

MASTER'S THESIS

Competing Public Diplomacy on Weibo between US and Iranian Embassies in China: A Longitudinal Research Design

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ABSTRACT

Public diplomacy is a critical way of strategic communication for governments to influence global public opinion, especially during international conflicts. Based on the layered model of communicative space and the concept of affordance, this study investigated the role of communicative functions in US-Iran competing public diplomacy on a Chinese social media Weibo. Using mixed methods (social network analysis and qualitative content analysis) and longitudinal research design, this study suggested that the use of hashtag could increase social media presence and encourage public engagement. While the US accounts conducted online interactions with the Chinese publics, Iranian accounts made use of China's state agendas as their narrative agency. In terms of the relationship between the use of communicative functions and online public attention, macro-layer function (i.e., hashtag) horizontally disseminated news from mainly state-media accounts about the US-Iran conflict and increased public awareness of the issue within a short time, whereas meso-layer (repost and follower network) and micro-layer (mention and comment) functions helped establish vertical communication and facilitate idea-based discussions that could persisted for a relatively long time. Apart from discussion about the conflict itself, the Chinese public also provided localized understandings of the issue, which may be an important factor for attracting public interest. Two main themes emerge from the study: perceived legitimization of being a fair third party, as well as dissatisfaction toward China state-media accounts' social media openness and China's diplomatic actions comparing with the US and Iran respectively. This study contributes to the fields of public diplomacy, information warfare and international communication of international affairs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Public Diplomacy in a Globalized World.....	3
From Informational to Relational Communication	5
Involving the Public in Digital Public Diplomacy	10
US-Iran Competing Public Diplomacy on Weibo	12
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	19
Digital Public Diplomacy	19
Public Diplomacy in Conflict Situations	22
Affordances and the Use of Technology	25
Communicative Layers in Competing Public Diplomacy	29
CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHOD	36
Data Collection and Longitudinal Design	36
Social Network Analysis	38
Qualitative content analysis	39

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	42
Post Frequency and Communication Structure	42
Narrative Agency and Engaging Public of the Third Country	46
Horizontal Dissemination and Vertical Assemblage	51
Localized Understanding of US-Iran Conflict.....	54
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	58
Theoretical Implications	59
Practical Implications	61
Limitations and Future Study	62
REFERENCES	63
APPENDICES	80
Appendix A. Five Rounds of War-of-Words between the US and Iran	80
Appendix B. US and Iran Governmental Accounts on Weibo	81
Appendix C. Waves of Analysis.....	83
Appendix D. Networks of the five rounds of word-of-war	84
CURRICULUM VITAE	88

LIST OF TABLES

<i>Table 1.</i> Independent T Test Result.....	44
<i>Table 2.</i> Frequency Test Results.....	45
<i>Table 3.</i> Ten Most Popular Hashtags and Other Types of Communicative Functions in Wave 10.....	52

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1.</i> A Post by the US embassy in Response to the Assassination of Qasem Soleimani.....	15
<i>Figure 2.</i> A Post by the Iranian Embassy in Response to the Assassination of Qasem Soleimani.....	16
<i>Figure 3.</i> Proposed Framework based on Literature.....	32
<i>Figure 4.</i> Daily Frequency of Posts by the US Governmental Accounts.....	43
<i>Figure 5.</i> Daily Frequency of Posts by the Iranian Governmental Accounts.....	44
<i>Figure 6.</i> Daily Frequency of Posts about US-Iran Relations on Weibo.....	44
<i>Figure 7.</i> Network Analysis of US Posts.....	47
<i>Figure 8.</i> An Example of Replies by the US Embassy in China on Weibo.....	48
<i>Figure 9.</i> Network Analysis of Iranian Posts.....	49
<i>Figure 10.</i> An Example of Iranian Post.....	50
<i>Figure 11.</i> Node Count, Edge Count and Network Density Trends.....	51
<i>Figure 12.</i> Conceptual Map.....	61