

The effect of economic ties on digital diplomacy: A sentiment analysis of the Twitter accounts of Chinese diplomatic missions

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Abstract

The use of social networking sites (SNS) in public diplomacy, termed digital diplomacy (DD), can be used as a low-level information warfare tool to influence public opinion and operationalize policy interests. I examine how economic ties between host and guest countries affect the emotional valence in the social media content published by diplomats. Strong economic ties will lead DD practitioners to adopt a positive tone because strong economic ties raise the potential costs of verbal aggressiveness online. A positive emotional valence on SNS also serves to cultivate good public perceptions of the guest and its economic activities. To evaluate these claims, I collect and conduct sentiment analysis on 53,601 original tweets published by 88 Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts from 2014 to 2020. I find economic ties have a strong positive effect on the tone adopted in DD. As the host's trade dependence with China increases, Chinese diplomatic missions are more likely to adopt a positive tone on Twitter. A systematic analysis of the topical content shows the positive effect of economic ties on DD is mostly driven by tweets about politics and business. This research contributes to the study of diplomatic communications and how countries use SNS to conduct diplomacy.

Keywords: Digital diplomacy, China, Sentiment analysis, Chinese foreign policy, Public diplomacy, Twiplomacy

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