China's Belt and Road Initiative at Ten:
A Global Perspective on Twitter

Extended Abstract

China's role on the global stage has been much discussed in the media and among academics. In the post-Cold War era, a term that is widely used in this context is 'soft power'. This idea was first put forward by Joseph Nye, who sees 'soft power' as the ability to shape what others want by being attractive (Nye, 1990). One of the challenges China faces in its rise is turning hard power into soft power. Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been proposed and developed as a much-vaunted part of China's grand strategy to engage with the world as a 'rising power' as well as to defuse 'the China threat' (Liang, 2019). It is a multifaceted project to expand China's influence abroad through economic links to Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. In other words, it is a move in China's pursuit of international status and a far-reaching strategy as part of realizing the 'China dream', which is closely associated with President Xi Jinping's vision for China's future (Loh, 2021).

Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has gradually come to occupy an ever more central place in China's transition from a passive participant to an active player in global order (Xiang, 2016). The number of countries signing BRI-MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) and cooperation agreements with China has grown from 3 in 2014 to more than 140 in 2022. The BRI is of such an enormous scale that, at the end of 2020, it has come to extend across 70% of the world population and 50% of global GDP, making it the most expansive and expensive infrastructure initiative ever undertaken worldwide.

At the same time, promotion of BRI has been accompanied by ongoing debates. Despite China's claims of its peaceful rise, the BRI has also been seen as creating "debt traps" or "strategic threats" or resulting in "economic colonisation" (Greer, 2018;van Noort, 2021). The major Hambantota Port project in Sri Lanka as part of the BRI, for example, has come under media spotlight and been mired in controversy. Furthermore, global powers have put forward competing schemes to counter the BRI, such as the U.S.'s Blue Dot Network and G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative. Accordingly, public opinion about the BRI is increasingly divided globally, including its media coverage and discussions on social media platforms.

Digital media have, of course, become a central tool in understanding international relations, especially on platforms like Twitter that used by officials and the wider public (Wheeler & Iosifidis, 2016). As traditional media platforms no longer the only main sources of information, public concerns on social media gradually convey an agenda-setting function and can, to a certain extent, influence the government's policy making and implementation. To be more specific, the world's response to the BRI, which is bound to have implications for its success or otherwise, and even reshape international relations and the global political landscape. However, there is little research that systematically evaluate online discourses of BRI on a global scale. This paper aims to fill this gap through the lens of social media platform.

As BRI approaches its 10th anniversary, what is the global perception of it on social media? With the accumulation of nearly a-decade data, this research examines BRI online discourses of 100 countries on Twitter. Twitter is used as the data source here because it spans many countries, has a wide range of users and reflects a variety of views. It is also an accessible and real-time data source that responds quickly to political and social trends. It should be acknowledged, however, that Twitter is disproportionally used in the Global North as well as by social elites and English-speaking users. Still, it remains a useful choice because of its global reach and strong influence over agendas on traditional media outlets. This research is, to the author's knowledge, the first study to examine BRI discourses internationally using Twitter large-scale data. It not only focuses on China's projection of its soft power globally, but also the responses from global countries, including both BRI-participant countries and non-BRI-participant countries from official and grassroots communities alike.

This study collected an English language dataset on Twitter from 2013 to 2021 via Twitter's Academic API using BRI related queries. As shown in Figure 1, the study combined several methods. BRI related tweets were coded both qualitatively and quantitatively with time series and TFIDF analysis, topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and supervised machine learning methods. Building on this, this research further carried out multi-level regressions to analyze BRI images across different user types, themes, and countries. The findings draw a sophisticated picture of BRI, which is seen as both an opportunity and a threat temporally, geographically, and in terms of content.

It might be thought that China's branding 'soft power' efforts to portray the BRI positively should have uniform effects at the 'receiving end' of BRI countries, either in diffusing this positive image or in calling forth negative images or criticisms depending on the position of 'receiving end' countries. What we find instead on Twitter is a more differentiated picture, with the strength of responses to BRI, the topics of concern and the sentiments varied not just between countries but also between different types of accounts. Further, there are various types of engagement with BRI, pulling perceptions and topics in different directions though with certain topical foci and regional or country-specific emphases. The implication is that responses to BRI need to treated more like a highly uneven landscape rather than a simple push-pull.

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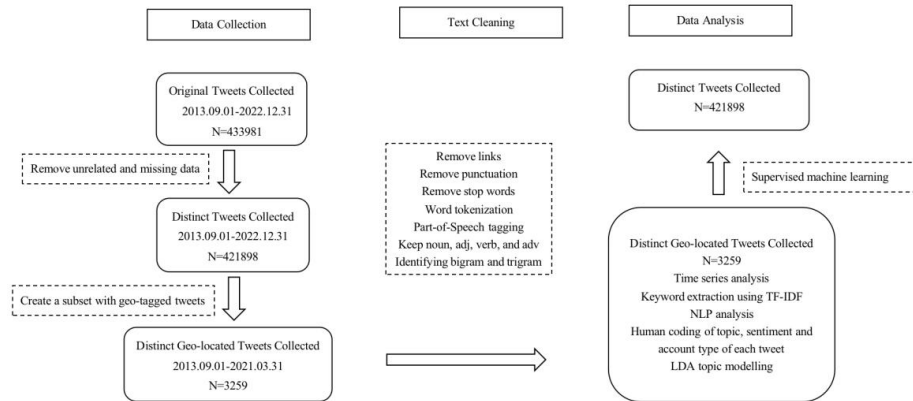
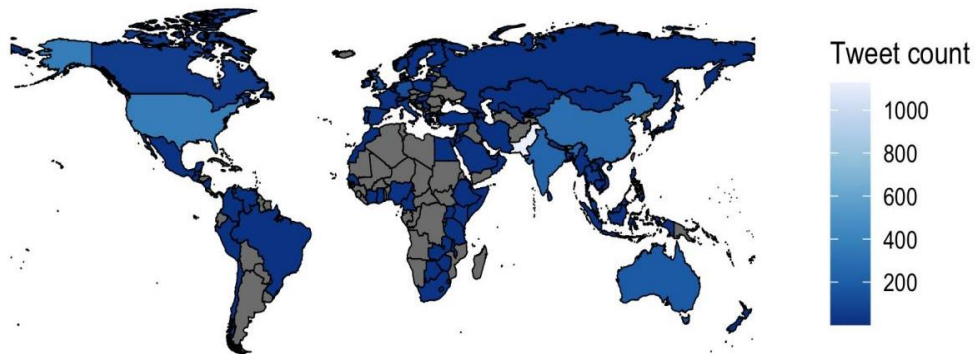Figure 1 Workflow of proposed research

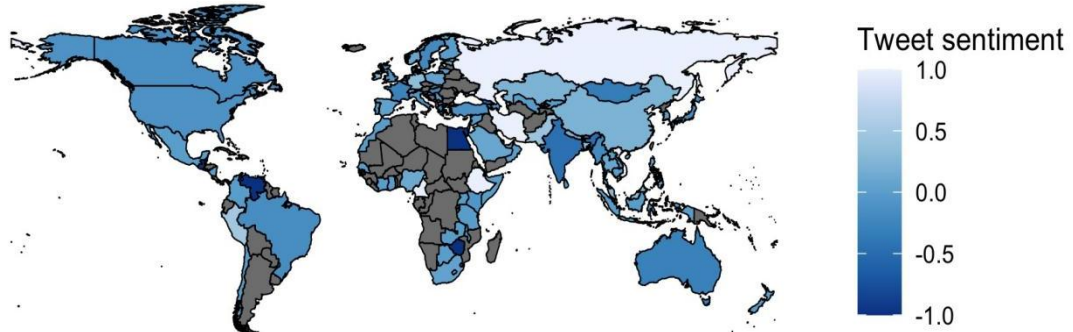

Figure 2 Tweet count distribution by country

Figure 3 Tweet sentiment distribution by country

Figure 4 Word clouds of ten topics identified by LDA topic modelling