

Digital Diplomacy in the Era of New Media: The Complex Interplay of National Image, International Migration, and Electoral Politics

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Abstract. The rapid development of globalization and new media has fundamentally altered the mechanisms by which national images are shaped, with digital diplomacy now extending a country's influence beyond traditional media. Unlike conventional state-directed communication, digital diplomacy enables a multi-dimensional dialogue where multiple actors—including international migrants—actively participate in creating and sharing narratives. This study first examines how new media empowers migrants as “unofficial ambassadors,” influencing public opinion in host countries and, in turn, shaping electoral preferences. These factors have gained increased significance in electoral politics, particularly as social media platforms amplify migration-related issues and sway voter behavior. Introducing a novel “New Media–Migration–National Image” framework, this research illustrates the intricate dynamics of cultural exchange, public opinion, and digital diplomacy’s evolving role in enhancing a nation’s soft power. Findings reveal that new media is crucial to digital diplomacy, enabling cultural exchange and cross-cultural dialogue essential for modern diplomatic strategies.

Keywords: Digital diplomacy, new media, politics.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The advent of digital technologies and the rise of globalized media have radically transformed the ways countries project their national image to the world. Historically, governments maintained tight control over national image dissemination, with state-owned or sanctioned media playing the dominant role in curating and controlling the narratives broadcasted to international audiences. The message was often singular and tightly managed, portraying only the perspectives that aligned with state interests. However, the emergence of new media—primarily social platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook—has revolutionized this landscape, introducing democratized channels for information dissemination and empowering individuals and non-state actors to participate in crafting and sharing national images. This shift allows a diversity of voices and narratives to shape perceptions of a country, transforming national image into a multi-layered and participatory construct [1].

One significant outcome of this shift is the empowerment of international migrants, who use social media to share stories, values, and perspectives about their home countries with audiences in host nations. Through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, these migrants act as “unofficial ambassadors,” sharing aspects of their cultural heritage, national traditions, and societal progress. This phenomenon creates a rich cross-cultural dialogue where host country residents gain insight into migrant-origin countries from an authentic, ground-level perspective. Such interactions contribute to soft power, broadening international understanding and, potentially, affecting diplomatic relations and public opinion abroad [2].

1.2. Research Significance

This study explores the complex relationships between new media, national image, and international migration, particularly through the lens of digital diplomacy. The research questions include: How does new media expand the capacity for shaping national image? How do international migrants influence public opinion and policy preferences in host countries through new media? How do these factors impact electoral politics in host countries, particularly through digital amplification?

As migrants engage with host audiences through social media, they play a crucial role in shaping international perceptions of their homeland, which in turn influences host-country policies, societal attitudes, and potentially, electoral dynamics. With this, the research provides valuable insights into how digital diplomacy extends beyond state-controlled narratives, allowing non-state actors, particularly migrants, to contribute to national image construction.

From a policy perspective, understanding these dynamics has significant implications. Governments can leverage migrant contributions to improve national image, foster cross-cultural understanding, and enhance diplomatic influence in host countries. Moreover, recognizing how new media emotionally amplifies issues like migration allows policymakers to better anticipate and mitigate polarization within host societies. This study, therefore, contributes to the evolving framework of digital diplomacy by elucidating the ways in which new media facilitates the co-creation of national narratives and broadens the scope of diplomatic engagement.

2. The Influence of New Media on National Image

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The concept of mediatization, as posited by Stig Hjarvard, provides a useful lens through which to understand how media transforms social and cultural structures by embedding its logic into them [1]. Mediatization theory suggests that media not only transmits information but also reconfigures social institutions and cultural practices by imposing new modes of interaction and consumption. New media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, embody this shift by enabling simultaneous production and consumption of content, breaking down traditional barriers between creator and audience. This interactive quality enhances the role of individuals—especially migrants—in shaping their home country's image, enabling them to share their stories, values, and customs with global audiences in a way that was previously impossible under state-controlled media paradigms [1].

2.2. Media Power and Cultural Symbolism

The concept of media power, articulated by Nick Couldry, complements mediatization theory by emphasizing how media not only shapes the content of public narratives but also determines which narratives gain prominence and influence societal norms [2]. In the context of national image, media power enables both state and non-state actors to present cultural symbols and narratives that shape public perception on a global scale. Through new media, countries can project diverse elements of their national identity, such as cultural achievements, economic progress, and social cohesion, in a manner that aligns with their diplomatic goals. This is especially significant for digital diplomacy, where media power allows for flexible and varied storytelling that can address or counteract international criticism.

For instance, China's use of CGTN on platforms like Twitter and YouTube exemplifies how a nation strategically employs media power to present a cohesive, positive, and diverse image. By carefully curating content that highlights Chinese cultural traditions, economic development, and international cooperation, CGTN aims to counterbalance negative global perceptions and create a narrative of China as a modern, progressive, and globally engaged country. This example highlights how media power facilitates narrative control, allowing governments to influence foreign perceptions through targeted cultural symbolism.

CGTN's activity on new media platforms represents a strategic application of digital diplomacy principles, where China actively curates its national image by broadcasting a selection of themes that reinforce its preferred global perception. With over 10 million Twitter followers and millions of views on YouTube, CGTN has become a powerful conduit for the Chinese government to disseminate carefully crafted narratives directly to foreign audiences. CGTN frequently publishes content that highlights China's technological advances, cultural events, and economic growth. This narrative strategy serves two primary purposes: first, to cultivate a positive image of China by emphasizing progress and modernity, and second, to counterbalance foreign criticism by presenting a nuanced perspective on sensitive issues such as human rights or trade policies.

For example, during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, CGTN utilized its Twitter and YouTube channels to showcase not only the athletic achievements but also China's organizational capacity, state-of-the-art facilities, and hospitality. This approach allowed CGTN to project an image of China as a competent and generous host nation, promoting national pride while addressing international skepticism about China's role in global sports and politics. Such cases demonstrate how digital diplomacy can effectively shape foreign public opinion through a well-organized media strategy that emphasizes cultural and social strengths.

3. The Role of International Migration in National Image Building

3.1. Migrants as Cultural Ambassadors and Contributors to National Image

Migrants play a unique role as unofficial cultural ambassadors, often using social media to share their home country's customs, language, and traditions with audiences in their host countries. Unlike official diplomatic channels, which may present idealized or overly simplified narratives, the personal experiences shared by migrants offer an authentic and diverse perspective. Through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, migrants disseminate personal narratives that humanize their home country and showcase its cultural richness, thereby contributing to a nuanced and accessible image of their homeland. This role is particularly pronounced among younger migrants, who actively engage in "digital storytelling" to convey their identities and cultural backgrounds in a way that resonates with foreign audiences.

For instance, Mexican immigrants in the United States frequently use TikTok and Instagram to share videos of traditional Mexican celebrations, cuisine, and everyday life. By participating in such platforms, they bridge cultural gaps, enabling American viewers to experience aspects of Mexican culture directly. Research shows that such representations contribute positively to the American public's perception of Mexico, helping to reduce stereotypes and fostering cultural understanding. Through these digital interactions, migrants not only reinforce their cultural identity but also strengthen the image of their home country in the host society [3].

3.2. The Impact of Migrants on Public Opinion and National Image Abroad

Migrants' use of social media allows them to directly engage with host-country audiences, providing them with an alternative, bottom-up narrative that contrasts with state-controlled or traditional media portrayals. This interaction has the potential to reshape public opinion in the host country, especially on issues that are emotionally or politically charged. For example, during times of political tension between the U.S. and Mexico, Mexican migrants have used social media platforms to counteract negative stereotypes, sharing stories that emphasize community values, work ethics, and cultural resilience. Such interactions contribute to a more balanced understanding of Mexico among American audiences, reducing polarization and promoting a more empathetic perspective toward Mexican migrants [4].

Studies show that digital media plays a pivotal role in cultural diplomacy, enabling migrants to shape perceptions by sharing authentic stories and cultural practices, which in turn fosters intercultural understanding and empathy [5]. For instance, Turkish immigrants in Germany often share videos on platforms like YouTube and Instagram depicting Ramadan celebrations, traditional

Turkish cuisine, and family customs. Such content bridges cultural divides, allowing German audiences to appreciate Turkish cultural values and everyday life, thus reducing misunderstandings. Research indicates that these digital interactions not only reinforce the migrants' cultural identities but also positively influence the public perception of their home countries abroad, demonstrating how digital media facilitates the promotion of cultural exchange and mutual respect on a global scale [5].

3.3. Digital Diplomacy Through Migrant Storytelling: A Case Study Approach

Migrants often engage in digital storytelling, a process where they narrate personal or cultural experiences, thus creating a relatable and humanized portrayal of their home countries. This method serves as a form of grassroots digital diplomacy, allowing migrants to share nuanced views of their countries, which contrasts with potentially negative or simplified portrayals often seen in traditional media. Digital storytelling by migrants not only highlights cultural diversity but also challenges prevailing stereotypes, contributing to a more empathetic and complex understanding of their nations.

For instance, Turkish immigrants in Germany have used YouTube and Instagram to share stories about Ramadan celebrations, traditional Turkish cuisine, and family customs. Such content bridges cultural gaps by enabling German audiences to gain a closer look at Turkish values and daily life, fostering empathy and reducing cultural misunderstandings. This type of interaction creates a positive national image based on shared human values rather than abstract political narratives. Studies have shown that this type of organic, migrant-driven content receives high engagement from local audiences, suggesting that digital storytelling can play a powerful role in influencing host-country public opinion and promoting cultural exchange [6].

4. Migration and Electoral Politics in the Digital Era

4.1. Emotional Amplification of Migration Issues in Electoral Campaigns

Migration issues have increasingly become central themes in electoral politics, often amplified through new media to evoke emotional responses from voters. Politicians and political groups leverage social media platforms to frame migration as a pressing national concern, using emotive language and imagery to connect migration with topics such as economic strain or national security. Studies show that during election cycles, emotionally charged migration content tends to go viral more frequently than other topics, indicating that the public is highly reactive to narratives that emphasize fear or threat. Social media platforms allow political actors to frame migration as an urgent issue, connecting it with themes of economic strain or national security to evoke fear and support for restrictive policies. In particular, studies on political engagement in polarized societies indicate that social media amplifies public reactions, with affective polarization intensifying the resonance of migration issues among like-minded communities [7].

A pertinent example is the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Donald Trump's campaign effectively used Twitter and Facebook to convey a message associating migration with crime, economic burden, and cultural degradation. Through frequent posts and targeted ads, Trump's team amplified migration issues, making them central to his electoral platform. The campaign's strategy leveraged social media's ability to evoke emotional responses, using visuals and language that framed migration as an immediate threat. Studies of social media engagement during this period show a significant increase in negative sentiment towards migrants, with keywords such as "border crisis" and "national security" trending widely across platforms.

For instance, during the 2016 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections, campaigns effectively used social media to amplify migration as a critical theme associated with national security. These efforts exploited social media algorithms to reinforce in-group and out-group dynamics, fostering divisive sentiment toward migrants. The study by Chan and Yi illustrates that in highly polarized democracies, social media amplifies divisive content, making migration a potent issue in shaping political attitudes and increasing democratic engagement, though often at the cost of social cohesion and satisfaction with democracy [7].

4.2. The 2024 U.S. Election: Migration Issues and Trump’s Digital Strategy

In the recent 2024 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump’s campaign once again capitalized on migration issues to sway public opinion, reaffirming the power of social media to mobilize conservative-leaning voters. Reports from sources like The New York Times and CNN indicate that Trump’s campaign heavily utilized Twitter and Facebook to associate migration with issues of national security, economic strain, and cultural identity. Through strategically timed posts, videos, and targeted advertisements, Trump’s team amplified anti-migration rhetoric, highlighting topics such as “border control” and “American jobs” to reinforce voter anxieties. This approach effectively polarized voter sentiment and helped rally his base around migration-related policies.

This election serves as a relevant case for examining how digital strategies in electoral campaigns utilize migration issues to emotionally engage voters. Trump’s use of social media algorithms to ensure his messages reached conservative audiences created what is known as an “information bubble,” where users were frequently exposed to migration content that aligned with their existing views. This strategy, which generated high levels of engagement and public discussion, exemplifies how new media’s targeting capabilities can be used to magnify certain issues, shaping public opinion to support specific political agendas [8, 9].

4.3. Polarization and the Role of Social Media Algorithms

The 2024 election highlights a growing trend of polarization facilitated by social media algorithms, which personalize content to reinforce existing biases. By tailoring information flows to suit individual preferences, algorithms create “echo chambers” where users are consistently exposed to content that aligns with their ideological leanings. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced with emotionally charged topics like migration, where conservative audiences were frequently shown content emphasizing security threats and economic risks associated with immigration.

The strategic use of social media algorithms in Trump’s campaign underscores the role that digital platforms play in deepening ideological divides. Studies have shown that when users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their beliefs, they become more polarized and less receptive to alternative perspectives. This selective exposure limits opportunities for constructive dialogue and can reinforce stereotypes, further entrenching political divisions within the electorate. By highlighting migration-related fears and targeting this content toward conservative-leaning voters, Trump’s campaign capitalized on the algorithmic design of social media to solidify support for his platform, amplifying social divisions in the process [10].

5. Digital Diplomacy Framework and Future Directions

5.1. New Media–Migration–National Image Framework

This study proposes a “New Media–Migration–National Image” framework to capture the multi-layered interactions facilitated by new media in shaping national image and influencing international public opinion. In this framework, international migrants function as grassroots digital diplomats, using new media platforms to convey narratives about their home countries that are more personal and relatable. Unlike traditional state-driven diplomacy, which often presents idealized images, migrant-driven digital diplomacy provides a bottom-up, authentic perspective that resonates with foreign audiences and facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the home country.

This framework emphasizes three main components. First, new media serves as the platform enabling migrants to act as “unofficial ambassadors,” showcasing their cultural backgrounds and social values. Second, the migration aspect highlights the unique position of migrants as cultural intermediaries who bridge their home and host countries. Finally, the national image component reflects how these narratives collectively influence foreign audiences’ perceptions of the migrant’s homeland. This grassroots form of digital diplomacy, therefore, enriches state-sponsored efforts by

adding depth and diversity to the image projected abroad, ultimately enhancing the home country's soft power.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

From a home-country perspective, governments can adopt policies that actively support migrants' social media engagement, thereby strengthening the country's digital diplomacy efforts. Governments could provide digital resources, training, and platforms for migrants to share cultural content effectively, as well as fund diaspora organizations to foster organized storytelling initiatives. Such support not only benefits migrants by enabling them to remain connected to their culture but also aids the home country by promoting an inclusive, positive, and modernized image abroad.

From the host-country perspective, policies could focus on fostering cross-cultural understanding and inclusivity. Host governments may create initiatives that encourage cultural sharing on social media and incentivize migrant community organizations to engage in positive cultural exchange activities. These initiatives could include social media campaigns that highlight the contributions of migrants to local society or educational programs that reduce prejudice and promote cross-cultural dialogue. In the context of electoral politics, governments might also consider implementing measures to prevent the misuse of migration issues on social media to avoid polarization and protect public discourse integrity.

5.3. Future Directions

This study's framework suggests several avenues for future research. Cross-regional studies examining how migrants from different cultural backgrounds use social media to influence national image could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of digital diplomacy. Moreover, future research could explore how various social media platforms differ in their effectiveness for digital diplomacy. For example, Twitter's real-time format may be better suited for political discourse, while Instagram's visual focus might lend itself more to cultural narratives.

Further exploration into the impact of social media algorithms on migration issues in electoral politics is also warranted. Comparative studies between countries with high migration rates and varying degrees of political polarization could help clarify how social media targeting practices affect public opinion and voting behavior. Additionally, quantitative analyses that measure social media engagement rates on migration-related topics could offer empirical support to understand how digital platforms shape political attitudes.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of new media in shaping national image and influencing electoral outcomes. Through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, migrants play an instrumental role in redefining how their home countries are perceived internationally. This bottom-up approach to digital diplomacy, in which individual migrants actively contribute to the cultural narratives of their homeland, presents a fresh and authentic perspective that complements state-led diplomatic efforts.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election serves as a pertinent case, demonstrating how social media can amplify migration issues to evoke emotional responses among voters. Donald Trump's campaign strategically used migration-related content to resonate with conservative audiences, leveraging social media algorithms to create an "echo chamber" effect. This approach magnified social divisions and underscored the need for responsible digital platform policies that prevent polarization in politically sensitive contexts.

In sum, new media provides a platform where both governments and migrants can collaboratively shape national image and engage in digital diplomacy. While this dual approach expands opportunities for public engagement and cross-cultural understanding, it also necessitates careful management to ensure constructive interactions. As digital diplomacy continues to evolve,

governments should adopt policies that support responsible media use, foster inclusivity, and promote international goodwill.

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