Country Image Restoration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Social Media Communication Strategies Used by Chinese Embassies in 11 Countries

- Nhung Nguyen
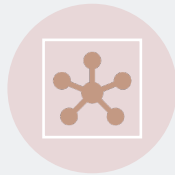- Annalise Baines
- Hechen Ding
- Ayman Amahad
- Hong Vu

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Overview

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Significance

China's global image has been negatively affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the pandemic hit France in February 2020, the Chinese ambassador has communicated more frequently on Twitter
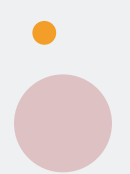
Image restoration scholars have examined corporations' strategies for crisis management purposes using various channels

However, less well-understood is how countries use social media for public diplomacy purposes in the context of a crisis such as natural disasters, armed conflicts or global pandemics
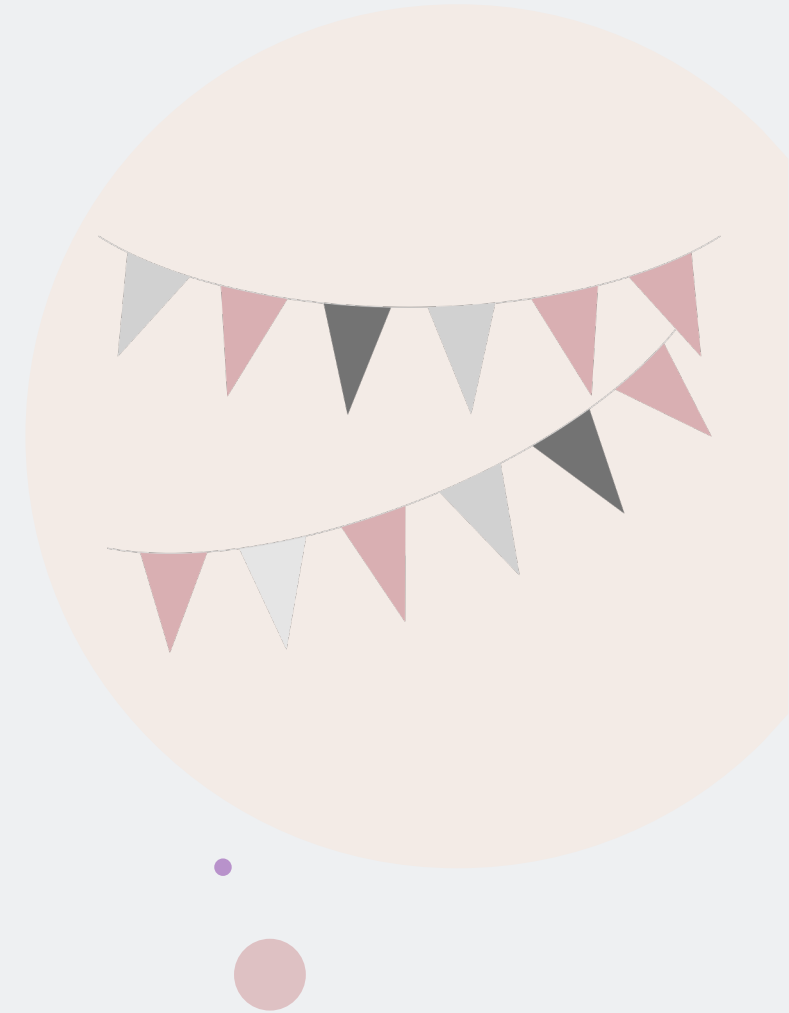
Theoretical framework – Image restoration theory (Image repair theory)

According to Benoit (1995a; 2014), image strategies are organized into five broad strategies including *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*.

In the *denial* strategy, any person or entity is forced to defend themselves from suspicions or attacks by simply denying the wrongful act or shifting the blame to another person or entity.

In *evasion of responsibility* the accused is often unable to deny performing a wrongful act and may try to evade or reduce their apparent responsibility for the act. There are four models of this strategy: *defeasibility, provocation, accident,* and *good attention.*

In the *reduction offensiveness* strategy, the wrongdoer attempts to reduce the degree of accusations from the audience through (1) *bolstering,* (2) *differentiation,* (3) *transcendence,* (4) *minimization,* (5) *attacking one's accuser,* and (6) *compensation*.

corrective actions and *mortification*, the accused vows to resolve the issue and make changes to prevent the recurrence of an undesirable act.

Research questions and Hypothesis

RQ1: Overall, what are the strategies employed by Chinese embassies in 11 countries to restore China's image on Twitter?

- **H1:** Chinese embassies in Western countries use *denial strategies* more than those in non-Western countries.

RQ2: What are the differences in the use of two *denial strategies* between Chinese embassies in Western and non-Western countries?

- **H2:** Chinese embassies in Western countries use more strategies to evade China's responsibility than those in non-Western countries.

RQ3: What are the differences in the use of different *evasion of responsibility* strategies between Chinese embassies in Western and non-Western countries?

- **H3:** Chinese embassies in Western countries use *reduced offensiveness* strategies more than those in non-Western countries.

RQ4: What are the differences in the use of different types of *reduce offensiveness* strategies adopted by Chinese embassies in Western and non-Western countries?

- **H4:** Chinese embassies in Western countries use *corrective action* strategies more than those in non-Western countries.

Research Method

Data was downloaded in December 2021 and the timeframe was from March 11, 2020, the start of the pandemic, until mid-December 2021. The tweets were included in the sample that contained "COVID-19," "COVID-19 pandemic," and "COVID-19 vaccine."

Countries	Number of Tweets	Percentage
1. Chinese Embassy in Germany	117	3.6
2. Chinese Embassy in the United Kingdom	161	4.9
3. Chinese Embassy in Kenya	310	9.5
4. Chinese Embassy in Nigeria	180	5.5
5. Chinese Embassy in Japan	155	4.8
6. Chinese Embassy in the Philippines	1055	32.4
7. Chinese Embassy in Brazil	404	12.4
9. Chinese Embassy in Turkey	323	9.9
10. Chinese Embassy in Saudi Arabia	146	4.5
11. Chinese Embassy in the United States of America	276	8.5
12. Chinese Embassy in Canada	134	4.1

Frequencies of Strategies used by 11 Chinese embassies

Strategy	Number of tweets
Denial strategy	2080
Evasion of Responsibility	237
Reduce Offensiveness	2718
Corrective Action	346
Mortification	0

Coding sample and Intercoder reliability

Strategy 1: Deny

The Washington Post report on the change in the statement by the WHO expert on the search of the origin of the #COVID virus is "fake news". → [Simple Deny]

Chart by #CGTN: #Corona-cases were discovered in many places around the world before the outbreak in #Wuhan. → [Shift the blame]

Strategy 2: Evasion of Responsibility

The US should do 4 things if it were really "transparent and accountable" about the origin of #COVID19 → [Attack accuser and Provocation]

Strategy 3: Reduce Offensiveness

Miss Dr. Chen Wei, a medical doctor from the military, is one of the first in #China to deal with the development of the # COVID19 vaccine. (1/2) https://t.co/oiX7iGJdwM → [Bolstering]

China is prepared to hold face-to-face discussions early in China and proceed with the second review of the "norm" if the conditions of infection of the new corona permit. → [Transcendence]

#COVID knows no borders and the #pandemic affects all nationals of the world. The fair distribution of #vaccines and solidarity and cooperation remain our priority

"We encourage all countries to make their decisions based on evidence, not just a blanket coverage. Because even in China, there are provinces with very few cases," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a press briefing at Geneva, Switzerland. https://t.co/rbmOmzO17 → [Minimization]

Strategy 3: Corrective Actions

President Xi Jinping attended the 13th #BRICSSUmmit today. Xi announced that in addition to donating $100 million to #COVAX, #China will donate an additional 100 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to developing countries over the course of the yer. → [Compensation and Corrective Actions]

Code/Coders	Lead Coder vs. Coder1	Lead Coder vs. Coder2	Lead Coder vs. Coder3
Strategy_yesno_1	1	0.87	0.73
Denial 1	1	1	1
Evasion of Responsibility 1	1	1	1
Reduce offensiveness	0.81	0.86	0.93
Corrective Action 1	1	1	1
Mortification 1	1	1	1
Strategy_yesno_2	0.75	0.87	0.92
Denial 2	1	1	1
Evasion of Responsibility 2	1	1	1
Reduce offensiveness	0.79	0.87	1
Corrective Action 2	1	1	1
Mortification 2	1	1	1

Results

The results showed that there were statistically significant differences among the Chinese embassies in the use of the *denial strategies* (χ^2(*1, N* = 3,261) = 59.760, *p* < 0.001). Chinese embassies in Western countries used the *denial strategy* significantly more than those in non-Western countries. **H1 was supported.**

Results from a Pearson's Chi-square test revealed statistically significant differences in using *evasion of responsibility* among Chinese embassies in Western countries and non-Western were statistically significant (χ^2 (*1, N* = 3,261) = 35.613, *p* < 0.001). This demonstrates that Chinese diplomatic missions in Western countries tended to use the *evasion of responsibility strategy* more than those in non-Western countries. **H2 was supported.**

Results

Results from Pearson's Chi-square tests revealed that there were statistically significant differences in Chinese embassies in Western and non-Western countries using the *reducing offensiveness* strategy (χ^2(*1, N* = 3,261) = 60.805, *p* < 0.001). **H3 is strongly supported.**

A Pearson's chi-square test result indicated that the differences in the use of *corrective actions* between Chinese embassies in Western and non-Western countries are not statistically significant (χ^2(*1, N* = 3,261) = 1.203, *p* = 0.273). **H4 is not supported.**

Discussion

These embassies were consistent in avoiding the *mortification* strategy as this can be seen as the acknowledgement of committing wrongdoing. Acknowledging wrongdoing, in this case, might lead to image damage or in other words, losing face (Peijuan, 2009), something that should be avoided as much as possible in Asian cultures.

These strategies can be seen as gaining a more positive reputation by being *constructive.* While the *defeasibility*, *good attention*, and *accident* models were rarely used and showed no differences among the embassies.

Chinese embassies in Western countries, in the context of being accused of spreading the novel coronavirus (Pew, 2019), tend to use more *denial* strategies, both *simple deny* and *shift the blame* models, than those in the non-Western countries. The embassies in Western countries used a more *provocative* approach than in the non-Western countries.

There was no significant difference between Chinese embassies in West and non-Western countries in terms of using the *corrective action* model. These tweets mostly mentioned the charity, donation, and humanitarian acts of Chinese over the hosting countries of such embassies. These findings are somewhat consistent with Chinese *"soft-power"* policy.

The current study found a proactive approach of these Chinese embassies worldwide in a more *context-oriented response strategies.* It reflects that the Chinese embassies expressed the realm of social constructionism approach. They, hence, created their social media messages based on what they have learned via social interactions within a shared socio-cultural context.

Conclusion

This study offers a unique case study, which is the first systematic analysis applying the image restoration theoretical framework to examining public diplomacy on social media in the context of a global pandemic and highly connected digital world.

This study contributes to the literature on the use of country image restoration strategy, which was conceptualized by Benoit.

Future research can build off on the limitations of the current study.

- *First,* extending the research to more Chinese embassies' social media would provide a more thorough picture of the topic.
- *Second*, assessing the adoption of image restoration using dimensions such as levels of economic development, international relationships with China, or Twitter use may provide more insights into understanding the strategies.
- *Finally,* examining how audience members from different countries react to the image restoration messages would help further our knowledge of how effective these strategies are in recovering the damages caused by the crisis.

Thanks for your attention!

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