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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL IMAGE BUILDING

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world of digital media, communication is faster, more interactive, and more effective than it was before. Now, countries' governments do not solely rely on traditional means of diplomacy like the embassy, press conference, or meeting with their international counterparts. They now have a more direct link with international citizens through media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and these changing ways have brought about "digital diplomacy" or "public diplomacy via social media".

Public diplomacy is a set of communication activities designed by a country to encourage foreign publics, win confidence, enhance its image abroad, and strengthen its credibility as a nation. Nation branding is a process in which the whole picture or impression of a country's culture, values, political system, tourism, economy, business, and political image abroad is established and shaped to look positive. Nowadays, as the world is increasingly integrated, social media emerges as one of the most efficient tools in order to enhance the global perception.

This paper explores how social media impacts public diplomacy and nation branding. It attempts to analyse the positive aspects and disadvantages along with real cases of countries' practices on how they make the image abroad stronger through using digital devices.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Formerly, the practice was exclusively reserved for government agents and limited to confidential exchanges conducted behind closed doors. However, Globalization and technological advancements have expanded the ambit of diplomacy beyond governmental apparatuses, bringing into its fold the populace, media, influencers, and international communities. Public diplomacy thus now operates by directly communicating to the foreign audiences, rather than simply relaying the messages to the intermediaries, who carry forward diplomatic discourse.

The pace of this change has been facilitated by social media, as it offers an unprecedented ability to governments to disseminate messages directly to millions of people throughout the world in real time. Through the form of tweets, videos, campaigns, and discussions, they could present their viewpoints, clarify their policies, and broadcast the accomplishments on the national front at the pace at which events are unfolding around the world. Unlike traditional diplomacy, digital diplomacy is faster and more interactive, involves a greater number of people, and also establishes a two-way communication channel in contrast to the one-way flow of information in the old school method. It now offers the ability to interact with the global citizen and receive real-time feedback. Thus, in an event of crisis government uses social media for the dissemination of authentic information to quell the rumors. Similarly, the Ministry of Tourism uses attractive digital campaigns to disseminate the culture, history and tourist destinations among international communities.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL OF NATION BRANDING

The role of social media in the promotion of nations Branding Nation branding - similar to corporate branding - is the practice of using branding to enhance a countrys attractiveness among tourists, investors, students, and also diplomatically. In this case, one viral marketing campaign could improve and ruin the national image. Since visual images and stories have become more and more important, social media plays an increasingly vital role in the development of the nation's brand. The different applications are:

Encouraging tourism: A significant proportion of state branding efforts using the web revolve around cultural identity, national heritage, tourism potential and festival celebrations. Most governmental bodies develop comprehensive web strategies designed to engage potential tourists through, for instance, a campaign incorporating an attractive social media presence with hashtags, travel-related influences and short videos depicting national highlights; this is evident in Indias 'Incredible India' campaign, a multimedia strategy employing social media to communicate cultural richness, spirituality and several other appealing aspects of the country to the world; another illustration is that of the social media presence developed by South Korea and Japan, the countries having successfully used online platforms to bring about positive perceptions regarding their entertainment sectors, traditions and culture.

Increasing soft power: According to the political scientist Joseph Nye, 'soft power' means 'the ability to get others to want what you want through the attractiveness of your culture, your ideals, your policies' and social media facilitates the expansion of this power as they propagate culture, beliefs and ideals among people and countries. South Korea's soft power has, for example, recently developed considerably, through the popularity of

K-pop, Korean dramas, Korean fashion and content on social media, stimulating peoples and countries' interests towards its economy and tourism.

Responding to crises: Now more than ever, states can benefit from online presence in times of conflict, disasters, epidemics, and other crises. Governments need to communicate effectively and swiftly, both to their people and to the rest of the world, through information sharing and maintaining transparency on the crisis in question. Several states successfully utilized online presence during the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen public trust and international confidence, providing clear and correct information concerning travel and disease.

Extending diplomatic communication: Foreign ministries and world leaders are now actively using online media to interact with the world and to strengthen relationships. Digital interaction enables direct communication with other nations through online posts which can convey sympathy during difficult times, thus helping to enhance diplomatic ties between countries.

ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

- The immediacy and speed of communication is perhaps the most significant benefit of social media. Information can be disseminated instantaneously between countries; and concerning international crises the need for rapid, unambiguous clarification is immense.
- Social media sites connect billions of people from all corners of the earth; even small states can engage with an international public sphere without expensive, mass-media focused campaigns.
- Communication through social media is less expensive than traditional diplomatic campaigns. A well-executed campaign can create an international public sphere at very little cost, or in some cases none at all.
- Citizens can actively participate in communication through the comments, opinions, and direct interactions with state entities allowed through social media interaction. This communication offers the benefit of enhanced transparency and democratisation.
- Leaders and institutions can make themselves seem more accessible and more human through these platforms. By publicizing national holidays, aid efforts or personal achievements these entities may become more personable, thus evoking an emotional resonance with foreign citizens.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA DIPLOMACY

- .Despite the benefits of social media, there are also numerous disadvantages to public diplomacy and nation branding.
- Misinformation spreads quickly online. False news, manipulated videos, and propaganda can affect a nation's reputation within hours. Countries are in a constant battle to keep misleading statements controlled in the digital sphere.
- Diplomatic social media accounts are susceptible to hacking, cyber-attacks and disinformation. These can potentially cause international conflict, jeopardising relations between countries, and eroding public confidence.

- The unpredictable nature of social media can be harmful; a badly worded post or controversial campaign can cause outrage, both from the home country and other nations around the world. Government communications need to be closely monitored.
- Digital divide means unequal access to technology. The internet may not be available to people in developing countries, and this can impact online public diplomacy. This also results in the creation of a divide between those who can and cannot access this technology.
- The sheer amount of content online means governments may not always grab public attention consistently, leading to information overload; the message being relayed could be lost amongst hundreds of other stories.

CASE STUDIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

India and Digital Diplomacy:

India has begun to embrace digital diplomacy by promoting the use of the Ministry of External Affairs and government initiatives to its citizens. It aims to enhance engagement with foreign publics through the use of social media for consular help, for promoting the country's achievements among foreign citizens and enhancing international image through the success of programs like yoga day, cultural initiatives, promotion of tech innovation, and tourism to enhance its brand value internationally. Indian public diplomacy on social media in form of the campaigns launched around Yoga Day has become a successful example of the country's soft power diplomacy.

United States and Digital Influence:

The U.S. Has long used the power of media and digital communication to establish itself as leader among democratic nations and to promote democracy worldwide. U.S. Embassies and other state organs around the world maintain a strong presence on social media platforms. The influence has its own negative aspects; Social media has helped the U.S. To enhance its influence through diplomacy in foreign lands, although it has also raised challenges, including misinformation, political division, and international criticism in times of war.

South Korea and Cultural Diplomacy:

In terms of nation branding by means of digital culture, South Korea is a great example. South Korea has gained brand value of its culture all over the world by means of the 'Korean wave' or 'Hallyu', where the wave shows increasing worldwide popularity of Korean culture (music, film, TV dramas) disseminated widely on social media. K-Pop, TV series and movies have gained popularity worldwide and have a strong positive influence in creating perception on South Korea globally.

The role of Influencers and Non-State Actors:

A crucial element of modern public diplomacy are the increased participation of non-state actors. Influence, celebrities, journalists, activists and even "ordinary" people are increasingly involved in the way countries are perceived. Bloggers, Youtubers and social media influencers can, for instance, be informal ambassadors of a

country and help shape an image that even official commercials are unable to project. NGOs and international organizations use social networks to spread human rights and information on climate issues or humanitarian questions across the world.

The Future of Public Diplomacy in the Era of Social Media:

Diplomacy will grow increasingly digital with the advancement in technologies such as AI, Virtual Reality, Data analytics etc and this will be the way for countries to develop future public diplomacy strategies, manage online reputation and practice Cyber Diplomacy. It will also increase concerns related to security, privacy and online manipulation, raising questions about the use of public diplomacy, in order to be successful in this new form of diplomacy, countries will have to ensure transparency, credibility and cultural relevance as the present audience favors authenticity over propaganda.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, public diplomacy and country branding have witnessed profound changes with the advent of social media. Social media has empowered the states with novel tools to engage with the international public and to pursue national interest, thus enhancing their soft power. With the social media state's culture, travel destinations, values and success could be promoted to an unprecedented extent. On the other hand, social media is the site of serious challenges such as propaganda, cyber warfare and loss of the image. Successful digital diplomacy requires an ethical usage of information and public support, together with thoughtful strategizing.

In today's world the perception of country image is no longer the sole prerogative of political leaders and the traditional media. Users, influencers and communities on social media are actively engaged in the process of constructing how countries are viewed across the globe. Future trends in technological development will keep Digital Diplomacy as a core element of International relations and Country Branding.

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