main advantage, is that it presents broad values of the Swedish brand, while each institution involved in the NSU

decides on its own focal points and areas to promote, depending on the institutional scope and objectives.

The SI is the main institution responsible for managing the image of Sweden with the goal to promote interest and trust in Sweden around the world, sharing information about the country and its values, analyzing how Sweden is perceived by foreign targets and promoting international partnerships. The SI runs Sweden's official website – sweden.se, and related social media profiles. As an interviewee explained, the SI's focus is to raise awareness on Sweden especially among younger people abroad, and its digital communications are primarily targeted at three audiences: English, Russian and Arabic speakers.

The presence of the NSU, one overall strategy (including common values and a visual identity system) for all main institutions involved in strengthening Sweden's image, and centralization of promotional tasks at the SI result in having one consistent and coherent communication strategy of the Swedish brand, which has been confirmed by all interviewed Swedish representatives.

Branding Belgium – complex state of fragmentation

Promoting a coherent country image seems to be more complex and problematic in Belgium. As confirmed during the interviews, managing Belgium's reputation is only a secondary task of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (PM) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), while there is no one, main institution focusing on promoting Belgium. Due to the state's federal character, its division into three regions and language communities, all having their own governments, state competences are spread over different levels and institutions. This leads to strong institutional fragmentation, decentralization, and the lack of one branding and communication strategy. As the PM's representative noted, each Belgian region manages its own image: "The situation is complicated here, as in Belgium the regions have their own branding campaigns. There are not so many national institutions involved [in promoting the image of Belgium]. As an example, there is no Belgian Tourism Agency. That is all regional."

As the interviewees claimed, there is no permanent collaboration between Belgian regions and federal institutions to enhance the country's reputation. This lack of coordination is seen as a main challenge for communicating the Belgian brand, as the PM's representative described:

It's difficult to promote Belgium as a country because it's so divided into regions and communities, whereas other countries, such as Sweden or France, are more centralized. Here, everything is decentralized. It makes it difficult for us to have a coordinated communication strategy because we do not operate as the entire country together. (...) When we have a Belgian project [to promote the country], it's difficult to collaborate because it's very complex and all the regions have to make their contribution (...).

The complex structure of the Belgian state makes it difficult to promote and communicate a clear message not only to the country, but also to its regions. As the WBI representative explained on the example of Wallonia, presenting Belgian regions to foreign audiences, especially those located far away from Europe, takes much time and effort:

When you are a French state institution, it's easy. You have a centralized state, and you communicate about France and French values. Here, it's difficult. We firstly need to explain what Belgium is, it's difficult because it's quite small on the map, and how it works here with six different governments. After that, we explain that we only represent the French speakers of Belgium. (...) And after that we can explain what we [WBI] are doing, what our main competences are. So, it needs time and explanation and it's quite challenging to explain the functioning of the Belgian federal state, because you have different regions and communities working in different competences. In Germany, it's easier because you have lands, and they all have the same competencies. Here, it's more surrealistic.

Each interviewed Belgian institution has its own strategy on communicating their territory, websites, and social media profiles. There is, however, the general, federal website belgium.be, managed by the PM, with information on Belgian administration and services, as well as the federal campaign “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal”, run since 2017 by the PM, aiming to “boost the image of Belgium”, as an interviewee explained. The campaign was launched online and offline on demand of Charles Michel, then prime minister of Belgium, as a reaction to a decrease of tourism caused by the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels.

There are several nations identified as the campaign's primary target audience, the US, the UK, China, Japan, Canada, and France included. In contrast to the SI that targets its promotional activities mainly at younger audiences, the Belgian campaign does not focus on any specific age segmentation. What is more, while the SI's activities are targeted primarily at the audience abroad, the Belgian campaign's goal is to promote the positive image of Belgium also within the country. As one PM interviewee contended: “The aim is to reach also Belgian citizens, so they feel proud of their own country. It would perhaps be weird in other countries, but in Belgium, where there are different language groups, it is necessary to have a campaign directed at the internal public.”

It is thus visible that the country's internal situation influences its nation branding strategy, and that strong regionalism requires promoting the country also internally. The aim of the “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal” campaign is to present “everything that shows Belgium in a positive way” (PM interviewee). The PM interviewees stressed, however, that due to the strong local regionalism, it is difficult to promote “typical Belgian values” and “typical Belgian identity” as “maybe Flemish people do stuff that people from Wallonia would never do. So it's difficult to really say: yes, this is truly Belgian”.

Despite a lack of one general branding strategy and centrally established values to

promote the country, almost all Belgian interviewees on a federal, regional and language community level claimed that they aim to position their territories as a place of multiculturalism, diversity, openness, and tolerance. What is more, it is important to show Belgium and its regions in a multilateral context, as solid partners on the international stage, especially within the EU and UN context. This positioning of Belgium and its territories is logical and results from the local geopolitical characteristics – Belgium is a relatively small country in the center of Europe, neighboring with other important states on the international arena such as France and Germany, and a home to many international institutions. It is thus not surprising that the country focuses on its cosmopolitan flair to benefit from the characteristics of the region and to strengthen its brand. The aim to position the country in a multilateral context has not been highlighted in such an extent in the interviews with the Swedish representatives. The Swedish participants focused more on a goal to present Sweden as a global leader in innovation, branding, and digital diplomacy, without stressing particularly international cooperation in order to achieve this objective.

Digital media as nation branding tools: keeping up with changes

The interviewed representatives, although more at the Belgian side, pointed to the need of still using traditional media to promote their territory's brand. However, what was indicated by all the interviewees is an increasing importance of conducting online activities. As a representative of the Swedish MFA said: "The aim is to think digital, to start questioning ourselves and our analog projects and to ask: 'Can we take this project and make it digital?'".

All the interviewed organizations run institutional websites and social media profiles, among which Facebook is undoubtedly the most popular social media channel. Facebook is used to engage Internet users and to create community bonds, which is possible thanks to the options of likes, comments and sharing. The aim of using Facebook to form and strengthen community bonding was stressed especially by the Belgian interviewees. To face Belgium's strong regionalism and related challenges, the PM's representatives, responsible for the belgium.be website and social media profiles, decided to have only one Facebook page where they publish posts in all three official languages of Belgium (French, Flemish, German), instead of having one separate profile per language. By this, Internet users can see all comments in different languages under the same post. As the PM interviewee explained:

It's our choice and strategy to have only one page for all languages. (...) We found out that for belgium.be it is better to have all languages together as it creates a kind of community between the Flemish and Walloon people. They see a post only in their language, but comments in all languages.

However, two main drawbacks of using Facebook were pointed out during the interviews. Firstly, as a popular and publicly available communication channel, Facebook brings a broad audience to reach, but also a broad public of Internet users with different opinions and values

to confront. All interviewees noted an increase of hateful comments as a challenge they face on Facebook, which, as the SPW representative claimed, creates serious doubts if the institutions should continue their presence on this channel. Secondly, the average age of Facebook users is increasing, while younger generations prefer other social media such as Instagram, Twitch and TikTok. Consequently, communication specialists need to widen up their spectrum of social media options in order to reach younger audiences.

The other popular social media channels used by both Belgian and Swedish representatives include Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. As the interviewees explained, the popularity of using the latter medium to promote countries and regions has much increased during the last years, mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, LinkedIn has been traditionally used to reach experienced business professionals and to promote economic diplomacy. However, there is a recent distinctive trend of younger people as well as specialists from other fields than business, such as science, education and culture, entering LinkedIn. This shift in LinkedIn users' profile gives the institutions an opportunity to open to a broader audience, especially younger generations. Secondly, LinkedIn is considered as a "professional environment", as the WBI interviewee indicated, where users log in by presenting their professional role and affiliation, aiming to build their personal brand. This specificity decreases a presence of unwanted, hateful comments and debates, which the institutions face on e.g. Facebook.

The interviews confirm that various social media channels, all having their own characteristics, bring different advantages and limitations that are evaluated by both Belgian and Swedish institutions in order to run effective online communication strategies tailored to their objectives. The institutions see changes in social media users' profiles which need to be thoroughly analyzed regarding the impact on reaching their target audiences. Additionally, using social media imposes adaptations in the institutions' way of working and production processes. Both Belgian and Swedish interviewees marked the need of having new profiles and competences within their communication teams – community managers, graphic and video designers. This requirement of new skills brings, however, challenges to employees formerly focused on promoting the countries and regions via traditional journalism. As the SPW representative said:

We have many people in our team who come from traditional paper press, who have prepared traditional brochures, flyers, press notes. (...) And now they need to change their way of working, to write on the web, to write for Twitter. This is upsetting people [translation from French].

The institutions need to adapt to the changing media environment, shifting their way of working in order to reach target audiences – whose online preferences are also changing.

The interviews revealed that to effectively communicate their territory's brand online, the governmental institutions need to face and adapt to digital media's market requirements. The following notions have been pointed by both Belgian and Swedish representatives: adapting the institutions' communication strategy to market-based logics of social media corporations

(e.g. algorithms), use of commercial language and practices, target-audience centricity, and customization, engaging private contractors and creating partnerships with the private sector.

Belgium's and Sweden's digital nation branding since the mid-2010s refugee crisis

According to Anholt (2007; 2010), immigration and related policies play an important role in shaping countries' competitive identity on the global market. The question remains if and how Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions incorporated this topic within their digital activities to manage their nation brand during the mid-2010s refugee crisis.

The Swedish representatives stated that the refugee crisis has not changed their overall nation branding strategy, claiming that their primary aim remained the same before and after the crisis – to present and promote “a correct picture of Sweden” (the Swedish MFA informant). Also, Sweden's “Strategy for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad 2.0” explicitly refers to migration and integration topics that need to be dealt with in order to clear the image of the country and to avoid misunderstandings. Interestingly, despite the emergence of a new potential target audience – asylum seekers with their Internet access, the Swedish state has not changed its tactic on whom they wish to target their branding communications at. During the crisis, neither the SI nor the Swedish MFA focused on reaching specifically immigrants or asylum seekers in their online activities – newcomers were not perceived as a particular target group of their communications. Instead, the Swedish institutions' focus remained on targeting connectors and younger people in general.

Nevertheless, during the crisis, the SI did recognize the topic's sensitivity and a higher than usual need of monitoring the public debate to keep their online content up to date and relevant to their target audience. In order to do so, the SI launched a dedicated team focusing explicitly on migration topics. The SI team identified certain communication gaps, especially in presenting Sweden as a country of immigration and emigration. Therefore, the “Sweden and migration” timeline has been published on the sweden.se website in order to present a bigger picture of migration to and from the country, and to explain that migration is not a recent phenomenon, but an integral part of Swedish history. The campaign stresses that while nowadays there are many newcomers migrating to Sweden, the country experienced in its history also periods of big emigration waves. The timeline focuses especially on the period from 1850 up till today, presenting statistics, reasons of migration as well as migrants' personal stories accompanied by their pictures. The article also contains several links redirecting to other websites of the Swedish authorities with more practical information on the topic such as how to obtain a work permit or study in Sweden.

Another symbolic key action taken by the SI team contained launching “Portraits of migration” – an offline and online campaign available on Sweden's website between 2017 and 2019. The campaign was part of the project “Portraits of migration – Sweden beyond the headlines” which aimed to “add new perspectives to the story of Sweden and migration, and to give insights into the current situation in the country” (citation taken from <https://sharing.sweden.se/toolkits/portraits-of-migration/>; accessed on 19 August 2019; webpage inactive

since 2020). In the campaign, the Swedish authorities engaged newcomers of different backgrounds to present their personal stories and experience with immigrating to Sweden. The campaign was created “not specifically for immigrants nor refugees, but for our target audience [younger generations] to show Sweden as open and caring” (dixit the SI informant), which is in line with Swedish brand values.

The allocated unit at the SI focused on migration operated for a few months after which it halted its activities. Quoting the SI informant:

At the time, the topic was on the top of everyone’s agenda, and we had to find out (...) how we could communicate it. We did some communications on this, then it was decided that we had enough content and we had so much else we needed to focus on. Afterall, this is just a part of the story of Sweden so it shouldn’t be lifted as a separate topic.

The Swedish MFA representative also confirmed that migration was back then a priority subject on their agenda, but with time, its importance has faded away, making it “nothing different from other policy areas”.

The topics of migration and asylum have not been in focus of the interviewed Belgian representatives. The institutions have not had any specific communication nor branding strategy on these aspects except for, as it was shared during the interviews, presenting the country and its policies in a correct way. Similarly to Sweden, immigrants and asylum seekers have not constituted a specific target audience of the Belgian institutions’ digital communication actions. As the PM informant said: “we distribute information on the belgium.be website that might be relevant for immigrants too, but it is not our target audience. We provide information to everyone, immigrants included, but they are not in our direct focus”. The federal institutions such as the PM or MFA are not involved, except for only specific competences, in migration-related communication activities which are in fact managed primarily by dedicated governmental migration institutions, such as Fedasil. Additionally, apart from certain topics such as granting work licenses, migration does not belong to original competences of Belgian institutions on a regional nor language community level. As a representative of one regional government stated, they do not communicate neither online nor offline on migration nor to immigrants/asylum seekers.

Digital challenges faced since the crisis

Although the refugee crisis has not changed the countries’ general digital nation branding strategy, but rather brought, especially in Sweden, certain topics into sharp focus that with time have faded away, it did lead to certain severe communication challenges that the institutions had to face. Both Belgian and Swedish representatives noted that because of the crisis, the topic of migration became highly delicate, making the institutions cover it online only when necessary and relevant to their target audience. According to the Belgian MFA

interviewee, since the mid-2010s, the Ministry has become much more aware of the topic's sensitivity and it currently takes much more time to publish any related content online as it is verified by more internal specialists, legal team included. As the informant stated:

I think not only Belgium, but also many other countries are now more hesitant to communicate about migration because it's so sensitive. I think that there is a lot of hesitation to cover this topic online, which was not up there before the big crisis.

The SI employee explained:

The issue is very sensitive and difficult, and often fails to create any constructive dialogue in our channels. It creates some good debates, but also some extremely angled discussions which are not constructive for anybody. So, we cover the topic only if it is something relevant for our target audience.

Both the Belgian and Swedish interviewees claimed that the mid-2010s inflow of asylum seekers caused an increased presence of unwanted and hateful online comments and discussions on migration and integration matters. As a result, especially the Belgian regional institutions, where migration does not belong to their original competences, decided to avoid the topic: "If we would start writing on migration or targeting migrants, I think all hell would break loose. It's the focal part of our audience, their comments can be really racist. We rather stay away from it" (Flanders informant).

Another aspect noted since the crisis, however mainly at the Swedish side, was an increased circulation of online fake news and misinformation on the country. As the Swedish MFA representative clarified:

You could really read and see during the migration crisis, that Sweden was portrayed as a failed state, as a country almost close to civil war, with no-go zones. You had President Trump saying: 'Look, look what is happening in Sweden'. And international voices from all over the world portraying Sweden as on the total brink of collapse.

The negative narrative shared by the international public towards Sweden and its, at least at the beginning of the crisis, welcoming attitude towards newcomers fits in the general discourse Sweden has been encountering since the 1990s where it "has in some aspects become a negative international projection surface for many countries" (Falkheimer & Raknes, 2022, p. 28). During the refugee crisis, perception of Sweden and its image has become much polarized in the international public debate, which has been pointed by the Swedish MFA:

Sweden is shown either as a paradise or hell. It's crazy. If you're looking at Sweden in the US political debate, you often hear people like Bernie Sanders referring to Sweden as an example to follow, and Donald Trump saying that Sweden is the worst, worst example.

The question remains if and what means were implemented to respond to the increased presence of online misinformation, as well as polarized and hateful discussions. The Flanders' government and its communication team, that suffered from receiving a high number of racist online comments, had to eventually introduce a strict policy allowing their community managers to hide or even remove comments propagating hate, racism, and conspiracy theories. As an interviewee explained: "At the beginning, we tried to convince and warn them [people publishing racist comments], but we gave up on that because they kept coming back. You cannot convince them that it's not OK to post racist comments. So now we delete them". This and the topic's avoidance were the only initiatives mentioned by the Belgian interviewees in response to digital challenges faced since the crisis' start.

The Swedish interviewees presented several major digital initiatives launched to answer the challenges. The first one was the expanded use of social media listening tools in order to conduct instant analyses of what has been said about the country. Secondly, the institutions found it important to map local online fake news with the help of regional representatives and embassies. As it was pointed out, misinformation might differ depending on a country where it is produced, and it is advised to apply local strategies to respond to it. It has also been pivotal for the Swedish representatives to launch proactive initiatives, such as to create and bond communities on social media in advance, instead of only responding to misinformation. As the Swedish MFA explained:

It is difficult to win that war when you want to react with your communication. The best thing is to work proactively. If you work strategically towards one target group, you constantly try to (...) create a bond between you and your target group, you inform them about Sweden and how we think, then they will be the ones in the first line of defense.

The informant pointed at the importance of having dedicated social media followers that can act as "Sweden's ambassadors":

When somebody tries to attack Sweden, you will have all these followers entering the debate and starting to discuss that. And we see this very clearly with our embassies that have managed to build up a strong bond with their followers. If you haven't worked well with your followers and the misinformation hits, you will stand alone.

Another way to fight against misinformation online is to explain trends and related data. The Swedish MFA informant gave an example of an online publication where Sweden's rate

of rape statistics was higher than in certain developing countries. The publication raised much controversy and online criticism of Sweden, presenting its open attitude towards newcomers as an alleged reason for increased crime. Seeing the public reactions, the government's goal was to explain the truth behind the numbers, ensuring that the inflow of asylum seekers has not contributed to the official rape statistics. In order to do so, the government released dedicated, factual digital information packages responding to the controversy in an accessible and clearly formulated language. However, as the Swedish MFA representative explained, social media do not serve well to provide deeper explanation on trends and complex data: "It is not always easy to go deeper and give statistical explanation on social media. It's difficult because on Twitter or other social media you need to communicate in a very simplistic way".

The other solution applied to fight against online misinformation on Sweden is to keep consistency and coherence in all governmental institutions' digital communication actions. It is important that created information packages are branded with Sweden's official visual identity system and shared on websites and social media profiles of different governmental institutions in order to present a consistent message, to increase content's reach and, consequently, to reinforce the country's reputation. The MFA representative emphasized a need of creating such information packages so also the country's foreign missions (e.g. embassies) can publish them on their social media profiles. Not knowing what can be shared externally in response to the refugee crisis was back then a common problem at local embassies. The Swedish MFA, which acts as a coordination center for the embassies, wanted to fill in this communication gap, bringing more consistency and clarity on the topic among their missions spread around the world.

Finally, as already noted above, a dedicated unit was created within the SI to focus on the topic, and several digital campaigns, such as "Portraits of migration" or "Sweden and migration", were launched in response to it. The most important for the Swedish institutions remained to bring digital communications that are relevant to their target audience: connectors and younger people. The Swedish interviewees also claimed that it was essential to treat fake news as an opportunity to share knowledge and correct information on the country, to promote its values and brand e.g. via dedicated digital information packages and campaigns.

Conclusion and Discussion

In our study, we posed three research questions in order to analyze Belgium's and Sweden's (digital) nation branding approach, and to study the countries' online nation branding and communication management since the mid-2010s refugee crisis, which took place alongside rapid digital shifts. We aimed to bring innovative contributions to digital nation branding by analyzing the countries with different geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics, governmental structures, as well as varying migration and integration policies while facing the refugee crisis. Upon our knowledge, the choice of countries and scope of analysis bring original results to the literature as no similar comparative research beyond the Nordic context has been performed.

Answering RQ1, there are certain differences between Belgium's and Sweden's approaches to managing their (digital) nation brand. Sweden has one long-term strategy and Council for the Promotion of Sweden Abroad in which institutions work together to promote a desirable image of the country, both offline and online. Taking from the marketing literature (Aaker, 2004), we consider it as an example of a Branded House. The presence of one coherent strategy seems to be lacking in Belgium where branding activities are held partially on a federal, but also regional and language community level, putting the country forward as a clear example of a House of Brands. The study confirms that the more decentralized a state is, the more complex it becomes to present one coherent and consistent strategy which is required to obtain desired branding goals (Olins, 2002). Having one main institution leading a nation branding strategy in collaboration with other involved entities is essential to present a strong brand on the market.

Belgium's offline and online branding campaign, "Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal", was launched as a response to a drop in tourism, and not as a proactively planned branding project as it was in Sweden. The Belgian representatives target its promotional activities also towards the internal audience, which is due to the country's strong regionalism. It is not surprising as previous research postulates the importance of the internal audience in the process of promoting a nation's image (Anholt, 2007; Aronczyk, 2008). Without citizens' involvement in reinforcing a country's reputation, especially in states with strong geopolitical, language or cultural divisions, nation branding may lack coherence and effectiveness. Sweden, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the external and younger public, without putting so much attention on the internal audience. The countries' geopolitical, state structural, linguistic, and cultural character influences their strategies to manage reputation. Both countries also have different objectives for their branding activities: the Swedish state aims to be a global leader in innovative nation branding and digital diplomacy, while the Belgian representatives pointed more at positioning Belgium in a multilateral context which relates to the country's geopolitical context.

What is common for branding strategies of both states is an increased use of digital technologies, especially social media, which created new ways to communicate with their public. This stays in line with the previous literature that confirms the importance, impact and contribution of online media in promoting countries (Chung *et al.*, 2020). It is important to remember though that social media are corporations which impose certain economic rules. Both Belgium and Sweden, countries with different characteristics, need to adapt to the global market requirements in order to gain the public's attention, to increase communication reach and, consequently, to strengthen their country's image. When communicating their brands, countries need to take into consideration not only their local specificities, but also global market characteristics. Neoliberalism, an "ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition" (Britannica, n.d.), brought broad privatization and marketization of the public space and services, making them a "calculative space" (Jansen, 2008). We also see that the Belgian and Swedish institutions need to face market logic when communicating their countries' image.

According to Anholt's nation brand hexagon (2007; 2010), immigration and related policies are among key factors building a country's competitive identity. Answering RQ2, the results show that in the face of the crisis, the Swedish authorities did not change their digital nation branding strategy nor values to communicate but tried to incorporate the topic into the already existing nation brand platform by clarifying information and emphasizing certain aspects and values. The interviewed Belgian authorities have not taken any digital branding nor communication initiatives in response to the crisis, claiming that they do not have any explicit strategy on this matter. On both sides, however, migration is seen as a subject where the country's image should primarily be correct.

Answering RQ3, although the mid-2010s refugee crisis has not changed general digital nation branding strategies of the Belgian and Swedish governmental institutions, it did bring along certain online communication challenges that the countries had to face – the topic's sensitivity, presence of unwanted online comments at both the Belgian and Swedish side, as well as increased circulation of online misinformation and polarized opinions on Sweden. To mitigate the crisis' impact on the country's reputation, the Swedish authorities took certain measures and communication initiatives to deal with the arisen online challenges. The institutions produced dedicated digital campaigns towards their target audience (connectors and foreign younger people) that would find the content relevant. It was also essential to share coherent information packages on different governmental websites and social media profiles. Also, a special focus was put on proactively creating and bonding transnational communities on social media. The previous literature confirms the importance of proactively fostering civic engagement via social media both during and after crises. Engagement originated from an organization “contributes to relational and behavioral outcomes that increase the likelihood for stakeholders to engage in public advocacy on behalf of organizations” (Yang & Saffer, 2018, p. 427). By engaging with organizations, Internet users are more likely to mention and share these organizations' content, which, in consequence, let messages spread through social networks and reach broader audiences (Yang & Saffer, 2018). Proactively engaging with Internet users and creating a strong community bond on social media can thus be beneficial in terms of influencing public discourse both online and offline, reinforcing a country's image. Sweden's example shows thus that crisis, such as the mid-2010s refugee movement, can be treated as an opportunity to strengthen a country's nation brand by: re-evaluating and improving institutional communication strategies, sharing correct information on the country, promoting its desired image and values. The Belgian governmental institutions decided not to incorporate nor respond to the migration topic in their digital nation branding, letting specific migration institutions and, in some limited cases, regions communicate on it. By this, the country missed perhaps an opportunity to position on the topic and communicate its stand within transnational networks.

Interestingly, neither the Belgian nor Swedish authorities treated asylum seekers as a target audience of their digital nation branding campaigns and have not foreseen related communications at this group. By this, both countries might have missed an opportunity to expand its international online network by a potentially new public. Also, although the

Swedish authorities engaged newcomers in their “Portraits of migration” campaign, we find that both countries could have involved more boundary spanners (Olsson, 2013) and immigrant representatives as a group helping to fight online misinformation and hateful comments.

Our study shows that digital media bring certain challenges, not present in traditional media, that governments active in the Internet sphere need to face. Social media do not always serve best in explaining complex data, trends, and sensitive matters. Also, online media bring a broad public, but also a risk of extended circulation of unwanted comments and misinformation that the governmental institutions need to manage. There are different ways to deal with these challenges, as presented above. As we can see, the mid-2010s crisis’ sensitive character led to different stands and approaches of the countries on how, if at all, communicate online in response to it and how to tackle the related digital challenges. Swedish authorities seem to incorporate the topic within their digital nation branding strategy in a more active and structured way.

We conclude that established nation branding strategies are a useful tool for governments and their institutions to base on during crises challenging the country’s reputation. As the example of Sweden shows, crises can act as an opportunity to reinforce a nation brand by sharing correct information on the country and promoting its values. Digital media help to do so, but also bring communication challenges which can make the already sensitive crisis situation even more difficult to handle by governments, especially in fragmented states. We claim that conducting digital nation branding strategy is essential in today’s world based on interconnectedness in order to gain a competitive advantage over other countries. However, it is pivotal for all governments that their digital nation branding strategy is well-thought off, well-established, long-term oriented, coherent for all involved parties and at the same time adaptable to global shifts, crises, and their specificities. It is also important to consider a specific geopolitical, social, linguistic, and cultural context of countries in order to establish their effective branding strategies.

As we are living in an increasingly internationally interwoven world facing migration challenges, transnationalism, media convergence and digital transformation, we argue that the presented results can be beneficial for future communication strategies of governments and public institutions. At the same time, it is important to conduct further research on how audiences perceive and respond to digital nation branding activities in countries with different cultural backgrounds and governmental structures, also beyond the Western perspective.

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The Impact of Citizen-led Facebook Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of Libyans' Views of the US

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Abstract

Citizen engagement in public diplomacy efforts has been considered important since its earliest conceptualizations in the 1960s. Since 9/11, the US government has put a strong focus on citizen engagement in promoting positive images of the US, its values and culture, suggesting that these activities would improve foreign publics views of US foreign policy. However, much of the public diplomacy scholarship has primarily focused on the state centric messaging form of public diplomacy to the neglect of interactions and relationships. In recent years, scholars have begun calling for an increased focus on nonstate actors, networks, and relational approaches to public diplomacy. Yet, there is still a strong need for empirical studies into how participants in these kinds of activities perceive them and how they affect their views. This article provides a case study of citizen-led public diplomacy between Libyan and American citizens through Facebook friendship groups and uses Facebook focus group interviews with Libyans to understand how these groups shape their views. The study finds that these kinds of activities are useful in promoting understanding and improved images of Americans and its culture. However, these activities do not improve Libyans views of US foreign policy.

Keywords: Public diplomacy; citizen diplomacy; Libya; US foreign policy

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Introduction

Like much of diplomatic practice, public diplomacy (PD) has gone through changes both in definition and practice. This has resulted in increasing discussion of the important role of nonstate actors in public diplomacy. However, there are still very few empirical studies exploring the impact of citizen-led initiatives. The aim of this article is to explore how citizen-led Facebook friendship groups between Libyan and American citizens can impact Libyans' views of American foreign policy. The countries of Libya and the US were chosen because of their history of conflict and because Libya was one of the countries subject to President Donald Trump's travel ban. This is an interesting case study because years of strained relations between the US and Libya and the travel ban have impacted Libyans' views of the US and its foreign policy. This study explores how Facebook citizen-led friendship groups can serve as a kind of public diplomacy when they are designed to facilitate trust, understanding and positive relations. However, this research is particularly interested in how these activities impact Libyans' views of US foreign policy. This research adds to the body of knowledge on citizen-led public diplomacy by exploring these activities through both a messaging and dialogic lens. It serves as a valuable case study because there is very limited research on the perspectives of citizens from Libya, especially regarding public diplomacy. It is also interesting, because it provides useful data on what impact citizen-led public diplomacy efforts have in influencing foreign people's views of a country and its foreign policy. This article starts with an overview of the literature on the evolution of citizen-led public diplomacy and how social media can provide a useful forum for both messaging and dialogue. These activities are useful in promoting trust and understanding between people which is helpful in improving people's image of a country. Having more positive images are important to a state's foreign policy and can be useful to facilitating more peaceful relations. The article then goes on to explore how these kinds of activities shape Libyan citizens' views of US foreign policy. It studies Libyan citizens' perspectives by conducting a Facebook focus group interview with Libyans that participate in two Facebook friendship groups. These groups are called *Libyan American Friendship Association* and *Libyans and Americans United for Friendship and Peace*.

Theoretical Background

Public diplomacy is a discipline which tends to be interdisciplinary in nature. The diversity of disciplines studying public diplomacy contributes to a lack of consensus on how public diplomacy is to be defined (D'Hooghe, 2015). This has resulted in a move to categorise public diplomacy into different logics, which allows for more studies of human centric and non-state actor approaches (Pamment, Fjallhed, & Smedberg, 2023). Most would agree, the purpose of public diplomacy is to promote a positive and attractive image of the values, culture, and policies of a state. However, it is not about promoting a good image for its own sake, but instead to facilitate positive relations and prevent conflicts. This is consistent with the recognition that the primary purpose of diplomacy is to facilitate peace and security within

the international arena. The purpose of public diplomacy is to improve the image or reputation of the sending country to shape the policy of the receiving country (USC Center for Public Diplomacy, n.d.). In the end, effectiveness of public diplomacy is measured by minds changed (Nye, 2019).

Historically, much of public diplomacy activity tends to center around state-led one-directional messaging and traditional media strategies which are very much akin to propaganda. Pigman (2010) suggests that the purpose of both propaganda and public diplomacy is to attempt to influence people's attitudes and opinions. There is a fine line between information and propaganda. However, people tend to be wary of propaganda (Nye, 2004). In 1937, Britain's foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, said "it is perfectly true, of course, that good cultural propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by bad foreign policy, but it is no exaggeration to say that even the best of diplomatic policies may fail if it neglects the task of interpretation and persuasion which modern conditions impose" (quoted in Nye, 2004, p. 101). Therefore, the ultimate purpose must be to change foreign publics' views. This is the reason that one-directional messaging is less effective than interactions. In interactions, people make judgments on whether they believe the people who are communicating with them are trustworthy. If the hearer perceives the speaker as trustworthy; they are more likely to believe and be influenced by what is said. The key difference between the two is trust (Pigman, 2010, p. 123).

This article takes the position that public diplomacy is distinct from propaganda because it can be state, or citizen-led and involves a variety of activities. In addition, this article focuses on citizen-led public diplomacy which includes both messaging and interactions. The purpose is to explore in what way interactions and narratives between citizens have an impact on the way citizens view another state's foreign policies. It is common for foreign publics to perceive the actions of governments, especially ones of countries that they have a history of strained relations with, suspiciously. Nye says "postmodern publics are generally sceptical of authority and governments are often mistrusted. Thus, it often behoves governments to keep in the background and to work with private actors. Some NGOs enjoy more trust than governments do. And though they are difficult to control, they can be useful channels of communication" (2004, p. 127). So, states are not always the best communicators of public diplomacy. This is one advantage to engaging nonstate actors in public diplomacy efforts. According to one study, NGOs tend to be viewed more positively than governments (Zatepilina-Monacell, 2012). A multi-case study of American NGOs looked at whether the way they are perceived by states had an impact on the way the US was perceived and attitudes toward foreign relations. The research found that NGOs that are privately funded are seen more positively, especially when they see their role as advancing the interests of the international stakeholders and where they are willing to publicly oppose the US government on matters concerning US interests (Zatepilina-Monacell, 2012). The fact that NGOs and civil society actors are perceived as more trustworthy shows that they may be in a better position to influence foreign publics.

The better view of nonstate actors may account for one reason we are seeing increasing

efforts by governments to engage citizens in their public diplomacy efforts. For example, the US Embassy in Libya facilitates a Facebook page targeting Libyan citizens called US Café, which uses university students to engage as ambassadors of sorts, sharing about the US, its history, culture, etc. with the hope of improving the image of Libyans toward the US. Social media is a social forum and a messaging forum. People go there to find out information and to socialize. As such, it certainly makes more sense to have citizens engaging in the process instead of governmental leaders. However, this idea of using nonstate actors is not a new one. In fact, from its very earliest conceptualizations, public diplomacy was also very much about interactions. During the 1960s, Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy was credited with coining the term public diplomacy to characterise the informational and educational programmes that were instituted by government and non-governmental organisations. People-to-people interactions were central to Gullion's views of public diplomacy. Gullion said, "What is important today is interactions of groups, peoples and cultures beyond national borders to think about foreign affairs" (Gullion quoted in Brown, 2010). The relational side of public diplomacy was reinforced by US State Department Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale when she said:

I think that the more we can have people having direct conversations with each other — and through those conversations and initiatives, through history of cultures we can learn about each other and if we do that, at the people-to-people level, that will provide us with a path to a more peaceful and prosperous future. So, it's a key part of what we're trying to do, to really have people engage with each other, to learn about each other (Brown, 2010).

The US State Department has put a strong focus on engaging citizens in its public diplomacy efforts. They even have a section of their website dedicated to encouraging citizen diplomacy with the label "You are a citizen diplomat." This website defines citizen diplomacy as a political concept of average citizens engaging as representatives of a country or cause, either inadvertently or by design (State Department, n.d.). It is communicated as a responsibility of citizens to help shape foreign relations "one handshake at a time," by engaging with the rest of the world in a meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogue (State Department, n.d.). There has been a lot written about the fact that following the terrorist attack on 9/11 that the US government increased their efforts of public diplomacy, especially leveraging the voices of citizens. Much of the increase in US public diplomacy funding following 9/11 was based on the view that terrorists attacked the US because America had an image problem (Van Ham, 2013; Peterson, 2002). President George W. Bush supported the view that this image problem was related to a perception of differing values between Americans and citizens of Muslim majority countries (Bush, 2001). It also reflected a recognition of the changing nature of international conflicts. The terrorist attack was a wake-up call that international relations is no longer exclusively about state-to-state relations, but instead requires a new approach that addresses the changing nature of conflicts as increasingly conflicts are perpetrated by non-state actors like global terror networks. If

non-state actors are the ones perpetrating the conflicts and citizens are the ones being targeted, then there is a need for more engagement of citizens in public diplomacy efforts. As a result, Bush advocated the expansion of public diplomacy efforts to promote a positive image abroad, especially in the Middle East.

By enlisting citizen diplomats in the process of promoting understanding about the US, its culture and its values, the belief was that it would also improve foreign publics' views of the country as a whole, its government and even its foreign policy. The belief is that if people have better views of a country, they are less likely to want to attack it, which then contributes to peaceful relations between countries. In this way, these public diplomacy initiatives recognise that citizens' views matter, not just because they are part of a state, but because in modern international affairs, it is citizens that are causing many of the conflicts. In the US, support for citizen involvement in public diplomacy has been welcomed by both Republican and Democratic officials. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "Public diplomacy cannot be an American monologue; it must be a dialogue with people from around the world. The dialogue must be sought out and conducted, not only by people like us in government, but by committed Americans from all walks of life" (quoted in Hughes, 2005; Pigman, 2010). Previous policy statements by the US State Department indicate a support for developing productive people-to-people relationships around the world and acting quickly to counter misinformation about US society and policies (D&CP, n.d., p. 57). Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was also a strong proponent of citizen diplomacy and the need to "leverage civilian power by connecting businesses, philanthropists, and citizens' groups with partner governments to perform tasks that governments alone cannot" (Clinton, 2010). Former President Barack Obama also supported leveraging citizen power in global engagement (Gregory, 2012, p. 118). The strong bipartisan support of US government officials for citizen involvement in public diplomacy indicates that these state officials recognise that public diplomacy is not only a state-centric messaging activity but also involves a variety of activities that bring the American people together with people from other countries. They also recognise that fostering peaceful relations between states is as much a function of citizenship as it is of governance and that a variety of everyday activities conducted by individuals in day-to-day life can serve as a conduit of peaceful relations between states and citizens and states.

With the increasing focus on public diplomacy in recent years has come a shift from what scholars call "old" public diplomacy to "new" public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005). Old public diplomacy was characterised by one-directional messaging, while new public diplomacy involves two-directional dialogue and involves citizens and civil society actors. At the centre of this two-directional dialogical approach are efforts to build relationships between citizens through a variety of cultural, educational, and business exchanges. Relationship centered approaches to public diplomacy are most useful to promoting good relations. Scholars are beginning to conduct more studies into the impact of these relational approaches (Tam, 2019). The relational shift in diplomacy is a result of a "growing interest from public diplomacy theorists in dialogue, transparency, trust and commitment" (Zaharna, 2009, p. 86). For public

diplomacy to be truly relational, it requires a worldview that supports the need to achieve mutual understanding (Fitzpatrick, 2013, p. 30). Listening to what people have to say and what they think is also an important part of public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005). Dialogue is the most effective way to learn what others think and believe. Dialogue refers to situations where ideas are exchanged and communication is multidirectional (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008, p. 18). It is through the process of asking questions and sharing views with one another that individuals influence one another. Dialogues about events, history, culture, and religion all serve as important components of getting to know one another. It is through these relationships that understanding of values happens (Melissen, 2005).

The role of dialogue is central to public diplomacy efforts aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts because it allows citizen actors to promote cross-cultural understanding, build trust and control narratives through dialogue in transnational networks. Zaharna (2009) argues that these networks can help to overcome cultural differences, foster credibility, and control narratives. This argument is consistent with the perspective of this article that transnational social media networks can serve as a forum to bridge the cultural divide. These networks transcend traditional boundaries, both geographically and politically, and include everything from terrorist networks to global financial networks (Hocking, 2005). Zaharna argues that these networks add a level of complexity to information flow and have implications for views of identity, information dominance and soft power (2013, p. 1). Within these networks is a strong public dimension that plays a vital role in fostering communication and trust (Hocking, 2005). Hocking (2005, p.37) defines these global networks as “a set of relatively stable relationships which are of a non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals.” This cooperation often includes collaboration on projects that have concrete goals to benefit the collective good. Zaharna et al. (2013, p. 7) suggest that collaboration in public diplomacy is the equivalent of traditional diplomatic negotiation. NGOs have a moral edge over government and businesses because their brands are forces for good “unencumbered by the trappings of sovereignty and untainted by realpolitik” (Hocking, 2005, p. 39).

Increasingly, these networks are happening online in social media. State and non-state actors alike are leveraging the power of social media in public diplomacy efforts to influence globally, which was not previously possible. However, scholars agree that the emergence of social media has had the greatest impact on the role of non-state actors in public diplomacy. In many ways social media has levelled the playing field between ordinary citizens and elites. This can be evidenced by the ability of ordinary people to “trend” or get significant social exposure around the world, which can even translate into traditional media exposure. Social media has expanded the network approach to online communication and information dissemination. It is no longer possible for traditional media sources to wait for others to come to them; they too must become active in online networks such as Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram. Influence happens within these network loops and using these various social

networks is called “total communication.” (Hall & Bach-Lombardo, 2017). These forums also allow users to build and maintain relationships around similar identities or goals (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, pp. 210-230). Shay (2013, p. 13) refers to this new approach as “peer-to-peer” where civilians by virtue of social media are not only consumers of government information, but also information producers, with the potential to bypass governmental bodies (2013, p. 13). Governments are collaborating with the public, “so that citizens can obtain and produce information themselves.”

Friendship forums can also serve as a useful place to promote intercultural understanding. It should involve activities that get to the heart of people’s identity and how people think, behave, and communicate, which is socially constructed and impacts narratives (D’Hooghe, 2015, p. 43). Zaharna (2012) appropriately notes that culture is often neglected in public diplomacy initiatives and when public diplomacy initiatives fail, it is because culture has been neglected. Therefore, considering the important role that culture can play in terms of perceived impact of public diplomacy, more attention should be paid to what the targets of the intended public diplomacy find to be helpful and influential to them. This is the reason that friendship groups designed to promote cultural understanding like the groups in this study are important. The use of Facebook friendship groups as a forum for public diplomacy fits under what some scholars refer to as the move toward Public Diplomacy 2.0 (Glassman, 2008; Van Noort, 2011; Cull, 2013; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016). Public diplomacy 2.0 is an approach, not a technology, but it is heavily dependent upon social networking technology and came about, in part, as an attempt to counter the efforts of terrorist groups’ use of social networking to plan and recruit for their attacks (Glassman, 2008). There are three elements of this approach: facilitating the creation of relationships; dependence on user-generated content from blog comments, videos, and pictures; and a focus on horizontally arranged networks of exchanging information (Cull, 2013, p. 125). One significant advantage of social media, which public diplomacy theorists have been calling for, is that it provides a forum for listening to publics and the ability to track how particular words or ideas move across networks online (Cull, 2013, p. 126). Cull suggests this is both a form of advocacy, by presenting the actor’s point of view, and a form of cultural diplomacy, by transmitting culture (Cull, 2013, p. 126). This dual function of actors using the forums to share their perspectives and learn about one another’s culture is consistent with what is happening in the Facebook friendship groups that this study is investigating.

Social media is not just about messaging but is also about relationships. “Building and maintaining meaningful connections or relationships with people around the world is at the heart of digital media-based public diplomacy efforts” (Seo, 2013, p. 157). Social media creates opportunities for virtual exchange where physical exchange is not possible. These “mind-operating opportunities offered through an exchange experience” can contribute to the experience of others as well (Helland, 2017, p. 96). These virtual exchanges allow for the development of mutual understanding and respect and give a voice to those who may not have access to physical exchange programmes (Helland, 2017).

One of the biggest challenges of public diplomacy has been the ability to measure its

effectiveness. As a result, social media has provided a platform to attempt to quantify and gain qualitative data on how public diplomacy messaging is received. For example, researchers look at comments on Facebook posts and likes as some of the main factors. Hayden (2013) argues, though, that it is difficult to draw a connection between Facebook likes and views on foreign policy. For example, in the study done by Hayden it was noted that Pakistan, which was viewed as having an anti-American sentiment, had the largest number of fans on the US Embassy of Pakistan's Facebook page (Hayden, 2013). Attempts were made to look at Embassy pages and note pro-America and pro-Obama words. Although this is not dialogue, Hayden (2013) argues that it does give some insights into deeper political thoughts. Further, the Embassy did try to make its Facebook page more interactive by occasionally posting pictures and answering questions (Hayden, 2013). Ultimately, only asking questions will give insights and understandings into what people really think about a state's foreign policy, its culture, and its people. This is the reason for this study. However, rather than just asking questions about state centric public diplomacy efforts, it focuses on citizen-led public diplomacy efforts and how those activities impact views of foreign policy.

Rationale for case study

The decision was made to study the countries of Libya and the US because of their history of conflict and because a case study of citizen relations between these countries has not been done before. Further, gaining the perspectives of Libyan citizens provides rich in-demand data on non-western perspectives of people in the Global South on international relations issues while empowering the people of Libya by giving voice to their perspectives. Libya is also particularly interesting for studying the role of non-state actors because Libya currently is considered a failed state that is lacking in civil society organizations and bureaucratic institutions that often support and encourage citizen exchanges. Since the Libyan revolution, there have been multiple conflicts with armed militias fighting for power. Following the Libyan revolution, there was a hope that relations between Libya and the US would improve. However, after the revolution there was a disintegration of the security situation in Libya with the country spiralling into more internal conflict. After the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi and escalating violence, the US Embassy moved its location to Tunisia and significantly decreased its engagement in Libya. The security situation in Libya became a foreign policy issue for the US government. In March 2017, Trump signed Executive Order 13780 banning travel into the US from certain Muslim majority countries for 120 days and indefinitely from Syria. This order included individuals from Libya. In September 2017, this so-called "Muslim ban" was downgraded to certain restrictions on countries that the administration perceived as doing too little to protect against terrorists coming into the US. The September 2017 guidance provided restricted entry for Libyan nationals as immigrants and non-immigrants in business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visa classes (White House, 2017). According to the administration, the justification was that the government of Libya faces significant challenges in sharing public safety and terrorism-related information, has significant problems with identity management protocols and has not been fully

cooperative in repatriating Libyan nationals removed from the US (White House, 2017). In September 2017, the government in eastern Libya announced that it would engage in a reciprocal arrangement against Americans, calling the US decision a “dangerous escalation, which puts Libyan citizens in one basket with the terrorists the army fights [and which] will force the Interim Government to adopt only one option—the principle of reciprocity” (Libya Observer, 2017).

The country of Libya has historically held an important place in US foreign relations. However, years of sanctions against Libya precipitated by Muammar Gaddafi’s involvement in state-sponsored terrorism caused years of strained relations between Libya and the US and impacted the views of Libyan citizens. Following the Libyan revolution, two Facebook friendship groups were started by Libyan and American citizens to promote understanding and friendly relations between Americans and Libyans. These groups, and similar friendship groups between people of other cultures, serve as fora for a kind of virtual public diplomacy. However, what is unique about these groups is that they are not created under the auspices of any governmental organisation. Some things shared in the group, like information about holidays and exchange opportunities, are similar to the kinds of things that the US Embassy posts on their Facebook page as part of their public diplomacy efforts. However, the difference seems to be the dialogic nature of the friendship groups and the lack of any overt governmental political agenda. The purpose of these groups is more about promoting cultural understanding and friendly relations and a sense of solidarity between Libyans and Americans. As such, the question remains whether these messaging and dialogic interactions impact Libyans views of US foreign policy.

Methodology

This study used an interpretivist research design to understand how actors construct meaning together around a given phenomenon. As such, focus group interviews were chosen as the most useful method over other research methods. Since central to this article is understanding the role that dialogue has in friendship groups and how the dialogue impacts Libyans’ views of US foreign policy, it makes the most sense to use a dialogical research method to explore this topic.

“Focus groups are group discussions exploring a specific set of issues” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4). Focus groups can be particularly helpful in research that explores everyday narratives in international politics (Stanley, 2016). The fact that Libya is classified as a failed state with an ongoing civil war and unstable security situation made travel to Libya to do face-to-face focus groups prohibitively dangerous. Therefore, an inability to travel to Libya provided an access issue. As such, an alternative way of collecting data was necessary. Facebook focus groups seemed particularly useful since the study deals with people that participate in friendship groups online. This methodological approach meets a need for additional ways to gain empirical insights which scholars have been calling for (Ayhan & Sevin, 2022)

Participants were recruited through a structured snowball sampling approach from the two Facebook friendship groups. After providing informed consent, the participants were invited to a private Facebook group set up to conduct the interview. Thirty-two participants joined the Facebook group and participated in the focus group interview. Of the thirty-two, eight were female and the remainder were male. The rules were posted in the Facebook group, including the expectation of confidentiality and that participants keep what was shared in the group private. The interview took place in an asynchronous format over a two-week period. The interview took place in a bilingual format where the questions were posted in English. Those Libyans who felt sufficiently fluent in English posted answers in English. However, some participants chose to post their answers in Arabic. The answers were immediately translated through Facebook's integrated translation software, which allowed follow-up questions and further dialogue around answers. After the research was complete, the interviews were exported and coded using thematic discourse analysis.¹⁾

Findings

The participants in the focus group interviews were asked about their views of the purposes of the friendship groups between American and Libyan citizens. They described them as a kind of citizen diplomacy that can be useful in improving relations between citizens and helping to promote understanding of one another's culture and values. These kinds of activities serve an important purpose of dispelling stereotypes and negative images that people have. They are seen as necessary to improving relations, especially between states that have a history of conflict. However, participants noted that these activities do not change their views of US foreign policy. In this interview, the participants strongly held the view that they separate their views of the American people and the culture, from their views of the US government and its foreign policy.

Cultural exchange promotes understanding

The respondents maintained that cultural exchange programmes are the most helpful way to improve relations between Americans and Libyans. Strained relations between the US and Libya during Gaddafi's time in power and years of sanctions had left Libyans with very little exposure to American people and culture. However, after relations began to be normalised between the two countries, the US State Department began to implement some limited cultural exchange programmes. Unfortunately, after the assassination of Ambassador Chris Stevens, most of these programmes stopped. FB2 said:

I think that the role of the US Embassy and State Department in promoting good relations between America and Libya is limited. There are no active participation

1) Readers interested in further details about methodology, including protocols, answer summaries and coding patterns, should see the forthcoming book *Facebook Friendship Groups as a Space for Peace* with Vernon Press.

of citizens and open discussion between America and Libya. Such as these activities are important in promoting good and close relations with the United States. It is very important that discussion also takes place elsewhere.

Programmes like scholarships for Libyans, student exchanges and even a virtual hub were mentioned as possible ways to foster understanding. FB31 said, “For me internet activities are not really effective the way the real activities are.” The participants favour programmes that involve mutual exchange and learning between countries. They recognise that both Americans and Libyans need to learn about one another. FB7 said, “Joint programs in art, sport, education, etc. show the Americans the real Libyans who hate war and violence, who wants to live in peace and share their culture with the rest of the world.”

The participants noted that cultural exchange and friendship groups are to some extent a kind of citizen diplomacy. They recognised that citizens do play a vital role in building good relations between Americans and Libyans. There were diverse answers. These included FB5 who said, ‘Yes, I think that’. FB30 said, “somewhat.” FB31 said, “Yes, if it is well controlled and does not lose the aim of the group after some time.” While FB1 said, “It depends on each group’s activity: and FB30 indicated that “Trust and alternate benefits” were necessary. FB3 said, “Word of mouth can promote good relationship. The citizens are acting as ambassadors of their countries.” FB31 said:

It depends on the activities promoted by “the other culture” through their embassies and consulates. If they share their activities and get involved in Libyan activities in different ways, this will make their culture reaching a lot more citizens and these citizens of course will attract much more citizens who will be interested to see more of the other culture.

This perspective reflects the fact that cultural exchanges can have a compounding effect because participants in cultural exchanges share experiences with other people. FB1 said, “They play an important role in changing the negative views of same country citizens as well when they participate in activities with different cultural people can understand how they think towards their country and try to convey the true picture of their country.” Similarly, FB2 maintained that “media plays a key role in forming and shaping opinions and deepening already existing cultural misunderstandings between cultures and religions.” These kinds of activities are needed to dispel these negative images. Participants characterize these interactions as a virtual cultural exchange experience. In cultural exchanges, people interact with one another on more superficial levels, but those interactions have a purpose of promoting understanding and improving relations between people and states. This social process is an important first step of getting to know people of other cultures collectively and requires time and intentionality. As Helland (2017) suggests, these virtual exchanges allow for the development of mutual understanding and respect. This is consistent with Zaharna’s (2012) contention that culture plays an important role in relational public diplomacy and in accounting for the reciprocal agency of the targets of public diplomacy.

The participants in this study do not see fostering peaceful relations as merely a state function, but also a societal function. Participating in Facebook friendships serves as a kind of bridge-building activity between citizens, where they can learn about one another's country and facilitate positive relations. The participants in this study recognise that the very act of joining a Facebook friendship group with Americans suggests that the participants are interested in promoting peaceful and positive relations with Americans, but also in combating negative stereotypes that exist about one another.

These citizen-led Facebook forums provide an opportunity for two-directional promotion of positive images, rather than only one-directional messaging which is more typical of state-centric public diplomacy efforts. Nye described effective public diplomacy as "a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking" (2004, p. 111). FB29 said the reason she/he participated in Facebook friendship groups was "to learn about and from others, exchange experiences and ideas and be part of the international community and understand what's going on and try to help my country." This is consistent with the discussion by Melissen (2005) about the shift to dialogic forms of public diplomacy involving non-state actors. Dialogues about events, history, culture, and religion all serve as important components of getting to know one another.

A lack of trust was also seen as a factor in perceptions about the efforts to promote good relations. FB1 said, "I think there is a notable effort. However, what spoils these efforts is mistrust." Biases and lack of transparency are perceived as a contributing factor in mistrust. FB6 said, "Without facilitating trust the future between Libyan and American people will take long time even if the politician come to agreement. I know a trust is a vital factor."

US foreign policy is the problem

Much of the rationale for the US government's efforts to increase its public diplomacy efforts in Muslim majority countries following 9/11 was related to a perception of differing values between Americans and citizens of Muslim majority countries, in particular Arab countries. As such, since 9/11 many US public diplomacy efforts have been focused on educating foreign publics about American culture, history, and people. Although these projects are helpful, the participants in the Libyan focus groups made it very clear that they see US foreign policy as the reason for conflicts and not the American people or American values. They all noted US foreign policy as the reason for strained relations between the US and Libya. FB9 said, "I found that government have to do with this more than religious and cultural differences."

FB6 said, "US foreign policy is the biggest factor causing conflict between countries." The participants' discussion of US foreign policy went back in time and showed the impact of historical memory on views as well. For example, FB30 viewed America as wanting to colonize Libya and cited US Navy activity off the coast of Libya during the Tripolitan War in 1801-1805. However, for most participants, negative views of US foreign policy were more recent. Several mentioned the American air raid on Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986 and the

blockade for ten years that came about after it was found that Gaddafi had engaged in acts of state-sponsored terrorism. There was also some mention of the terrorist attack on Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland and how the resulting sanctions impacted the country of Libya. This tragedy continues to hang over the heads of Libyan people with many still questioning whether Libya was responsible for that attack, which can even be seen in the way they frame the tragedy. FB8 discussed the resulting effects of the international community's response to the Lockerbie attack on the Libyan people:

The implemented sanctions on Libya after Lockerbie accident. Normal Libyans were suffering and not the leaders. Also, it was not based on sound evidence. There are other suspects like Iran and extreme Palestinian organization. Even if Libya was responsible; they left Gaddafi ruling. Libya continued to export the oil because the west needed it and we were punished twice; by the sanctions and by continued to be ruled by Gaddafi.

Despite some lingering questions of Gaddafi's responsibility for the Lockerbie attack, the participants noted that the Libyan people also suffered deeply at the hands of Gaddafi and do not perceive him as a victim or a saint. Instead, there seems to be a residual recognition that in the end it has been the Libyan people that have suffered the most during the years of sanctions and they have been treated as if they were all terrorists simply because they are from the country of Libya. FB3 said, "The past government used to cause conflicts with America that caused bad reputation to all Libyans." Others recognised that both countries' policies have impacted relations between Libya and America. FB6 said, "The bad policy between Libya and USA is bad politics."

Some of the participants shared that their concerns with US foreign policy were related more to current issues. There were concerns about the US government's infringement on oil and gas companies (FB16). Others saw the US government as crossing the line and intervening in local issues (FB3). In addition, a few of the participants noted that they perceive America as engaging in terrorism around the world and questioned what they perceive as unjust US involvement in wars in Iraq (FB3 and FB16). However, consistently, the US support of Israel was raised as an issue that affects Libyans' views toward the US government.

The US travel ban was described by all participants as a significant factor contributing to their negative views of the US government. Libya was designated as one of the seven countries subject to Trump's travel ban. The participants suggested that Libyans are being unfairly singled out for this ban. "One Libyan makes something wrong, are we all judged?" FB28 described this as "guilty until proven innocent." FB7 said, "Libyan people felt that's unfair to allow countries that export terrorism to travel to the US and ban us who are suffering from terrorism." While FB3 described it as "a new type of racism." FB1 said, "It's undoubtedly unfair and this makes the American policy disgusting and can't gain other cultural people's trust." One participant did not see the impact of the travel ban as being as

strong as the policy back in the '80s and '90s (FB6), which referred to the UN and US sanctions against Libya.

Since the travel ban is seen as a significant issue impacting the Libyan participants' views of American foreign policy, the participants hold the view that doing away with the travel ban is an important step in improving the way the US government is viewed by Libyans. FB3 said, "Lift the travel ban and ease immigration rules." FB3 said, "Treat Libyan with human rights perspective" and FB1 added, "Surely, yes stop the arbitrary policy toward Libyans such as travel ban." While FB28 maintained, "I hope American department gives visa to Libyans to travel there and the reverse for its citizens because this decision has a big impact on our relations."

Despite the participants' clear problems with US foreign policy, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that they separate their views of the American people from American foreign policy. FB1 noted the US policy is unfair and ironhanded, and before meeting Americans thought the people were like their government. This was influenced a great deal by the anti-American rhetoric that they were fed by Gaddafi. However, that is no longer the case. As people learn more, their views change, and they can separate their views. This is especially true because the Libyan people do not see their views as being the same as the views of Gaddafi, so they give the same level of deference to citizens of other countries that they want people to give to them. FB1 said, "Exactly as I think as my American friends did of Ghadafi's policy." FB28 shared a story about going to Malta in 2002 to apply for a US visa and for six days being afraid to go to the US Embassy. This participant noted that she finally got up the courage to go inside and asked to meet with the consul. FB28 indicated that he was very polite when asked about travelling to America on holiday. FB28 shared with him that she was afraid that he would refuse to issue a visa because she was an Arab Muslim wearing a head scarf. FB28 stated that he was nice and reassured her that he would not deny her a visa for that reason and this experience affected her views of the US government. FB28 added, "I think for me as a citizen the past has no effect but what is happening now matters a lot like the travel ban."

Programmes designed to improve Libyans' views of the American people and culture have almost no impact on the Libyan participants' views toward the American government. FB3 said, "The American people are naïve, innocent, very nice and you can use all other kind words. We know them very well. But American politics is something different." FB20 posted a picture of a man wearing a shirt that said, 'Saying all Muslims are terrorists is like saying all Americans are like Trump'. FB3 added, "When someone do a mistake, we should not generalise and say all Americans are same as Trump." As such, the travel ban does not impact the Libyans' views of the American people, only their views of American foreign policy. FB22 said, "It doesn't affect. I think both nations share the same human values regardless of political issues." However, FB16 said, "Difference between government and people. But American people are often in the hands of the government."

Views of the US government have also been influenced in part by the lack of US

involvement in helping to rebuild Libya after the revolution. FB2 said, “Libyan people were hoping that the US government will continue its support to Libya and help rebuild the country after the revolution, but the negativity of the White House disappointed the Libyans when they were looking highly at US government.”

Generally, the participants held very favourable views of the American people. FB8 said, “I differentiate between American people and American policy. Firstly, I cannot judge a whole population. I have dear American friends who helped us, listened and were very friendly. I am against American’s government in other countries all over the world.”

In the end, the Libyan participants see the history of conflict between the US and Libya as being a government problem and not a problem between citizens. FB32 said, “I think as a Libyan citizen that the friendship between the two peoples existed from the fifties during the reign of King Senusi. After the Qadhafi coup, the relationship took on another direction because of Qadhafi’s policies and because of the US government in general.” FB32 added that he blames the US government for messing up relations. This is based on his perception of US interference in domestic affairs of countries in the Middle East. This participant urged the American people to press their government to change its policy in the Middle East, especially on the Palestinian issue and stop its support of the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the participants shared that they want to foster a long-term positive relationship between the US and Libya and desire for a return to the positive kinds of relations that existed between the US and Libya before Gaddafi came to power.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that citizen-led Facebook friendships between Libyans and Americans serve as a kind of citizen-led public diplomacy that are necessary to dispelling stereotypes and promoting understanding between people. These activities are helpful to promoting better images of one another and fostering more peaceful relations between Libya and the US after years of strained relations. However, despite seeing these interactions as a form of diplomacy, even describing themselves as ambassadors of sort, the participants also recognize that there are limits to what these kinds of activities can accomplish. These initiatives are important to learning, promoting goodwill, and humanizing one another on a collective level. Therefore, these virtual interactions are an important first step in building relations on a superficial level. However, they see in person activities as having much more impact and desire to see more of these kinds of cultural exchange activities between the US and Libya. Further, they prefer to see activities facilitated by civil society actors as they are seen as altruistic and more trustworthy than government. In particular, the participants noted that they separate their views of the American people from the American government. As such, values-based initiatives that have dominated the US public diplomacy priorities do not have an impact on the Libyan citizens’ views of US foreign policy. In fact, the participants did not see things like culture, religion or values as being a barrier between countries. Instead, the respondents overwhelmingly shared negative views and distrust of the US government,

because of the years of sanctions and from the more recent travel ban which they characterised as unfair and unjust. Therefore, the US government needs to do more to rebuild trust with Libyans and that does not happen through superficial citizen interactions. Instead, they are looking for more long-term engagement and capacity building programs to show the US commitment to helping Libya rebuild. In the end, they overwhelmingly shared that if the US government wants to improve the way it is viewed by the Libyan people, it needs to be more aware of how its foreign policy impacts the people. When a government declares all the citizens of a country as enemies and ban them from traveling to that country, no amount of discussion of culture or friendly dialogue between citizens is going to change their views. If the US government wants to improve its image, it needs to start with changing its foreign policy.

This study has provided very useful insights about public diplomacy efforts between the US and Libya which should impact further diplomatic efforts and inform further research. Moreover, this study has shown that historical relationship matters to the kinds of activities that are useful and one size fits all is not the best approach, especially when it comes to relational forms of public diplomacy. However, it also provides some helpful insights about public diplomacy efforts in general. The study has shown that if researchers or states ask foreign citizens what kinds of activities are useful in improving relations, they will tell them. In this study, the participants shared useful ideas of the kinds of activities that are valuable and those that are less valuable. The study also showed that citizens value a two-directional dialogue over one directional messages. The citizens participate in activities because they want to promote positive images about themselves and their countries as much as learning about another country. This is often overlooked as a consideration in studies on public diplomacy. Trust is essential to improving images and building trust takes time and intentionality, especially when trust has been broken. As such, more research into two-directional approaches is needed in public diplomacy, especially relational approaches. In addition, more comparative case studies would be valuable to learn the kinds of activities different populations find most useful in building trust and whether those result in improved images of a state and its foreign policy.

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Nation branding and international media coverage of domestic conflict: An agenda-setting study

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Abstract

Agenda-setting theory of the media describes the relationships between how news media present issues and how important those issues are to news consumers. Applying agenda setting theory, we ask, does media coverage of international political events relate to a nation's brand? We leverage a domestic conflict index variable from the Cross National Time-Series (CNTS) dataset of New York Times articles, which are considered influencers of global news content. Our dependent variable is Anholt's NBI index from consumer surveys from 2005 through 2007, whose data include an aggregate nation brand index score as well as a disaggregated score for different categories such as tourism and exports. To investigate these relationships, we employ general additive models (GAM), which account for non-linearity using cubic splines, finding generally a negative relationship between media coverage of conflict and consumer sentiment of a country. To confirm our findings, we compare the results with both the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) dataset of political events and the Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) measure of reported conflict fatalities in a country.

Keywords: Nation Branding, Agenda-Setting Theory

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The concept of nation branding emerged in the early 21st century, partly due to the aftermath of 9/11 and the U.S. State Department's efforts to improve America's image. Simon Anholt introduced the idea of place branding in 2002, applying commercial brand management strategies to countries. However, he later realized a country's image is more closely tied to its identity, politics, and competitiveness, and began using the term Competitive Identity instead (Anholt, 2011, p. 21). In distinguishing between nation branding and country reputation, Passow and colleagues (2005) noted that reputation is a strategic concept centered on long-term impressions that are constructed by images and actions of an organization, or in this case, a country. Some of the images, messages and actions are functions of nation branding, and the impressions people hold about countries are, in fact, the nation's brand (Anholt, 2020). Studies of country reputation have found it to be a multi-dimensional construct, including aspects of leadership, affection, and culture that is quite stable (Yang et al., 2008; Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005; Fullerton & Holtzhausen, 2012).

When Anholt originally put forth the idea of nation branding, he developed the "Place Branding Hexagon", dividing it into Tourism, Brand Exports, People, Culture, Governance and Investment/Immigration (Anholt & Hildreth, 2004). He also launched the Nation Brand Index (NBI) survey in 2005, which measures a nation's brand through the lens of consumer sentiment, using a series of questions about the respondents' attitudes toward and awareness about other countries. To the extent that product brand perceptions and attitudes result from consumer processing of brand information, through either mediated messages or word-of-mouth communication, as well as personal brand experience (Aaker, 1996), the resulting brand concept or image consists of multiple attributes and beliefs, including valence. Likewise, the formation of citizen attitudes toward nation brands has been described as a stable, yet heterodox phenomenon that is affected by various integrants, including but not limited to country exports, tourism, advertising, media reports, governance, natural and man-made disasters, and cultural exports such as movies and music (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2017).

The media can have a significant impact on a country's brand, as studies suggest that increased news coverage leads to a higher perceived importance by the public (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). This influence on public perception is known as agenda-setting, where the way news is presented affects the importance assigned to the issues by those exposed to it. Classic agenda-setting studies found a strong correlation between newspaper reporting and which topics the public subsequently perceived as being important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), a phenomenon later referred to as first level agenda-setting. Later, in studies of second-level agenda-setting, media messaging was found to influence not only topic salience but also attribute salience for a particular topic. For example, exclusive reporting by the New York Times (NYT) about animal abuse in horse racing led to high salience not only for the topic but also for specific story attributes like equine drug use (Denham, 2014). This phenomenon is known as second-level agenda-setting.

One medium's coverage can also influence another medium's coverage, referred to as 'intermedia agenda-setting theory'. Studies have found that depending on the topic, major

outlets, such as the NYT tend to act as the agenda setters (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018; Stern, Livan, & Smith, 2020). In other examples, Van Belle (2003) reported that NYT coverage of foreign politics tracked with subsequent US foreign aid decisions, Chomsky (2000) concluded that NYT coverage of the Greek civil war acted as an “advance agent of the Truman Doctrine” (p. 415), and Lin et. al (2018) showed evidence that NYT international business reportage affected world gold markets. Lihua (2012) argued that stories about China in the NYT manipulated opinion about that country, and Golan (2006) found that the NYT strongly influences the agenda of UK network television news programs.

Given the potentially high impact news can have on perceptions, according to agenda-setting theories, we seek to add to the research literature by asking: does media coverage of international political events and domestic conflict relate to a nation’s brand?

Data

To study our question specifically regarding the NYT, we examine whether NYT coverage of inter national domestic conflict is related to NBI, by leveraging the CNTS dataset that was generated through systematic coding of NYT articles (Banks & Wilson, 2022). We use the domestic conflict index (DCI) from the CNTS data, which is a weighted index of eight measures, including assassinations, general strikes, guerrilla warfare, major government crises, purges, riots, revolutions, and anti-government demonstrations. While this dataset tracks NYT reporting exclusively, it is this limited, but arguably powerful, coverage by an iconic media outlet used to build the index that we seek to explore.

The New York Times has limitations in terms of its audience and coverage (mostly US based) and thus its global agenda-setting influence. Further, the DCI variable is a hand-coded database, which can introduce bias. Therefore, to cross-validate our findings, we also test the agenda-setting influence of media on a nation’s brand by correlating NBI with two other media databases, known as GDELT (Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone) and the Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)’s geo-referenced event dataset, version 22.1 (Leetaru & Schrod, 2013; Sundberg & Melander, 2013).

GDELT is a dataset of political events built by daily computer-assisted scraping and machine coding of thousands of worldwide news outlets from more than 100 languages (Leetaru & Schrod, 2013). We use GDELT’s Goldstein score (1992), which is an index for how negative or positive a story is from -10 to 10, in this analysis. GDELT has been used in other agenda-setting studies, including those on intermedia agenda setting and fake news (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018) and how news media in different countries influence how other countries cover international news (Guo & Vargo, 2017). UCDP’s geo-referenced dataset includes records information about individuals killed or injured around the world from organized violence. Because violence may have an especially negative impact on perceptions of other countries, the UCDP database provides an additional check on the relationship between media coverage and perceptions of other countries. While the UCDP database has

not been widely used in other agenda-setting studies, it is commonly found in conflict literature about the influence of violence and death on the United Nations Security Council's agenda (Binder & Golub, 2020).

By analyzing three data sources to understand whether a nation's brand is influenced by media coverage, this study can provide cross-checks and increased validity, with each dataset intended to address a shortcoming of other datasets. All datasets include measurements of political events as reported in the media and score them on how they relate to domestic stability, making them readily comparable. The CNTS dataset potentially has a coverage bias both in terms of only covering negative events and not recording more minor, locally covered events. Since the GDELT data set has a much more comprehensive scope, it allows us to compare NYT's relationship with a nation brand when compared to all media coverage, which could also proxy as a measure of true number of events since it is likely to include all political events instead of just those deemed newsworthy by the NYT. It also accounts for the fact that local and regional news have an audience that is more interested in smaller events. However, GDELT is machine-coded and could suffer from algorithmic bias. UCDP fills in this gap by using human-coding and many media sources including Global Newswire, BBC monitoring, and local and specialized news outlets. This allows us to further explore the criterion-related validity with another media-collected dataset focused on conflict and adds to the research on intermedia agenda-setting.

Research Design

Our dependent variable is Anholt's NBI index and our time sample was determined by availability of these data, which cover 2005 through 2007 and were provided directly by Simon Anholt.¹⁾ Measurements are made quarterly and include an aggregate nation brand index score as well as a disaggregated score following Anholt's hexagon categories. Scores are based on rank-ordered responses from about 40 countries, mostly developed or rapidly developing, from online consumer surveys administered to stratified random samples within each country. Samples are stratified by age, gender, and where applicable, geographical region, race and ethnicity. Sample sizes ranged from 200 to 1000, with a mean of 740 and median of 1000. Respondents do not rank their home country.

To interpret the relationship between NBI and media coverage, we use general additive models (GAM), which account for non-linearity using cubic splines. We visualize these models for overall NBI and each of its six categories with all three media-sourced variables of CNTS, GDELT, and UCDP. As a check of media-source inter-relationships, we also compare all three media source variables using plots of GAMs.

We make a number of transformations in the data for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, the NBI data were reported quarterly and had different scales of scores when

1) We considered adding measures of our dependent variable, such as the country rankings provided by US News & World Report, but to our knowledge other options only publish ordinal rankings, which would not have been compatible with our design.

administered.

Therefore, quarterly survey scores were normalized between one and zero. Second, to match the data with the CNTS and UCDP data, NBI scores for all quarters during which a country was included and GDELT Goldstein scores, which are reported daily, were averaged for each year. Third, for comparability, DCI scores and Goldstein scores were normalized to scores between zero and one as well. Fourth, Goldstein scores usually run from negative to positive, which is the theoretical opposite direction of DCI, as higher scores indicate more violence, and so the GDELT Goldstein scores were inverted for easier comparison. Fifth, given the high level of dispersion and expected diminishing effect, fatality counts from UCDP were logged. Lastly, we lag the media related variables by one year, which is the minimum amount possible, so that these events have time to impact consumer sentiment, if at all.

Findings

We found, depicted in Figure 1, a quadratic relationship between media conflict events and the overall NBI score. Initially, increased conflict corresponded with lower scores, but for the highest scores, the relationship became positive. Spain maintained a strong brand despite domestic conflict, indicating that negative coverage can lower a country's brand score, but not if the brand already well-established. When contrasted with GDELT, countries with neutral events have the highest branding, but highly positive or negative events lead to lower branding scores. This indicates that negative events like military attacks hurt a country's brand and seemingly positive events like foreign aid can be perceived negatively by some consumers, likely due to conflicting interests or perceptions of unnecessary intervention. UCDP fatalities with no observations vary greatly, but the negative linear relationship for non-zero values indicates that fatalities impact the perception of a country more than media events.

When examining brand indexes for NBI, DCI, GDELT, and Goldstein, shown in Figure 2, 3, and 4, certain aspects have a stronger impact on the overall relationship. DCI and GDELT scores for Exports, Culture, and Tourism are mostly neutral. Government, People, and Investment show a positive quadratic relationship. Goldstein scores are consistent, with only Export branding showing no correlation. UCDP scores are all negative, but not always linear. Exports level off at higher values, while People show the most consistent negative correlation.

Broadly, we find that NYT coverage of conflict events around the world was negatively related to consumer sentiment, but this relationship appears to be limited to government and investment branding, indicating that consumers realize that political events covered in the NYT do not represent a country's culture or people. Also, the DCI relationship with overall NBI is much flatter than we see for the other two variables. Compared to the nearly linear relationship between UCDP recorded fatalities, the contrast suggests consumers can differentiate between types of negative political events, with deaths being perceived most negatively. At the top-line level, these findings support the long-standing agenda-setting theory of the press, as well as second-level and intermedia agenda-setting theories. The mixed

effects on various aspects of the nation brand are consistent with Anholt’s (2020) premise that some active branding functions, such as tourism advertising and the marketing of exports, can impact certain dimensions of a nation’s brand, while not necessarily its image overall. The results of this study also confirm that a nation’s brand is relatively stable and does not move quickly with each reported news story.

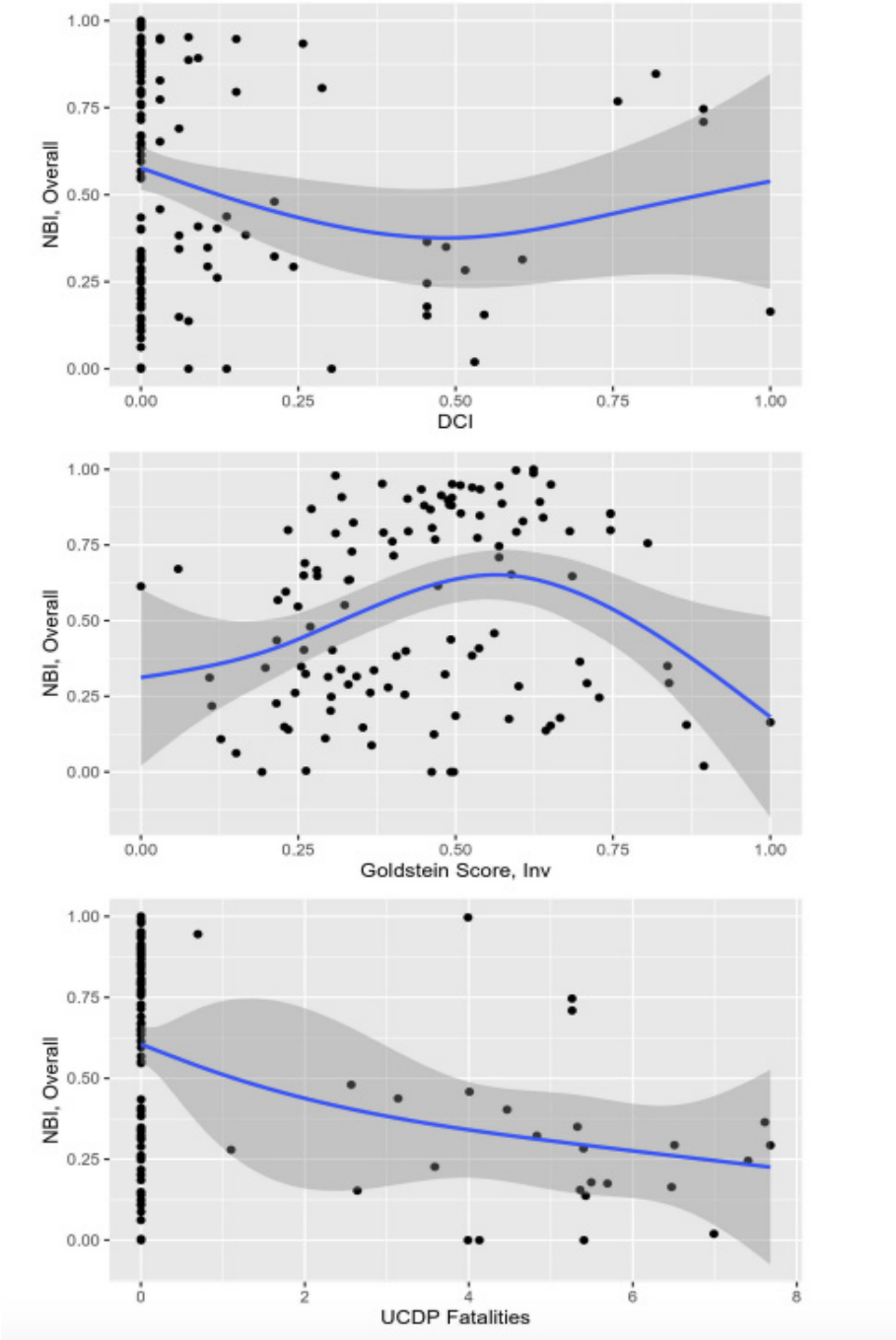


Figure 1. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and CNTS’s Domestic Conflict Index. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI and the Goldstein score are lagged by one year and scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

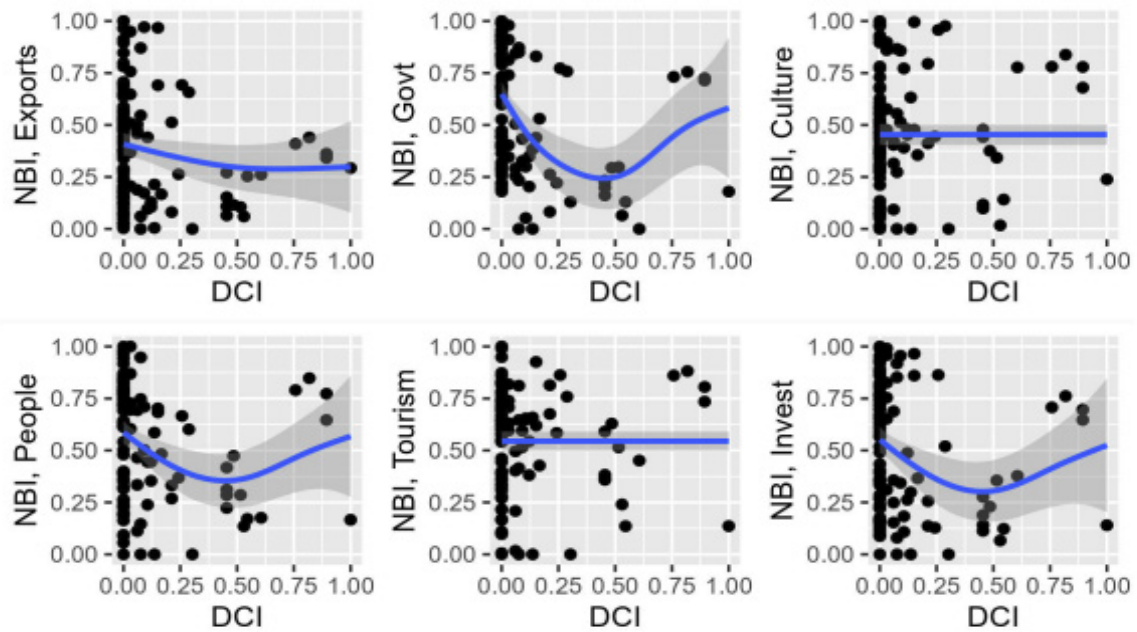


Figure 2. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and CNTS’s Domestic Conflict Index. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI is lagged by one year and all variables are scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

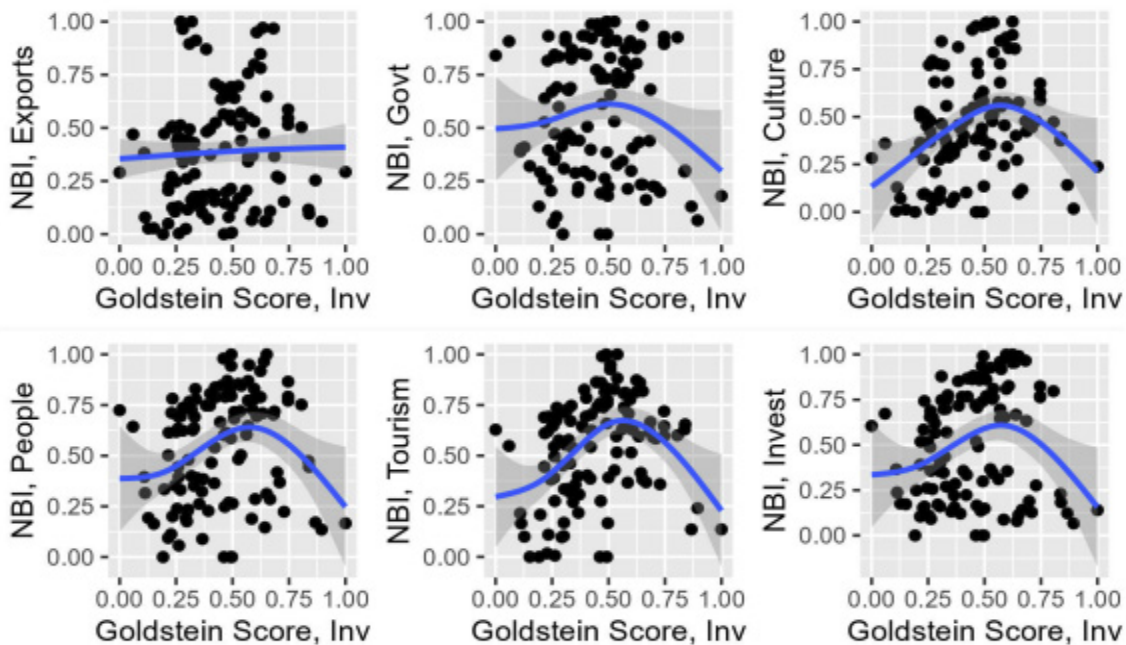


Figure 3. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and inverted Goldstein score from GDELT. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. DCI is lagged by one year and all variables are scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

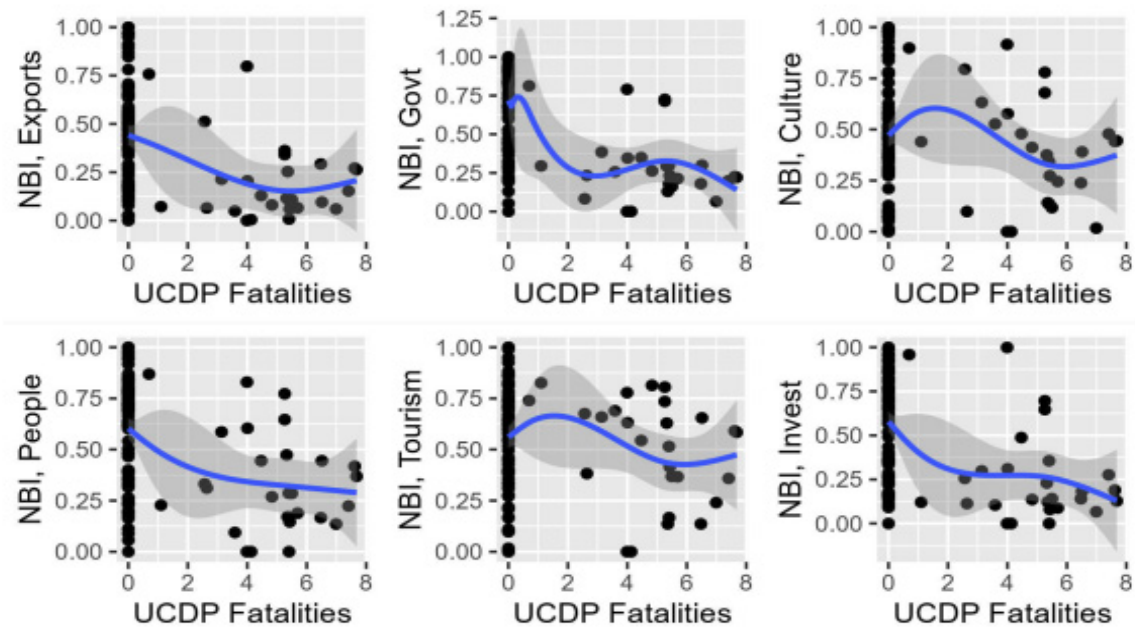


Figure 4. Scatter plot with GAM smoothed line for NBI Index and UCDP recorded fatalities. The shaded area is the 95% confidence interval. Logged fatalities are lagged by one year and NBI is scaled to be between zero and one. Zero is the lowest reported value and one is the highest reported value in the sample.

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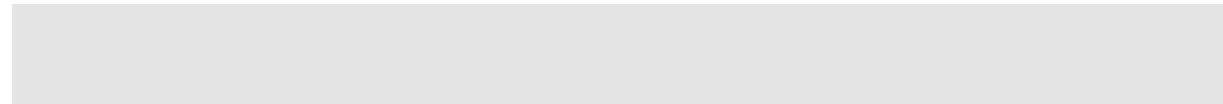
How China Constructs Cultural Self-confidence

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Abstract



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Introduction

The concept of Cultural Self-confidence has gained extensive attention in China since 2010, after publication of three articles by Yun Shan¹⁾ in the Chinese official journal *Red Flag Manuscript (Hongqi Wengao)*. These articles defined cultural self-confidence as “a nation’s full affirmation of the value of its culture” (Yun, 2010, p.4). More recently, political authorities appear to have reframed China’s pursuit of soft power as an exercise in building cultural self-confidence. As a strategy to counter the growing influence of Western culture and to project Chinese culture, the concept is increasingly aligned to China’s soft power and public diplomacy strategies. For example, Li (2008), an international relations (IR) scholar at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, pointed out that China’s soft power discourse revealed “a lack of confidence and forcefulness” (“China Debates Soft Power” p. 307).

Studying China’s domestic discussion amongst IR and other scholars is crucial in understanding foreign policy strategies. Recent scholarship from International Relation (IR) experts argues that the field of IR scholarship in China is not a monolith and that scholars are active in expressing diverse opinions on many policy issues to “best serve China’s national interests” (Feng & He, 2019, p. 109). Given the increasing role that IR scholars play in providing advice and suggestions to policy makers in China, studying Chinese scholarly research can contribute to better understanding “what Chinese policy makers might think and what they might do in world politics in the future” (Feng et al., 2019, p. 193). Thus, this paper is intended to take a similar lens and investigate how state-funded scholarly articles rationalise cultural self-confidence in order to help contribute to the development of this concept. Overall, scholarly opinions on cultural self-confidence are consistent with the policy positions of the Chinese government. Scholarly discussion agrees with the application of cultural self-confidence in China’s domestic and foreign policies, and in this way government policy is reinforced by the contribution of Chinese scholarship, which provides more insights into culture, definitions of cultural self-confidence, and why and how to enhance cultural self-confidence.

Most writings by Chinese scholars and analysts within the international relations (IR) field are in Chinese language, so little appears in English-language journals. The principal aim of this study is therefore to present and appraise empirical evidence of their views and to enrich understanding of the conceptual construction of cultural self-confidence as a vital component of an emerging diplomatic strategy for China. In addition, exploring Chinese scholars’ discussion and debates about cultural self-confidence is valuable for three reasons in particular. First, these debates provide a new perspective on a Chinese foreign policy strategy as well as on the role of Chinese IR scholars in Chinese foreign policymaking. Second, this project seeks to bridge the perception gap between the Chinese scholarly (particularly IR) community and the outside world. Third, this project has strong policy relevance for both

1) The name “Yun Shan” used in the paper is a pseudonym for Liu Yunshan, the former leader of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, as confirmed by Shanxi Daily in 2010.

China and the international community.

This paper includes five sections. The first provides context by briefly considering uses of cultural self-confidence as a political concept in a number of important official. The second explores how cultural self-confidence is understood in China, while the third section examines why cultural self-confidence is seen to be highly significant at this point in China's development. The fourth section discusses the mechanisms that underpin the scholars' influence on China's foreign policy. The fifth analyses the implications of cultural self-confidence for China's management of international relations.

Context of developing cultural self-confidence within China

Growing political and academic interest in the concept of *cultural self-confidence* in China now sees this term appearing frequently in government documents, scholarly articles and books, and media reports. This frequency indicates that cultural self-confidence is being rhetorically developed as an increasingly indispensable component of how China seeks to engage with the world, and particularly here, how Chinese citizens need to carry out their international engagement to most effectively contribute. As an approach to foreign policy carried out at popular as well as official levels, and one that is vital for telling the world China's story on Chinese terms, cultural self-confidence is seen to have the potential to make a valuable contribution to China's public diplomacy strategies for developing discourse power as a form of soft power for China.

The cultural self-confidence concept has attracted significant attention from top Chinese leaders. In 2011, then Chinese President Hu Jintao clearly proposed the concept of cultural self-confidence for the first time, in his speech at the 90th Anniversary Gathering of the Communist Party of China. He claimed:

As culture has increasingly become an important factor in competition for overall national strength, we must have a keen sense of our own cultural identity, have confidence in our culture, focus on raising the quality of our nation and shaping a noble character, redouble efforts to promote cultural reform and development, carry out cultural innovation in the great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and enable the people to share in cultural achievements (Hu, 2011, para. 52).

In 2011, Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Concerning Deepening Cultural Structural Reform in the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Congress of CPC proposed "training [people in] high-level cultural consciousness and cultural self-confidence" to build a "strong socialist-culture country" ("Central Committee of", 2011, para. 8). The reference here is an important indicator that cultural self-confidence had been endowed with significance as a political term for the first time in China's history. From there, its popularity and use have increased in both scholarly and political arenas.

President Xi Jinping has attached ever greater importance to cultural traditions since he came to power in late 2012, as reflected in his public speeches on various occasions. For example, on 1 July 2016, at a celebration of the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CPC, Xi Jinping delivered a speech in which he added cultural self-confidence to the three self-confidences initially proposed by Hu Jintao at the 18th National Congress. The three self-confidences refer to the chosen path, the guiding theory, and the political system. Xi's speech is considered to indicate the formation of "Xi Jinping Thought" on cultural self-confidence. Xi stressed the importance of cultural self-confidence, among other things, by stating that it is a "more fundamental, broader, and deeper form of self-confidence" (Xi, 2017, para. 36). This statement emerges from the belief that culture is embedded within the frameworks of both economy and politics and has a continuing impact on people's thinking, thereby affecting not only people's current thought and behaviour, but also their potential thought and behaviour (H. Liu & Wang, 2018).

The report of the 19th National Congress in 2017 further strengthened the importance of this concept by including it in the basic national strategy for developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the report, Xi stated that "cultural confidence represents a fundamental and profound force that sustains the development of a country and a nation" (p. 19), and "without full confidence in our culture, without a rich and prosperous culture, the Chinese nation will not be able to rejuvenate itself" (p. 36).

Then, in November 2021, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century noted that "since the 18th National Congress, we have seen a sweeping and fundamental shift in the ideological domain, a notable boost in confidence in our culture among all Party members and all Chinese people, and a major increase in cohesiveness throughout society" (p. 38). This statement indicates official acknowledgement of the continuing importance attached to the concept of cultural self-confidence nationwide.

Discussion in the two sections below concerns two key questions about the messages these journal articles convey: (1) *what* is cultural self-confidence and (2) *why* does China need to promote cultural self-confidence? This discussion – looking "inward" to examine debates about cultural self-confidence in general – sheds light on how scholarly discussion helps to bolster the understanding and promotion of cultural self-confidence as a key "external" stance for China. The dominant messages of these articles constitute a key posturing that has come to define how the CPC wants to situate China's influence in the world.

What is cultural self-confidence?

Scholarly literature reveals the absence of consensus on what "cultural self-confidence" means. Nevertheless, four key perspectives dominate. One, reflected in the work of Liu and Liu (2019), conveys the overriding importance of culture for understanding this concept. In this sense, cultural self-confidence is defined as "confidence and trust in the role of culture, its

vitality, creativity and influence” (H. Liu & Wang, 2018, p. 116). Just as *culture* includes material, social, and spiritual culture, cultural self-confidence involves faith in a wide range of entities such as family, food, housing, country, society, history, religion, and philosophy (H. Liu & Wang, 2018). Here the weight attached to cultural self-confidence is determined by the importance of the myriad aspects of culture (Qin & Wang, 2017).

The second view, introduced by Qin and Wang (2017), focuses on the holders of cultural self-confidence, recognising two levels: (i) country/nation/party; and (ii) people. For cultural self-confidence at the first level, the country, nation, or political party “correctly views its own culture, clearly understands both the rich connotations of this culture and the value of the times and has full confidence in the vitality and development prospects of this culture” (p. 61). Cultural self-confidence at the second level requires that all citizens of China acknowledge the identity and values of Chinese national culture and have positive attitudes towards it (Qin & Wang, 2017).

The third perspective understands cultural self-confidence from its sources. The majority of Chinese scholars abide by President Xi Jinping’s views of the source of China’s cultural self-confidence:

China’s fine traditional culture, which was born out of more than 5,000 years of civilization, and its revolutionary and advanced socialist culture, which was born out of the great struggles of the CPC and the people, house the deepest aspirations of the Chinese people, representing a unique symbol of our nation (Xi, 2016, para. 35).

The last view looks at the relationship between cultural self-confidence and the other three self-confidences. Xi Jinping has singled out cultural self-confidence as most important among the four confidences, urging that “we must strengthen our confidence in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, in theory and in systems. In the final analysis, we must strengthen our confidence in culture” (Xi, 2016, para. 30). Qin & Wang (2017) have observed that adding cultural self-confidence to the three confidences identified earlier enables the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics to become “more persuasive and attractive” (p.66). This link indicates the fundamental role of cultural self-confidence in enabling the conditions necessary for socialism with Chinese characteristics, such as ideological support for the other confidences, and the newly proposed concepts for China’s development, such as the China dream. Among the four definitions, the prevailing definition is that cultural self-confidence is confidence in China’s fine traditional, revolutionary, and advanced socialist culture (Zhu, 2019). Domestic scholars study cultural self-confidence in the context of China, and not at a global level, positioning them to identify cultural self-confidence as the confidence of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese nation, and the Chinese people in the Chinese nation’s socialist system (Gao, 2018).

Scholars express differing opinions about the interpretations of the priorities in conceptualising cultural self-confidence. Some stress the importance of integrating socialist ideology into the

cultural self-confidence debate. In terms of theory, they promote the sinicisation of Marxism as a concept that can be situated within the broad gamut of promoting cultural self-confidence. Ma and Ma (2018) have considered that subsuming sinicised Marxism as intrinsic to contemporary Chinese cultural ideas gives major ideological guidance for China to rebuild its cultural self-confidence. For example, some traditional ideas consistent with this theory, such as “harmony is most precious (*yiheweigui*)” and the need for “harmony without uniformity (*he'erbutong*)” have been developed into the modern idea of “a community of [a] shared future for humankind”, which Xi Jinping has championed. This concept has been implanted with new meanings, especially in dealing with international affairs, to convey that promoting the diversity of civilisations is better than advocating for a one-size-fits-all political system (Xin, 2017). “A community of shared future for humankind” implies that countries should respect and learn from and with each other rather than exclude each other (Xin, 2017).

Other scholars debate the relative importance of Western culture as a key influence on the degree to which the Chinese nation can claim sufficient cultural self-confidence. While acknowledging the values of Western culture, there are different interpretations of the attitudes China should take. Some scholars claim that development of cultural self-confidence in China does not necessitate total abrogation of Western influence, and they argue that cultural self-confidence requires learning from the positive and useful aspects of the culture of foreign countries. This statement originates from the advocacy of the reform and opening-up policy, which highlighted the need to learn from the advanced aspects of the West, while remaining loyal to national independence, self-determination, and self-reliance (Han, 1996). Therefore, the correct way for China to engage with the West is to “neither advocate wholesale Westernization nor negate it in wholesale fashion” (Han, 1996, p. 90). In this case, various elements including advanced technology; positive aspects of literature, the arts, ethics, and philosophy; and even the rational and scientific elements in economic theories, policies, and legislation from the West are all considered beneficial in the construction of a globally beneficial productive force (Han, 1996). Other scholars, while supporting learning from other cultures, emphasise the significance of increasing cultural compatibility with peoples and cultures outside China to help cultivate mutual tolerance. They point to the importance of learning and absorbing foreign cultures because cultural self-confidence is, after all, built on qualities such as tolerance, adaptability, inclusiveness, and self-reflection (Xu et al., 2018). They see that a country with open-minded cultural self-confidence is willing to accept elements of other cultures without worry about assimilation, and that country can objectively judge and make clear responses to “bad” culture, rather than being wary of foreign cultures (Meng, 2017).

Others are more cautious about how to deal with the Western culture. Liu (2018) raised concerns about the difficulty in integrating the Western culture. They claimed that how to handle the relationship between security and insecurity in cultural integration between China and foreign countries is a major challenge for cultural development in the new era. Taking a more balanced approach, Peng and Zhang (2019) claimed that insisting on a rational and inclusive cultural disposition does not mean worshipping Western culture blindly and without

scrutiny, otherwise it would be easy to swing to the other extreme (Peng & Zhang, 2019). In the same vein, Meng (2017) noted that China must not only study critically excellent elements of Western culture, but also be vigilant in guarding against cultural invasion and penetration in order to prevent cultural aggression and cultural hegemony in the benign name of cultural exchange. Zhang (2018) has approached this issue more pragmatically. They offered two suggestions about how Chinese people can learn from foreign culture to better serve China. One suggestion is to make consistent the foreign culture from which Chinese people may learn with the ideology embraced by China's socialist system. The other suggestion is to integrate the cultural achievements of foreign countries with conditions in China, such as Chinese customs and values. However, these evaluation criteria are still not clear enough for classifying "welcome" and "unwelcome" foreign cultures, so they will result in confusion between cultural tolerance and cultural repulsion in the understandings and behaviours of the Chinese public.

The final factor that affects the interpretation of cultural self-confidence involves emphasis on helping Chinese people live a prosperous and satisfying life. In this context, there is a general consensus among scholars calling for cultural satisfaction among Chinese people. Wu and Ma (2018) argued that an important measure of cultural self-confidence is whether it can meet people's cultural needs and spiritual pursuits, including work and faith (Wu & Ma, 2018). Similarly, Luo (2018) opined that the construction of cultural self-confidence must adhere to the principle of "people's culture" and to the people-centred cultural work orientation. This, in turn, will enhance cultural identity in the process of identifying cultural needs (Ye & Mao, 2019). This statement stems from the notion that realising cultural self-confidence relies on acknowledging China's cultural values, and the prerequisite for a positive assessment of cultural values is based on fulfilling people's cultural needs (Ye & Mao, 2019).

Why China needs to promote cultural self-confidence

Why has China so enthusiastically promoted the concept of cultural self-confidence and what is the significance of this? Chinese scholars have approached these questions from two angles: internally, where cultural self-confidence has been regarded as meeting the essential conditions from historical, practical and political perspectives, and it is also closely related to political and ideological security, and externally, where it can promote soft power in ways that are intended to enhance discourse power and offer Chinese wisdom to the world.

Internal factors

Internally, the dominant view among Chinese scholars is that the situation in China today meets all the requirements for reconstructing national cultural self-confidence. Specifically, the official proposal to reconstruct cultural self-confidence has three bases: historical, practical, and political. Cultural self-confidence stems first from a historical basis (Wang & Zhong, 2017). The concept of cultural self-confidence stems from a crisis of "lack of cultural

confidence” in modern China (Zhao, 2018). The dominant narrative on the importance of cultural self-confidence is closely related to the “century of humiliation” during the 19th and 20th centuries. Until 1840, Chinese people had faith in their culture, which was seen as advanced by comparison with other nations’ cultures. However, China’s national power declined through a series of military defeats, from the first Opium War (1839-1842) to the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the consequential unequal treaties China was forced to accept, as well as through the political unravelling of the Qing Dynasty. The successive downturns convinced prominent scholars at the time that Chinese culture was backward and should be seen as responsible for China’s failures. These developments resulted in the collapse of China’s cultural self-confidence, which impacted Chinese people’s views of all aspects of their culture (Wu, 2018). Consequently, the peoples’ relative lack of cultural self-confidence has seriously affected China’s cultural power and ideological security, as both scholars and central political authorities appraise. One further reason for the cultural self-confidence drive has been increasing recognition within China of the qualities of China’s heritage and history. Chinese scholars have claimed that China’s long and splendid cultural traditions, and heritage and vast resources, can provide a solid foundation for China to re-establish cultural self-confidence (Zhu, 2019). For example, Wang Yuxin (2017) argued that the uninterrupted 5000 years of Chinese civilisation, together with socialist thought with a history of 500 years in the world, and China’s 100 years of leadership under the CPC, are precious resources for the development of cultural self-confidence in 21st century China.

Secondly, cultural self-confidence has its practical basis. More recently, an additional source of national pride is the era of economic and social modernisation since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Scholars such as Lei (2016) and Jing (2018) note that China’s recent cultural self-confidence results from significant national achievements, through the great success of contemporary China’s development—from economic development to the increasing life satisfaction of Chinese people. China has developed into a global power, with its economy, measured in nominal exchange rate terms, the world’s second largest below only the United States since 2010. It is also the major trading partner of over 140 countries worldwide. Consequently, the Chinese government and its national development model have gained more trust from the Chinese people. Given the important role of economic development in realising cultural self-confidence, China’s rapid economic rise will continue to enhance the confidence of Chinese people in their nation’s culture. The value of a culture in most senses depends not on the culture itself, but on the social conditions to which the culture is attached (H, Wang, 2017). The same culture may appear to be excellent or weak differently, depending upon its social development background (H, Wang, 2017). It is widely believed that if a nation loses strength in these areas of development, its culture will also weaken (C. Liu & Wang, 2018). Chinese leaders have a clear vision of the important position that economic and political power can play in promoting culture in the international community.

Thirdly, the source of cultural self-confidence has a political basis. While it is evident that the Chinese government strongly promotes cultural self-confidence in its policies, it could be argued that this is largely to counteract negative perceptions of culture within its borders.

Chen (2018) suggests the promotion of cultural self-confidence is a strategic move tailored to oppose Western-oriented culture theory and eliminate national and cultural inferiority. Cultural self-confidence plays a significant role in political discourse, with Wang & Deng (2017) linking it to the success and failure of the establishment of socialism with Chinese characteristics. C. Liu and Wang (2018) go further, proposing that cultural self-confidence offers strategic support for China's independence and rise, especially since culture could be a catalyst for strong national cohesion and influence domestically, and a tool to project soft power internationally. The pursuit of cultural self-confidence could, however, be perceived as a lack of awareness within China of the uniqueness and importance of Chinese values. Some scholars argue that many social problems in China stem from this deficit, that is, insufficient appreciation of Chinese culture (Li & Ru, 2017). Fei Xiaotong, a notable Chinese anthropologist, was first to put forward the concept of cultural self-awareness (*wenhua zijue*) in the public arena in 1997. In his opinion, those living within a specific culture must first "know themselves, know where they came from, how their culture developed, its distinguishing features, and how it is evolving" (2015, p.43). A prominent held viewpoint is that contemporary Chinese society exhibits a tangible disconnect from its rich cultural heritage, especially traditional culture, thus leading to the partial failure of cultural inheritance (Hu, 2012). Critics like Hu (2012) suggest that the culture of Chinese language, arts, and ways of thinking has been passed down through generations, but in the contemporary period Chinese people have largely abandoned these long-standing cultural values and philosophy such as that of Confucius and Buddhism, as well as the social and scientific knowledge in ancient works. This purported cultural distance, some argue, has rendered the Chinese populace unsure about the place of traditional culture in contemporary society. Wang and Pan (2017) without presenting any empirical evidence, argue that some challenges have prevented Chinese traditional culture from being effectively integrated into self-confidence. For example, the sentiments of cultural superiority, inferiority, and confusion have led to an uncertain situation of how to reconstruct traditional culture, what role traditional culture plays in a national cultural system, and what is its relationship to all of the world's outstanding cultural achievements.

In analysing the role of cultural self-confidence in China's ideological stance, it emerges as a potential shield against Western influence. Significantly here, in the context of globalisation and the rapid advancements in internet technology, the concern that people being exposed to and gradually influenced by different cultures, as noted by Zhao (2020), will lead to a genuine ideological shift. While C. Liu and Wang (2018) discuss concerns of a possible ideological infiltration from Western nations, it is worth considering the broader implications of this. Huang (2019) delves into the strategic nuances of cultural diplomacy, suggesting that the West has employed culture as a tool for "peaceful evolution" within China. They suggest that Western nations have leveraged their perceived cultural superiority, including establishing dominant international cultural standards. They imply that these efforts have dictated global narratives that are unfavourable to China, positioning China with a discourse system of binary opposition between civilization and barbarism, democracy and autocracy, and advanced and backward. These dichotomies draw lines of contrast in realms of civilization. Because of the strength of Western influence, a number of Chinese people

believe that the Western civilization is superior to Chinese and so argue that China should abandon its traditions and become completely Westernised (C. Liu & Wang, 2018). Scholars such as Shao and Bai (2019) have expressed concerns about the security of China's socialist ideology and have offered a proposal for bolstering China's core socialist values and national spirit to counteract the perceived negative impacts of Western ideas. Others have argued that core socialist values and national spirit can be realised only after Chinese people become more confident in their culture (Liu & Liu, 2019).

External factors

Projecting cultural self-confidence 'outward' to the world, involves promoting China to the world and contributing Chinese wisdom to global governance. As China's prominence in global politics and economics rises, there's a discernible emphasis on soft power tactics, aimed not just at increasing cultural export but also at carving a distinct space for Chinese narratives in international dialogues. Over the past decade, China is reported to have invested US\$10 billion annually in amplifying its soft power. Such investments primarily manifest in activities such as aid, cultural and educational exchanges, and global media outreach.

More recently, Chinese self-confidence appears to be increasingly aligned with China's soft power and public diplomacy activities. Culture is the core concept that connects cultural self-confidence, soft power and public diplomacy. Cultural self-confidence emphasises having faith in Chinese culture and values. Accordingly, soft power and public diplomacy embrace culture as the most important source of their promotion; therefore, they are primarily interpreted by Chinese scholars and officials through a cultural lens. When advocating cultural self-confidence and promoting soft power on different occasions, Chinese President Xi Jinping used the same words to show the important role of culture by claiming that "Culture is a country and nation's soul. Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong" (Xi, 2017, p.36). Due to the rise in its economy and politics, China's public diplomacy has developed to a new direction, with focus shifted from "listening to the world" to "telling China's story" (Zhao, 2019). This change requires that China's public diplomacy place more weight on the projection of cultural self-confidence to show the real China to the world, promote a Chinese discourse power, and improve China's communication capacity in the international community (Zhao, 2019). While cultural self-confidence offers an important underpinning to China's soft power narrative and public diplomacy projections, the cultivation of soft power, in return, serves as a source for cultural self-confidence. This alignment stems from the fact that all competitions ultimately converge into a competition of cultural soft power (Sun, 2019).

Over time, scholarly discussion about cultural self-confidence discourse has gradually expanded to incorporate broader discussions about how China can best project itself to the world. Chinese scholars agree that cultural self-confidence and international discourse power are mutually reinforcing. They believe that international discourse power plays an important role in China's soft power and public diplomacy initiatives. Increasing China's discourse

power to the world has become one of the central tasks of China's public diplomacy. Chinese authorities nowadays attach more importance to discourse power on the assumption that a country's discourse power is closely related to the rights of setting an agenda, making rules, and expanding influence in international affairs (Zuo & Zhao, 2019). This growing attention paid to discourse power is also related to the unfriendly international environment. The prevailing China threat theory in most Western countries has generated negative public views that cast China in a certain adversarial light, deemed by many Chinese scholars as biased and exaggerated. They often regard it as a term created by the West in order to contain China's growth. Another reason for the negative perception is the misunderstanding from the West due to its lack of knowledge of Chinese history and culture. To address both issues, China needs to be heard and understood by foreign publics.

Therefore, Chinese leaders and intellectuals began to suggest creating a discourse system with Chinese characteristics—a system with features using its own words to explain its success, problems and future in a way that can be understood by ordinary people and foreign people. The concepts that have been proposed with Chinese features include the China Dream, Harmonious Society and Harmonious World, and A Community of Shared Future for All Mankind. Although China has made progress in enhancing its international discourse power over the past decades, it is considerably weak compared to its political and economic development. Some of the new discourses have not gained the expected traction, especially in the international arena (Boer, 2021). One possible reason for this is the coexistence and collision of various ideological ideas such as historical nihilism, wholesale westernization and neoliberalism which severely impact how Chinese discourse functions (Long & Lin, 2018). Chinese scholars mostly attribute the weakness in promoting a Chinese discursive system internationally to Western long-established cultural hegemony and China's hesitancy and passiveness in its culture promotion (Zhao, 2018). One Chinese scholar further pointed out that China's lack of competence in agenda-setting and establishing efficient communication methods also contribute to the weakness in discursive power (Hu & Liu, 2020). Some of the challenges that hinder China's ability to engage in discourse power can be, to a certain extent, attributed to the lack of cultural self-confidence.

Scholarly discussion: information model

To understand China's foreign policymaking, an important aspect involves an analysis of the domestic discussion within China by Chinese IR scholars and other academic scholars. Feng and He have emphasised the "unique value" of Chinese scholars in helping understand China's foreign policy by pointing out that China's domestic scholarly debates are "more dynamic than widely perceived" in the West (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4). These IR scholars, they argue, keep China's state security and development in mind while attempting to aid the government with policy promotion or advocate policy change. Through investigating IR scholarly views, people can "better assess how Chinese policymakers may think, behave, and react on major issues in IR" (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4). Although scholars agree it is indeed

difficult to calculate the precise extent to which scholars impact foreign policy, they nevertheless believe that their importance cannot be ignored (Zheng, 2016). To better understand this impact, several analytical models have been proposed to examine the mechanisms of such influence. For example, Feng and He (2019) proposed four models: the epistemic community model, the free market model, the signalling model, and the mirroring policy model. The four models are not designed to be mutually exclusive (Pu, 2017), and they all have their merits. Pu and Wang (2018) suggested the information model, based on the last two of these models, featuring a mutually influential dynamic between academic discussion and policymakers. Therefore, this information model is considered more appropriate to analyse the state-funded articles because IR scholars, on the one hand, “reflect the orientation of Chinese policy-makers” because the Chinese government can “use funding opportunities to shape the research agenda of scholars” (Pu & Wang, 2018, p. 1022). While, on the other hand, they can also provide feedback for policymakers through various events such as interviews and conferences (Pu & Wang, 2018).

Three features have been identified to elucidate the operational framework of the information model, showcasing how Chinese scholarly discussions contribute to the development of cultural self-confidence concept while also providing feedback and suggestions to policymakers. First, scholarly discussion here has been large-scale and rapid, as data from CNKI, the most popular Chinese language scholarly database indicates. As discussion below of scholarly publications on this topic reveals, in the second decade of the 21st century, the concept of “cultural self-confidence” attracted considerable interest in China’s academic arena.

Second, scholarly discussion of a concept can equip the public with better understanding of its implications. When a concept is proposed or even politically emphasised, it might appear only briefly in the speeches of leaders or official documents, making it difficult for the public to clearly comprehend. Ordinary people then need to rely on academic experts who can provide deep insight into its meaning. This is particularly true for the cultural self-confidence concept, because carriers of Chinese culture, who are now required to have cultural self-confidence, are not only the authorities or elites in China, but are also citizens across the entire country.

To realise the national goal of constructing and projecting cultural self-confidence, the public needs to have an elementary understanding of cultural self-confidence, why it needs to be promoted, and how it can be enhanced. Chinese scholars can play a role in helping the public address these issues. “Ordinary” people do not generally read scholarly articles, but media serve well to carry scholars’ ideas to the public, including various media channels that present interviews where scholars can express their opinions. Prominent IR scholars such as Zhang Weiwei and Yan Xuetong, use online platforms through which they express opinions on China’s domestic and foreign policies, and cultural self-confidence has been often discussed. For example, in the well-known TV show [*Zhe Jiu shi Zhongguo*] (*China Now*), key speaker Zhang Weiwei who, often actively involved with activities in support of Chinese government’s discourse, devoted one episode (episode 39) to Chinese culture in promoting cultural self-confidence. The new media ecology such as social media and digital media can

also provide a platform for the public to express their opinions on this topic.

Third, scholarly discussion, to a large extent, represents and reflects the requirements of China's policies. In China, the government often sets the focus and provides guidance for research topics and, in turn, the results are expected to facilitate further policymaking. Detailed meanings attributed to political terminology are often fleshed out by scholars in think tanks and universities. Scholars evidently follow the political trend in their research area and intuitively take responsibility for elaborating and explaining policy and political concepts. However, helping interpret policy does not mean scholars accept everything that officials propose. In fact, scholars' opinions often differ from or even conflict with government policy and concepts. Feng and He (2019) have argued that "many scholars have seriously and diligently used their knowledge to challenge official policies as well as offer valuable recommendations to the Chinese government" (p. 200). On cultural self-confidence, scholars have reached general agreement about the importance of promoting this concept among Chinese people, yet differences remain among scholars in their understandings of what the concept means and the priority for various approaches and challenges to enhancing cultural self-confidence.

While I have not argued that there is direct causal effect between scholarly writing on cultural self-confidence and policymaking, an examination of thinking and debates within the field of scholars whose research is state-funded indicates what the "perceptual parameter" (Feng & He, 2019, p. 4) of opinions and thoughts exist that policymakers are able to be drawn on to develop rationales for cultural self-confidence in domestic and IR policy. The "perceptual parameter" means the broad gamut of published opinions and ideas that can be used as a resource for articulating arguments about a certain issue or subject. Arguments for or against a certain issue found within a perceptual parameter not only enables an outsider to understand what actions or constraints Chinese leaders might face in policy-making, but also can potentially assist in predicting their future behaviour (Feng & He, 2019, p. 7).

Implications of cultural self-confidence for China's international relations

Understanding the reasoning of scholars in relation to the "what" and "why" of cultural self-confidence, as discussed above, gives context to the debates about how this discourse is being put to use to promote China's image internationally. The main implication is that the internal discussions about the worthiness of cultural self-confidence largely align with IR scholars' arguments about the importance for China of exhibiting cultural self-confidence in *international affairs*. *This is not to suggest any alignment of understanding among all who are involved, or that this proves a direct causal link between developments of the content of "internal" discussions about what cultural self-confidence is and why it is important, and the content of "external" IR debates in Chinese academic and diplomatic circles about China's place in the world.*

One of the most significant implications of the development of the cultural self-confidence

narrative in Chinese academia and policy is that cultural self-confidence has now become an indispensable component of China's grand strategy in relation to the way it presents itself to the world. Chinese diplomats and foreign policy experts, like the majority of Chinese scholars who study this topic, argue that China needs to promote its confidence to ensure cultural security internationally by lessening the complex, inappropriate sentiments on the domestic front. Consequently, the concept of cultural self-confidence will become clear in the process of struggling against cultural inferiority and superiority (Xiao & Zhang, 2018). Fulfilling the China Dream of National Rejuvenation requires that China develop its confidence in soft power and public diplomacy strategies to enhance its international discourse power and play a more important role in the global community.

The second major observation that can be made in light of the discussion above is that the concept of cultural self-confidence is consistent with China's proposal to establish a discursive system with Chinese characteristics. According to Hu et al. (2021), simply counteracting the Western narrative is not enough for China to achieve discourse power with Chinese characteristics. They claim China's strategy "should be based on broader common values and act as a bridge between China and the West" (para. 27). In this vein, China would extricate itself from the sphere of influence of Western narratives and explain its success and problems in its own way.

The discussions in this study align with a sound body of evidence that China's diplomacy has departed from its practice of "keeping a low profile", in pursuit of the national goal of realising the China Dream (Hu, 2019; Yan, 2014). These Chinese scholarly debates seek to challenge Western interpretations that the shift in China's foreign policy sees China becoming more assertive and aggressive, with the intention of seeking hegemony and changing the current international order by replacing dominant Western values with dominant Chinese values. In understanding this alternative view of China's national rejuvenation discourse, three specific implications for debates about the rise of Chinese self-confidence become evident.

First, to better understand China's intentions, it is necessary to consider China's stated motivation for putting forward this concept of cultural self-confidence. Both Chinese political leaders and scholars state that promotion of this concept is in accordance with the goal of rejuvenating the Chinese nation on the basis that cultural self-confidence is closely related to national prosperity, cultural security, national spiritual independence, and social cohesion. Increasing cultural confidence is not merely a cultural issue but is also related to China's changing identity and vision, as articulated by the current leadership. It is also a strategy that can be used to strengthen the people's confidence in political ideology and core socialist values. Wang Yonggui (2017) has argued that cultural self-confidence in China is also ideological confidence, because ideology is considered the final goal of cultural self-confidence. In the same vein, Dong (2017) has argued that the foundation of cultural self-confidence represents and reflects socialist values, which is a manifestation of "the ideals, beliefs, orientations and attitudes of all members of the Chinese nation" (p.134).

Second, although it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between the domestic debate and China's foreign policy, many external China observers have publicly claimed that China's recent assertiveness in foreign policy, for instance, on the South China Sea and Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, reflects growing self-confidence. Recently some Western media and politicians have labelled China's diplomatic style as "Wolf Warrior", which originated from two Chinese movies. Western media and scholars have mostly claimed the "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" features a shift in China's diplomacy from "conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile" (Zhu, 2020, para.1). In contrast, most Chinese scholars and politicians regard the shift in diplomacy as a way of defending China's national interests. Jin (2021) explained that China's new diplomatic style is a demand of the new development goal of "becoming strong" to solve the problem of "being scolded". Le Yucheng, the Deputy Minister of China's Foreign Ministry, said the notion of "Wolf Warrior" in Chinese diplomacy has become a new version of the "China threat theory" and its purpose is to "stop China from fighting back when criticised" (Zhou, 2020, para. 2).

Third, a misalignment appears in the understanding of China's new diplomacy. Chinese scholars and diplomats argue that to understand the difference between aggressiveness and self-confidence one needs to explore the culture and history of China. In China, the century of humiliation has had a long-lasting effect on Chinese authority and Chinese people. China's "keeping a low profile" policy proposed by Deng Xiaoping offered a partial reflection of the effect. Now it is evident that China's goal is not to permanently "keep a low profile". With its rising economy and comprehensive national strength, China wants to develop what leaders call a "normal" profile, which can be interpreted as being treated equally regardless of the differences in ideology, values, and culture. This is the key to understanding China's foreign policy stance in this regard because what other countries might view as aggressive, China argues, is merely a departure from being humiliated and "looked down upon." When most Western China viewers talk about China's assertive behaviour in Xi Jinping's era, they compare it with the policy formulated by his predecessors, especially Deng Xiaoping. That means they consider "keeping a low profile" as a standard, and call anything more proactive than that "assertiveness." In contrast, Chinese scholars and the public think China was "humble" and "obedient" in the past and should become more confident to "view the world with a mindset of equality" ("Xi Jinping", 2021, para. 1).

The debate over cultural self-confidence has been articulated through comparison and contrast between China and the rest of the world. The upsurging political popularity of cultural self-confidence in China appeared against a backdrop of the emergence of increasing flaws in Western democracy and culture, especially in the US. For example, domestically, the gap between rich and poor in the US has expanded, and its economy has increased more slowly with a potential of being overtaken by China. Chinese scholars argue that, internationally, the failure of many countries to transform into the model of Western democracy has plunged them into chaos, poverty, and instability (Yang, 2016). At the same time, populism caused by long-term problems with the liberal – democratic system of government has led to the splitting of societies in many countries (Yang, 2016). The incompetence of this system of

governance, the argument goes, will make other countries (such as China) stand out in a positive light. The perceived failure of the Western model and success of the Chinese economic development model have convinced many Chinese scholars that copying the Western model regardless of its national conditions “will not only lead China into an ideological deadlock, but also bring a historical tragedy to the nation and its people” (Dong, 2016, p.8); and therefore, China’s affairs should be dealt with according to China’s circumstances and by relying on the strength of the Chinese people.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, cultural self-confidence and its implications for China’s domestic and foreign affairs have become a focus of attention in Chinese IR discourse and cultural studies. Since the early 2010s, much more attention has been given to this concept in China. However, few articles on this topic can be found in English language scholarship or publications. This study, the first in English to examine this aspect of policy and its implications for the IR field, moves some way towards enhancing the understanding outside China of cultural self-confidence and how a large section of the Chinese scholarly community view it.

This study suggests that discussion of cultural self-confidence in the scholarly realm of government funded research is playing an increasingly important role in foreign policy as China becomes a powerful and responsible state. The study has shown scholars’ agreement on the urgent need for China to build cultural self-confidence to establish discursive power with Chinese characteristics, as one of the leading tasks of China’s soft power and public diplomacy initiatives. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that IR scholars in China generally assert that cultural self-confidence is a vital component of Chinese policy – not only a result of China’s increasing comprehensive national strength, but also a requirement for China’s continuing rise in the future.

Over the past decade, moves have been made to shift Chinese discourse to address and recalibrate what Li Mingjiang suggests is the persistent lack of confidence evident in China’s soft power discourse (Li, 2008). Scholarly discussion in China about Chinese cultural self-confidence is still developing around the meaning and utility of this concept. Nevertheless, the interplay between scholarly and official discourse appears relevant to the dual and interrelated purposes of galvanising domestic opinion and support for political and party leadership on the one hand and countering the dominance of Western (especially US) negative perceptions, enhance its discourse power, and build a positive image on the other.

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Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty, edited by Paweł Surowiec and Ilan Manor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 386 pp., \$91.61 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3030545512

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Published amid the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, this edited volume interrogates the complex relationships between the theory and practice of public diplomacy and uncertainty as it is witnessed in the present moment of global politics. Uncertainty is identified by the editors as arising from such political dynamics as the rise of illiberal states in the international system and the social tensions and populist trends in a number of liberal-democratic countries. The former is foreseen to entail uncertain futures for the global political order, while the latter are feared as factors threatening the very foundations of the political order that were once a taken-for-granted certainty of liberal-democratic societies. The editors place a considerable stress on the post-truth society and the proliferation of digital hyperrealities (also addressed as post-reality) as crucial factors exacerbating these trends.

In presence of these premises, one expects to find in this book a collection of the kind of ethnocentric writings mostly concerned with the continued preservation of the liberal international order as well as the survival and success of liberal democracies in the much-worried-about context of declining U.S. global leadership and the supposed liberal-democratic reputational jeopardy resulting from the well-known and well-addressed populist phenomena being Donald Trump and Brexit. That is indeed what we find in three entries of the book: Steven Spike's discussion (Chapter 1) on the challenges faced by American public diplomacy amid the changing configuration of the contemporary international system; Nicholas Cull's analysis (Chapter 4) of British public diplomacy and reputational security after Brexit; and Ilan Manor and Corneliu Bjola's manifest call for escalating public diplomacy tactics to proactively

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counter the “assault on reality” that is usually assumed to be a trademark of Russia and other non-Western states (Chapter 5).

Yet, it may well be pleasantly surprising for the reader to find that this composite volume delivers much more, as it presents a remarkable host of non-Western and critical perspectives. In their chapter on Russia’s information strategy as crisis public diplomacy, Lucy Birge and Precious Chatterje-Doody (Chapter 7) emphasize the reciprocal character of the accusations of “information warfare” Russia and the West exchange with one another. Yan Wu, Richard Thomas and Yakun Yu (Chapter 2) apply textual analysis to the construction of Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream”, while Zhao Alexandre Huang (Chapter 8) appraises the human-to-human relationship-building dynamics of the everyday workings of a Confucius Institute in Africa. Both Chapter 2 and Chapter 8 assume the Chinese conception of public diplomacy as a valuable instrument to defuse international tensions, misunderstanding, and uncertainty and to support the recovery of China’s standing as a respected actor in the world. Although somewhat cursorily, Sara Kulsoom (Chapter 10) illustrates how rethinking India’s public diplomacy, which is yet anxiously and overwhelmingly driven by the fear of China’s growing influence in India’s neighborhood, may help the so-called “largest democracy in the world” to effectively navigate the great-power competition among Russia, China, and the United States in the South Asian region.

Beside these pluralizing non-Western perspectives, two critical innovations presented in this book are noteworthy. Christopher Miles (Chapter 6) traces the roots of public diplomacy – which occurs today in an inherently competitive post-truth informational environment – not in rationality and truth (the Habermasian public sphere) but rather in rhetoric and, to some extent, in falsification. This impressive discovery questions the long-held assumption that more information, in terms of quality (truthfulness) and quantity, decreases uncertainty thereby yielding public diplomatic benefit. Some empirical evidence reported by the contributor suggests that, in certain cases, the opposite is observed.

In her declared critical intervention concerning the very public diplomatic logics that are instantiated in the everyday conducts of three selected cases of American exchange diplomacy, Laura Mills (Chapter 11) mobilizes the critical concepts of governmentality and performativity to reveal how non-American (non-Western) exchange participants are subjected to hierarchical power relations embedded in the public diplomacy programs. These inhere in the conducts of exchange diplomacy and prescribe the participants to simultaneously perform the fixed subjectivities of (domesticated) foreign Others (as “cultural ambassadors”) and good cosmopolitans. These Orientalist and essentializing practices betray the very clichés of cosmopolitanism, openness, and inclusivity that inform much discourse of cultural exchange. Mills’ critique discloses possibilities for a radically new and empowering vision of public diplomacy.

These two critiques markedly stand in tension with other entries in the same book. First, Mills’ radical critique can be elegantly applied, as it appears to the reader, to the case of the Confucius Institute in Africa discussed by Huang in Chapter 8, as it displays similar discourses

of “cultural inclusiveness” and “respect for cultural diversity” which are problematically coupled with government practices (for instance, in terms of “self-censorship”) and essentialist Chinese/African binaries. Second, Miles’ consideration of untruth as a fundamental element of public diplomacy contrasts with the advocacies for counter-disinformation measures advanced not only by Manor and Bjola in Chapter 5 but also by Alicia Fjällhed in her chapter focusing on Sweden’s public diplomacy (Chapter 9).

The unique and outstanding value of this recently published book lies indeed in the overall theoretical tensions underlying its various contributions. The most thought-provoking tension arguably concerns the normativity of truth from the perspective of public diplomacy. While some contributors (notably, Manor and Bjola and Fjällhed) admittedly endorse public diplomacy’s normative commitment to truth under conditions of post-truth and post-reality, other authors (including Birge and Chatterjee-Doody and Miles) seem to contemplate the role of untruth in advancing the interests of public diplomacy. This tension points to a lively scholarly debate and a praiseworthy deal of (self-) critical and scientific rigor.

Although some arguments that can be found in specific chapters, such as Kulsoom’s optimism about India’s political and cultural brand potentially outshining the Chinese competitor, may appear as facile prescriptions supported by minimal empirical evidence and logical reasoning, the volume offers timely and engaging insights into some pathbreaking advancements in public diplomacy research, challenging the assumedly positive correlation of public diplomacy and truth as well as some fundamental tenets of the existing public diplomacy paradigms. It is therefore a must-read for any scholar and practitioner truly committed to the field of public diplomacy. The fact that the most pluralizing and innovative contributions are offered by early-career academics (mostly PhD candidates and lecturers) promises exciting developments to come.

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Bravo, V., & De Moya, M. (Eds.). (2021). Latin American Diasporas in Public Diplomacy. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. (Price: USD 159.99)

Pablo Sebastian Morales

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Even though moving from place to place to seek better survival opportunities has been an intrinsic behaviour for human beings since the dawn of time, the emergence of the nation state and the collective identities linked to it have made migration a highly contentious phenomenon. Migrants have complex identities that transcend space: they are insiders beyond borders (emigrants) and at the same time they are outsiders within borders (immigrants). They navigate between multiple realities and, in the eyes of many, their individuality becomes a signifier of a collective identity: that of a foreign nation. In other words, migrants are inadvertently perceived as informal representatives of a nation-state and their actions shape perceptions around their country of origin. As such, the study of diasporas and their strategic role in public diplomacy efforts constitutes an important area of scholarly research. Vanessa Bravo and Maria De Moya's edited book *Latin American Diasporas in Public Diplomacy* is an insightful compendium that examines the involvement of Latin-American diasporas in public diplomacy initiatives around the world, contributing to a growing body of literature that has shifted the focus from the role of the state onto non-state actors and their often-ignored impact on public diplomacy efforts.

The book starts with a comprehensive introduction (Chapter 1) that situates and conceptualises the role of diaspora communities and their initiatives as forms of participatory public diplomacy. Additionally, the authors provide a well-documented account of the complexity of Latin American diasporas and the socio-economic and political context of their formation. The main body of the book is organised in two parts. The first part (Chapters 2 to

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5) explores state-to-diaspora case studies that feature the different ways in which governments in Latin America build relationships with their respective expatriate communities overseas, including diasporic communities of Mexicans, Guatemalans, Bolivians, and Ecuadorians (Chapter 2), Salvadorian and Colombians in the USA (Chapter 3), Argentines (Chapter 4) and Chileans in China (Chapter 5). The second part (Chapters 6 to 12) examines diaspora-led initiatives to advance public diplomacy efforts in host countries, including advocacy groups seeking political impact either in their homeland or in their adopted home. The case studies mostly focus on USA-based communities –e.g., Cubans (Chapter 6), Puerto Ricans (Chapter 7), Mexicans (Chapters 8 and 11) and Brazilians (Chapter 12)–, with two exceptions: Brazilians in France (Chapter 9) and Venezuelans around the world (Chapter 10). In the conclusion (Chapter 13), the editors summarize the findings presented throughout the book, elevate the level of abstraction, and identify distinct patterns in the way diaspora communities engage in public diplomacy efforts.

The contributions of this book are manifold. Conceptually, it highlights the complex dynamics between the state and non-state actors in public diplomacy by shifting the focus on diaspora groups. On the one hand, emigrants are increasingly recognised as public diplomacy assets that can be activated and instrumentalized by their country of origin. On the other hand, their proactive engagement also attests to their own agency to pursue their own goals which very often are not aligned to those of the state. Empirically, this book provides invaluable insights from a region frequently ignored by Anglophone academia. It does justice in reflecting the plurality of Latin America by not just focussing on diasporas from the economic or political powerhouses of the continent, such as Mexico or Brazil, among other, but also, as mentioned above, by examining the experiences of communities from comparatively smaller countries that, despite their reduced dimensions, show an enormous ability to organise and translate their efforts into political pressure in both their home and host countries.

This book is a remarkable collection of case studies authored by scholars from all corners of Latin America, whose expertise in most cases is based on their own international experiences –even as members of diasporic groups themselves. There is, however, a prominence of case studies focusing on diaspora experiences in the USA, with only a minority looking beyond (either in Europe or Asia). While this may seem to weaken the scope of the study, this limitation is nonetheless a product of the phenomenon it observes. Indeed, geographical proximity and cultural affinity are among the most determining factors regarding the destination of migrants. In any case, as a phenomenon that entails not just the physical movement of people but also a spiritual journey of uprooting, adaptation into a new cultural system and all the implications thereof, including integration, isolation, and even return in many cases, the complexity of migration is impossible to exhaust in just one volume.

Some aspects that are not directly addressed in this book but that are evident in the case studies pertain to intergenerational shifts regarding the self-identification of diasporic members, their self-perception in connection to a specific heritage and subsequent motivations to participate in community initiatives that can be considered as conducive to advancing public diplomacy efforts. For example, to what extent would second, third or subsequent

generations engage in such efforts? Is assimilation a barrier or an asset? For example, could celebrities of Hispanic or Latin American heritage become assets for public diplomacy efforts for the countries of origin of their families (e.g. Jennifer López vis-à-vis Puerto Rico, or Anya Taylor-Joy vis-à-vis Argentina, among many others)? Furthermore, what about the complexities of multiple diasporic identities such as that of mono-, bi-, and sometimes even multinational citizens? These could be added to the multiple questions the authors present in the conclusion, as an invitation to other scholars to explore in further studies.

Overall, by examining the strategic role diaspora groups play in engaging with local audiences and (voluntarily or inadvertently) helping shape perceptions of their home countries, Bravo and De Moya's edited book addresses a gap in extant literature on non-state actors and their agency in public diplomacy initiatives. In this sense, diasporas constitute public diplomacy assets that can play a significant role both by acting independently or being activated to complement state-led efforts. Finally, the relevance of this book extends beyond area studies and serves as an invaluable point of comparison for studies in other parts of the world.

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Faizullaev, Alisher. 2022. Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone (Hardcover). Leiden: Brill. 306pp. 151,58 €

Dr. Antonio Alejo

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Since the early 21st century, the study of diplomacy has extended in terms of processes and dynamics through diverse geographical areas. In the current application of diplomacy, it is recognized that it is under pressure to involve a social dimension in the decision-making process on foreign policies and global agendas.

Not long ago, scholars and practitioners considered the societal dimension irrelevant to discussing diplomacy's function. However, as seen in the flourishing extension of the academic literature, diplomacy is progressing as an attractive field of research moving beyond the discipline of International Relations and Diplomatic Studies.

The study of the relationship between diplomacy and society beyond structural and elitist perspectives is a relatively new area of diplomatic studies, and the book *Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone* is more needed than ever. Discussing the social dimension of diplomacy, Professor Alisher Faizullaev invites us to think of diplomacy as a collaborative space beyond the orthodox perspective of diplomacy as a select sphere for states and their international institutions.

The book *Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone* argues “that both traditional and new sociopolitical actors, including states, organizations, companies, groups, and individuals, can use diplomacy to manage existing relationships, resolve problems, and protect interests.” (p. 2) From an interdisciplinary dialogue between diplomatic studies, psychology (Chapter 8), and sociology, especially using the Symbolic Interactionism and Game Theory approaches of Ervin Goffman (Chapter 9), the discussion offered in this book expands a theoretical approach

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to diplomacy, moving from a traditional understanding of diplomacy to trans-professional and everyday diplomacy. (Chapter 9)

With these perspectives in mind, the book fosters diplomacy, including social life and interpersonal relations. *Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone* argues that “genuine diplomacy represents a positive and constructive idea and practice, and dialogical instruments of mutual influence serve a dignified and commonly acceptable coexistence of entities such as states, organizations, and individuals.” (p. 4)

To develop his arguments, the author organized the book into nine chapters. Through these chapters, Professor Faizullaev exposes a coherent logic to demonstrate emerging Social Diplomacy. While reading this book, we can observe diplomatic action and diplomatic actors regarding “selfhood, distinctiveness, dispositions, and attitudes within the Self-Other paradigm or in the context of the actors’ engagements with other entities.” (p. 4)

From the Self-Other paradigm and the interactional perspective, the author discusses different approaches to understanding the practice and thinking of diplomacy; following these theoretical approaches, professor Faizullaev studies the emergence and patterns of “unconventional ambassadors” (Chapter 4) and invites to rethink the diplomatic functions through their missions, objectives, methods, and skills from a dialogical approach. The book also offers theoretical arguments to think of diplomacy as a social practice (Chapter 7) and develop the notion of Social Diplomacy (Chapter 8). At a micro-level, with an approach of Game Theory, using the perspectives of Schelling (social psychology) and Goffman (symbolic interactionism), the author develops an analysis of micro-interactions (greetings) as a critical element of social engagement in the practice of everyday Social Diplomacy.

The arguments offered by Professor Faizullaev call on us to reconsider diplomacy related to the social function of diplomacy and the importance of thinking it as a co-working space where collaborative thinking is fostered. The challenges associated with multidimensional global inequalities make it necessary to consider how ordinary citizens participate in increasingly complex and interdependent societies. This book’s perspective on diplomacy and societies proves the necessity to recognize how diplomatic infrastructures have been transformed from closed circuits into open spaces.

The current times show a moment where the states are not well equipped to face the challenges of global dynamics. It is essential to recognize that the involvement of ordinary citizens in diplomacy is an innovative contribution to contemporary diplomacy, but it is not easy to organize their inclusion and participation. The book *Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone* offers a critical message: club and elitist diplomacy models are inadequate to address current global challenges and societal pressures. The global order requires an effective inclusion of ordinary citizens to address the everyday globalization dynamics that affect people’s daily lives worldwide.

Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone invites us to consider the emergence of social diplomacy. This book discusses the construction of social diplomacy between multilateral

organizations, governments, civil society actors, and individuals, promoting cooperative dynamics by fostering thinking beyond interest and hierarchies. In this sense, with a collaborative approach, Social Diplomacy results from interactions between actors, individuals, and institutions. Thus, in this book, we observe the development of trans-professional diplomacy with a permanent promotion of inclusive diplomacy worldwide.

Recognizing that the subject of Public Diplomacy, as the author does in this book, is too vast for any single theory and has many variables, geographies, models, and instruments in its practices, the book *Diplomacy for Professionals and Everyone*, through Social Diplomacy, invites us to revisit the understanding of processes applied by Public Diplomacy, beyond disciplinary and structural approaches, by which diplomatic actors advance their ends abroad through the engagement of the public.

This book is a valuable seminal step in promoting interdisciplinary and trans-professional dialogue between sociology, psychology, and diplomatic studies. Based on the advances developed by Professor Faizullaev, it will be necessary that in future studies on these interdisciplinary dialogues, particularly with the sociological perspectives, they have to be treated with greater precision and rigor by contemporary sociological theories. Greater consistency in the use of sociological theory will help to avoid inaccuracies and repetitions, as happened in some parts of this book, and the sociological theories will be presented clearly and more precisely according to their complexity in the face of the study of the application and thinking of diplomacy.

As an incipient sociopolitical process, Social Diplomacy is an evolving incomplete and shows a new set of inclusive conditions that make the traditional understanding of diplomacy pretty obsolete and many orthodox diplomats uncomfortable. However, the challenges mentioned above should be visible in the everyday practices of diplomats and require the addition of new functional qualities to their diplomatic performance, including strengthened skills for interacting with ordinary citizens and involving non-state actors in the decision-making process.

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