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Public Digital Diplomacy of China: A Study on Chinese Diplomats' Use of X in Nepal

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Abstract

In recent years, social media platform has been proven to be an effective medium for China to conduct its public digital diplomacy. After China's President Xi Jinping encouraged his diplomats to tell China's story well for promoting China's global influence, they are increasingly using social media as a tool of public digital diplomacy. In this regard, Chinese diplomats in Nepal are no exception and are actively using social media to disseminate information and interact with local people to advance China's interests. However, there is a research gap regarding the pattern, content, popularity, and effectiveness of their social media practices in Nepal. This study aims to fulfil this research gap by examining Chinese diplomats' public digital diplomacy practice in Nepal through the content analysis of their posts in X from the lens of Grunig's four models of global PR theory. Through the explanatory sequential mixed content analysis method, this study provides practical insights into the effective digital engagement of China's public diplomacy efforts in Nepal. This study finds that China's digital diplomacy could be strengthened by localizing content to better align with Nepal's socioeconomic context, thereby improving audience relevance and engagement. Nepali publics engage more with Nepal-related content.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy; China–Nepal relations; global PR theory; Chinese diplomats; social media; X; public diplomacy; digital diplomacy



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1. Introduction

As people are using social media to obtain the latest information from various parts of the world, news generated beyond traditional media has become more accessible to anyone, everywhere. Social media profiles are easily accessible to government agencies, and they carry the advantage of communication affordances for different purposes (Yuan et al., 2022). Governments are keenly aware of the power of social media to inform, educate, and influence their target audiences. With the development of the concept of public diplomacy in the digital era, social media like X (previously known as Twitter) has been increasingly employed by many countries as a more interactive tool for engaging the foreign public compared with traditional channels (Cull, 2011; Bjola et al., 2019). Despite X and Facebook being banned inside the country, China is also increasingly using these social media platforms to disseminate its messages to the foreign public. According to a study carried out by CASM Technology and BBC Monitoring in 2021, there were 691 X and Facebook

accounts run by China's foreign ministry and its diplomatic missions, ambassadors and consular, as well as Confucius Institutes (Miller, 2021).

Historical outcomes have shaped China's modern diplomacy and emphasized its soft power strategy (Palit, 2023). Contemporary power politics and the new media landscape have altered internal and external communication approaches. By embracing the new media, the Chinese state and diplomats have undoubtedly revolutionized contemporary political communication around the world. The state's willingness to embrace Western platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, despite their restriction within the country, reflects China's high priority to stay current with the changing communication landscape to influence the perceptions of the digital global community around the world to advance its interests.

As part of the Chinese government's strategy to 'tell China's stories well (讲好中国故事)', the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (MoFA, China), spokespersons and officials, Chinese embassies, and diplomats around the world are aggressively using all kinds of social media platforms and have been practicing public digital diplomacy. Chinese MoFA spokesperson Wang (2021) said in a regular press meet, "the primary goals of international communication, including the use of Twitter, are to eventually have a greater voice on the world stage and foster a favorable external environment in terms of public opinion." On that basis and in that spirit, China's missions and diplomats are using social media platforms as a tool of public diplomacy to engage the foreign audience. Chinese embassy and diplomats in Nepal are no exception in following their government's policy and strategies to practice public digital diplomacy.

In Nepal, a country with a young and digitally connected population, social media platforms (especially X and Facebook) offer a great opportunity for China to disseminate information about itself and to shape public perception in its favor. In recent years, the Chinese embassy and its diplomats have been actively conducting public digital diplomacy through X and Facebook. For the purpose of this study, the authors have focused on only one social media platform, X, and set the research problems, objectives, and significance accordingly.

The primary goals of international communication of China through social media platforms like X are to tell China's story well to the foreign public and foster a favorable external environment in terms of public opinion. Schliebs et al. (2021) studied China's Public Diplomacy Operations: Understanding Engagement and Inauthentic Amplification of PRC Diplomats on Facebook and Twitter. Similarly, Guo and Qin (2024) explored Wolf Warrior Spreads Superior: The narrative and effectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy behaviors on Twitter, and Miller (2021), China's public digital on Facebook and Twitter. Although previous studies have examined general trends in social media use by China for public digital diplomacy, there remains a gap in country-specific studies evaluating the effectiveness of such use. Chinese diplomats in Nepal have been actively using X and posting information about China. However, no prior study has examined the effectiveness of such social media use in Nepal or whether it serves as a tool of the two-way symmetrical model.

This study has two objectives: first, it examines the frequency of use of X by Chinese diplomats in Nepal and the types of content disseminated, identifying the emerging topics and themes and dissemination patterns. Second, it studies whether Chinese diplomats are utilizing X as a tool for the two-way symmetrical model to advance China's interests in Nepal. For this study, the authors have chosen the official X accounts of two Chinese diplomats: PRCAmbNepal and PRCSpoxNepal, respectively. The study used the X API tool to retrieve the X accounts' data between 1 January 2023, and 30 April 2024, and then conducted quantitative and qualitative content analysis through the lens of global PR theory.

This study shows that in Nepal, X has been an effective social media tool for public digital diplomacy in Nepal, with Nepal-focused content, particularly content posted in the Nepali language, receiving more audience engagement. Similarly, it suggests that effective public digital diplomacy could further strengthen state-to-state relations, state-to-people relations, and people-to-people relations between the countries. This study is useful to know about China's digital practices through social media and how Chinese diplomats are telling China's story to the foreign public.

This study is structured into six sections: Section 1 covers a review of existing academic work in relevant fields, encompassing the emerging importance of public diplomatic practices in the digital era, the evolution of social media, public diplomacy, China's public digital diplomacy, and the research gap in the field. Section 2 provides a theoretical background, and Section 3 gives a detailed explanation of the methodology and data sources utilized in this study. Section 4 analyzes the data and presents the findings. Section 5 concludes with implications of the research findings and assesses their validity.

2. Social Media and Public Diplomacy

Social media platforms facilitate the sharing of ideas and information through virtual networks. It keeps us up to date with the happenings around the world. A social media platform is a group of Internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These applications present tremendous networking opportunities, collaborating, sharing best practices, communicating, and connecting to a nearly unlimited pool of people with similar needs and desires (Patton, 2009). Social media is a tool for the rapid spread of information in limited or unlimited groups. A social media platform is not just a personal networking site that unveils the issues before the official correspondence takes place. X, Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, and TikTok have also become the means of disseminating the governments' positions, interests, and issues to the national and international public. These platforms allow for governments to engage directly with the public, shape narratives, and influence public opinion on various topics through interactive and real-time communication (Bowen, 2017).

Public diplomacy has typically been rooted and primarily researched in the area of international relations, with the categorization of diplomacy sorted into two types: traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy (Golan et al., 2015). Traditional diplomacy pertains to "conducting negotiations between governments", dealing with government-to-government negotiations or nation-to-nation negotiations, which are often performed by government leaders and appointed diplomats, such as ambassadors (Deutsch, 1996). On the other hand, public diplomacy refers to how diplomats, governments, individuals, and groups directly or indirectly impact public attitudes, which can further influence other governments and their foreign policy choices (Signitzer & Timothy, 1992). Public diplomacy is a term used to describe the efforts by nations to win support and a favorable image among the general public of other countries, usually by way of news management and carefully planned initiatives designed to foster positive impressions (McQuail, 2010). The term is also associated with being concerned with the management of relations between states and other actors (Barston, 1997). From these definitions, we can say that public relations conducted by the state and its diplomats is public diplomacy, which is also part of soft power. According to Nye (2008), the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). China is one of such examples that is benefitting from public diplomacy and soft power in recent times. China's soft power reflects the dualistic nature of the Chinese strategic culture: it has two components, a direct (zheng) and an

indirect (qi) dimension, which are not in opposition; rather, they are integrated (Zanardi, 2016). The Confucius Institutes and China's naval diplomacy are two relevant components of "soft power with Chinese characteristics". China's understanding of and approaches towards public diplomacy are quite different than those of other counterparts. From this unique setting, a more fundamental observation can be made, namely, China's willingness to engage and cooperate with foreigners in the context of public diplomacy (Huang, 2021). China is investing heavily in public diplomacy aimed at improving its image, guarding itself against international criticism, and advancing its domestic and international agenda.

Social media platforms are changing the space within which diplomacy unfolds. In contemporary diplomatic relations, the increasing use of social media has been the most effective tool for public diplomacy. Arguably, the perceived ease with which social media can be accessed as the low cost in comparison to other methods make it an attractive tool for many embassies and other organizations (Fisher, 2013). Social media has emerged as a pivotal element in the practice of public diplomacy, enabling nations and governmental entities to communicate with a global audience (Khusnu Perdani et al., 2024). The use of social media for public diplomacy has increasingly drawn the attention of public diplomacy professionals, observers, and political analysts. Foreign policy analysts have shown great interest and enthusiasm in exploring how to increase the efficiency of using social media for more effective public diplomacy. The adoption and impact of social media; the users' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors; and the way to integrate these technologies into the existing practice of public diplomacy need systematic analysis.

2.1. New Public Diplomacy and Digital Diplomacy

Traditionally, foreign policy and diplomacy were the domain of politicians, diplomats, and bureaucrats. But now, it has become a subject of public domain and an issue of open discussion. It has especially become public domain due to the growing digitization and rapid use of social media platforms in diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Digitization has paved the way for digital diplomacy, which is transforming the practice of public diplomacy. Bjola (2016) defines digital diplomacy as the use of information and communication technology by state and non-state actors for public diplomacy. In other words, digitalization of public diplomacy has been a long-term process in which digital technologies, digital publics, and digital initiatives have all impacted the conduct of public diplomacy (Manor, 2012). Digital diplomacy can be defined as the utilization of digital technologies by state and non-state actors to conduct diplomatic activities, communicate foreign policy objectives, engage with global audiences, and shape international perceptions (Bjola et al., 2019). From the above definitions, we can conclude that "digital diplomacy is a form of new public diplomacy that uses the internet, new information and communication technologies (ICT), and social media as means for strengthening diplomatic relations."

The increased influence of technology on diplomacy is known as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is the facilitation of the conduct of traditional diplomacy digitally in a much quicker way (Hocking et al., 2012; Bjola, 2018). So, within less than a decade since the launch of the first social media networks, 90 percent of all UN member states have established an X presence, and 88 percent have opened a Facebook account with a combined audience of 325 million and 255 million, respectively, comprising followers, likes, and users (Twiplomacy, 2016). Similarly, with the opportunity to engage with millions of people in real time and at minimal cost, Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), embassies, and diplomats have developed a constellation of new tools and methods in support of their activities. They range from the use of dedicated platforms for engaging with diaspora communities and foreign publics to communication with nationals in times of international crises and the development of consular applications for smartphones (Bjola, 2018).

Digital diplomacy has seen growing use of ICTs and social media platforms to achieve its foreign policy goals and practice public diplomacy (Manor, 2012). Thus, public diplomacy in the social media era has created a new landscape in diplomatic practices, also known as new public diplomacy and digital diplomacy. This landscape has become global and needs a comprehensive study of its interactive and participatory nature. Here, the study focuses on China's digital diplomacy practice to examine how its diplomats interact with the foreign public.

2.2. China's Public Digital Diplomacy

Officially plugged into the virtual community in 1994, China has a new media landscape that is unique for attempting to alter the social and political fabric of the country while reinforcing its state-level and public-level relations efforts. China's MoFA created its first social media account, the Public Diplomacy Office [外交小灵通] on Weibo, in April 2011 to "popularize the public diplomacy concept, introduce China's national conditions and ideas, and interpret China's policy and advocacy" for the domestic public (Huang, 2021). Having blocked Western social media platforms like X, Google, Facebook, and WhatsApp, China employs homegrown alternatives, namely Sina Weibo3 (wei means "micro" and bo means "blog" in Chinese and is similar to X; Sina Weibo, adopted since 2009, is the most popular social media platform in China), Baidu (Chinese parallel to Google), WeChat (which ensures a more intimate public engagement, similar to WhatsApp), and Renren (equivalent to FB). These local platforms have not only been used for shaping public diplomacy but have also shaped public opinion (PO—yulun dao xiang) on major global issues as well. An interesting dimension of China's social media landscape has been the embrace of local alternatives like Weibo and WeChat by more than 165 foreign governmental organizations, including foreign Embassies in China and even foreign political parties, to engage and interact with the Chinese netizens (Jiang, 2017).

Since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2013, social media have become a major state priority to achieve the goals of the CCP nationally and internationally. A month after that, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged diplomats to "tell the Chinese stories well"; in August 2013, the MoFA, China created its first diplomatic X account [ChinaEU Mission] to digitize its public diplomacy efforts in the European Union (Huang, 2021). Although President Xi had been using the phrase "tell China's stories well" multiple times since 2013, China's digitalization of global communication was slow. Beijing operated fewer than 20 active diplomatic X accounts as of late 2018 (Huang & Wang, 2019). In 2019, there was massive growth in the number of diplomatic accounts (from fewer than 20 to 80); on Weibo, the MoFA had also reinforced its presence by creating another official account, the Spokesperson Office [外交部发言人办公室] to demonstrate its diplomatic activities to domestic publics (Huang & Wang, 2021). China's Confucius Institutes, ambassadors, consular officials, and their foreign ministry have 691 X and Facebook accounts since 2021 (Miller, 2021). In 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged officials and diplomats to strengthen the country's international communication efforts, reemphasizing the need to "tell China's story well," promote a positive national image, and enhance China's soft power (Xinhua, 2021). Since then, digital diplomacy has become one of the major elements of Beijing's broad-ranging and well-resourced efforts to build influence and shape and control global public narratives about China. Beijing is pumping out social media content in more than 40 languages from accounts linked to its embassies, ambassadors, and consuls general around the world (Miller, 2021).

2.3. Nepal–China Relations and Public Diplomacy of China in Nepal

The relations between Nepal and the People's Republic of China have evolved into a stable and strategically significant partnership rooted in geography, history, diplomatic

relations and mutual understanding. The two countries formalized their relations on 1 August 1955, which marked the beginning of a relationship grounded in mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, 2026). Nepal is firmly committed to the “One China” policy and is also committed not to allowing its soil to be used for any inimical activities against China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, 2026). The China–Nepal relationship has withstood changes to the international situation and has been growing in a consistent, steady and healthy manner, which sets a model of peaceful coexistence between countries of different sizes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2009). China has its Embassy in Nepal and Nepal has its Embassy in Beijing; Consulates General in Lhasa, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou; and an Honorary Consul in Shanghai. Beyond the traditional and bilateral relations, China and Nepal have been involved in public diplomacy and digital diplomacy to influence public perception and strengthen soft power. As Nye (2008) said, “Public diplomacy is not a public relations campaign; instead, it involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies.” Similarly, social media facilitates cultural exchanges, promotes people-to-people connections, and contributes to the development of bilateral relations between Nepal and China in the modern era (Paudel & Shrestha, 2018).

The above literature shows that the graph of digital diplomatic practice by the MoFA of China, diplomatic missions, diplomats, and Chinese media is aggressively increasing. The official accounts on Facebook and X are growing in number, and it helps to make direct engagement with global audiences. There is some research about China’s public diplomacy on social media, China’s public diplomacy on Twitter and Facebook (Miller, 2021), which has worked to build a new way to study China’s public diplomacy on Facebook and Twitter, as well as China’s Digital Public Diplomacy towards Africa: Actors, Message and Audiences (Madrid-Morales, 2017) and Digital diplomacy with Chinese characteristics: Evolving narratives, strategies and global impact (Tran Sautédé & Vincent Mo, 2025).

The Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal and its diplomats are using social media to inform the Nepali public about China. However, there is no scholarly research about the public digital diplomacy practice of Chinese diplomats in Nepal, although China is the only neighboring country other than India. Thus, this research seeks to address that gap by studying the use of X by Chinese diplomats in Nepal. It also aims to provide insights into how Chinese diplomats construct and disseminate China’s stories in a country-specific context for public engagement and for advancing their interests.

2.4. Four Models of Public Relations

The pioneers of public relations theory, Grunig and Hunt (1984), developed four models of public relations: the press agency/publicity model, public information model, two-way asymmetrical model, and two-way symmetrical model. They have summarized four models as follows:

Press Agency/Publicity Model: Focuses on gaining public attention through media coverage, often using one-way communication to promote a specific agenda.

Public information model: Aims to provide accurate information to the public, emphasizing transparency and factual reporting without manipulation.

Two-way Asymmetrical Model: Involves two-way communication but is primarily focused on persuading the audience to accept the organization’s point of view, often using research to inform strategies.

Two-way Symmetrical Model: Encourages mutual understanding and dialogue between the organization and its audience, aiming for a balanced exchange of information.

According to Grunig (1993), organizations typically practice different models for programs aimed at different publics. According to them, all four models could be practiced

through mediated or interpersonal communication. Grunig et al. (2002) developed the excellence theory of public relations after 15 years comprehensive study, which specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective, how it is organized and managed when it contributes most to organizational effectiveness, the conditions in organizations and their environments that make organizations more effective, and how the monetary value of public relations can be determined. The excellence study also identified characteristics of effective public relations in four major categories, which are empowerment of public relations, communicator roles, organization of communication function, and public relations model (Grunig et al., 2002).

2.5. Global PR Theory

Long before the term “social media” was coined, Grunig (1993) advocated a methodology of public relations that puts communication with the “public” first, above the tactics of media relations. Grunig (1993) suggests that public diplomacy uses public relations strategies in diplomatic communication with the foreign public. In his 2009 paper, “Paradigms of Global Public Relations in an Age of Digitalization”, Grunig argues that social media has the potential to make the practice of PR more “global strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical and socially responsible” (Grunig, 2009). As an extension of the four models of PR theory and excellence theory, global public relations theory provides generic principles that are understood in the same way around the world and can be operated effectively in most nations (Jiang, 2017).

Global public relations theory suggests that practice in different countries should be different based on culture, political system, economic system, media system, level of economic development, and extent and nature of activism in a certain country (Grunig, 2009). Philips (2009) constructed a model of digital communication tools to show how they fit into four models of public relations. He called these models propaganda, information, one-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. Grunig (2009) argued that digital media would seem to force communicators toward the two-way symmetrical model, but Philips argued that digital tools exist for each of the models. As Philips (cited in Grunig, 2009) suggested, static websites can be used to implement the propaganda model; frequently updated websites, the information model; blogs with comment enabled the one-way asymmetrical model; and open corporate social media sites like Twitter (now X), and interactive online community contribution, the two-way symmetrical model. Most researchers have applied four models of PR theory, excellence theory, and even global PR theory to test organizational PR practices through social media. In this study, the authors have tested the public relations practice of a country to its global public through social media.

According to Grunig (2009), public relations practitioners first used online media as an information dump in the same way that they used traditional media, newsletters, and publications. New digital media have dialogical, interactive, relational, and global properties that make them perfectly suited for a strategic management paradigm of public relations—properties that one would think inspires public relations practitioners to abandon their traditional one-way, message-oriented, asymmetrical, and ethnocentric paradigm of practice (Grunig, 2009). This study seeks to find whether PR practices of a country follow a professional way and proper communication management to reach the global public. Chinese diplomats are using X, whether traditionally or utilizing it as a two-way symmetrical model in Nepal. For that purpose, this research addresses the following two questions:

RQ1: How frequently do Chinese diplomats based in Nepal use X, and what types of information do they disseminate on the social media platform to Nepali audiences?

RQ2: How effective is the Chinese diplomats’ use of X in presenting China’s stories and fostering two-way engagement with Nepali audiences?

3. Methodology

This research has used an explanatory sequential mixed design, considering the limitations of qualitative and quantitative methods. An explanatory sequential mixed method is a design in which the researcher first begins by exploring quantitative data, followed by qualitative data (Creswell et al., 2003; Othman et al., 2020). This design is used in this study to further explain a set of quantitative data with additional qualitative information.

This study has gathered tweets from two official X accounts of the Chinese Ambassador (PRCAmbNepal) and Chinese Embassy Spokesperson (PRCSPoxNepal) in Nepal. The reasons to choose X accounts are as follows: First, these two accounts are the official online channels to disseminate information about China in relation to Nepal. Second, X is the major social media platform where the Chinese side practices its public digital diplomacy primarily. This is because of the presence of public opinion-shaping audiences such as “politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, academics, journalists, social activists and students who are more active in X” (Acharya, 2019).

Data collection for the study covers the time from January 2023 (the beginning of the term of Ambassador Chen Song) to April 2024 (the time when this study began). The study is limited to 72,542 followers of PRCAmbNepal and 2922 from PRCSPoxNepal. As the audience can access and engage with these accounts without necessarily following them, the number of followers does not equate to a strong connection and strong influence with the audience. An account might have a million followers and say nothing; even though a post gets retweeted 1000 times per day, it does not indicate whether those followers are supporting or against the user’s communication goals (Jiang, 2017). Similarly, engagement in Nepal can include a significant diaspora and non-Nepali audience, too.

This study utilizes the X API tool to collect data, and then a chart is made in Excel to present the collected data. X API provides programmatic access to X’s public conversation, allowing for users to read posts, publish content, manage users, and analyze trends—all through modern REST endpoints with flexible pay-per-usage pricing (X Developer Platform, 2023). The total number of tweets analyzed is 1216, of which 439 tweets are from PRCSPoxNepal and 777 from PRCAmbNepal. Following the explanatory sequential mixed design, this research analyzes all collected X data by separating them based on followers, activity (view, favorite, and reply), language, and category (original tweet, retweet, post with URL). Five themes were derived inductively through iterative coding of sampled posts, and a codebook was made. After that, this study sampled the top five posts of two accounts based on views to analyze the public engagement. Then, this research analyzed replies of five themes quantitatively and qualitatively to find the interactivity of the posts.

To find themes, data were iteratively coded into different categories and inductively incorporated into five themes on Nepal–China affairs, China’s domestic issues, China’s foreign affairs, Nepali domestic issues and other issues (see Table 1). In the Nepal–China affairs theme, more than 32 topics, like the Nepal–China border, trading points, Nepal–China trade, visits and meetings between leaders and diplomats of the two countries, development assistance, economic activities, Nepal’s commitment to the One China principle, visa policy, social activities, Chinese events in Nepal, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Nepal, Nepal–China Railway, education scholarship, cultural exchange, Chinese language, people-to-people, etc., were identified. In the China’s domestic issues theme, we identified 23 corresponding topics, like the Communist Party of China, Chinese domestic policy, Chinese national day, culture, Chinese festivals, economy, innovation, development, national security, technology, energy, transportation, education, etc. Similarly, the China’s foreign affairs theme identified 20 concerns, like China’s foreign policy, neighboring policy, the state visit of Xi Jinping, China and Asia, Tibet, Hong Kong, Taiwan issues, China and other countries, China and international organizations, international trade, the

South China Sea, COVID-19 impacts, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), vaccine support and trade, economic diplomacy, technology, etc. In Nepali domestic issues, nine concerns were identified: Nepali politics, Nepali festivals, Nepali domestic cultural events, disaster and tragedy, governance, Nepali events, Nepali people, and other Nepali activities. Lastly, in other issues, nine corresponding topics of India, USA, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, Europe, Russia, Ukraine, issues of the Global South, and other posts are coded.

Table 1. Coding sample.

Date	AC	Tweet	Code	Theme
30 April 2024	1	#ChinaInAction Siddababa Tunnel Project officially started drilling today. Congratulations to CSCEC. With total length of 2.59 km, connecting southern cities of Nepal and Pokhara, its completion will significantly reduce the life risk of landslide and falling rocks, and make...	Chinese Projects in Nepal	1
11 April 2024	1	2023 is the first year of fully implementing the guiding principles set forth by the 20th National Congress of the CPC. The Congress has outlined top-level plans for China's diplomacy, identified our missions and tasks, and made strategic arrangements to that end. #ChinaDiplomacy	CPC Foreign Policy	3
9 April 2024	1	A beautiful morning in Beijing. Happy weekend!	Tourism	2
2 April 2024	1	China is willing to import more quality agricultural products from Nepal and further expand and deepen China-Nepal trade cooperation.	Nepal-China Trade	1
20 March 2024	1	Chinese mainland will continue to promote economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation across the Strait on the basis of the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus: Premier Li Qiang.	Communist Party of China	2
10 March 2024	1	Congratulations on the successful conclusion of #the15thBRICSSummit, and welcome #SaudiArabia, #Egypt, #theUnitedArabEmirates, #Argentina, #Iran, and #Ethiopia to officially become new members of the #BRICS family! Let's join hands to make the world a better place for all!	China and the International Organization	3
14 February 2024	1	Deeply impressed by the collections of the National Museum of Nepal! Will work with Nepal to strengthen cultural exchanges and better preserve the Nepali national treasures.	Nepali domestic cultural events	4
13 February 2024	1	FM Wang stressed that to stabilize and improve the relationship, the two sides need to view each other's strategic intentions objectively, perceive the elements of competition in bilateral interactions correctly, and clarify the concept of national security.	China and other Country	3
27 April 2023	1	On 26 April, President Xi spoke with President Zelenskyy on the phone. President Xi said, on Ukraine crisis, dialogue and negotiation are only viable way forward. China will continue to facilitate talks for peace and make its efforts for early ceasefire and restoration of peace.	Russia-Ukraine War	5
21 February 2023	2	祝广大藏胞藏历水兔新年健康幸福!扎西德勒! LOSAR TASHI DELEK!All the best wishes to our friends. ཕྱག་རྒྱ་ཆེན་པོ་བོད་རིགས་སྤྱན་ནང་ནས་ལ་རྒྱ་མོ་ཡིས་འཛིན་གནས་ལ་ཁོ་གསུང་ཚེས་ལ་བཟུང་བའི་ལགས་གྲུ།	Nepali Culture	4

Accounts: PRCambNepal = 1; PRCsoxNepal = 2 (Themes: Nepal-China Affairs = 1; China's Domestic Issues = 2; China's Foreign Affairs = 3; Nepal's Domestic Issues = 4; Other Issues = 5).

For the inter-coder reliability of content analysis, 10 percent of posts were selected randomly from the collected data, and two coders worked on a reliability test. For that, we used Holsti’s (1969) simple agreement formula. The reliability score of the theme is 0.91.

4. China’s Public Digital Diplomacy in Nepal

Following the Chinese government’s strategy to “tell China’s stories well,” the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu is also active on social media platforms, mainly on X and Facebook, to practice public digital diplomacy. This study is limited to two official X accounts of the Chinese Ambassador and the Chinese Embassy Spokesperson in Nepal, because X is the predominant platform for conducting content analysis in social media (Møller et al., 2024). Similarly, Chinese diplomats practice their public digital diplomacy mostly on X. These two are the official accounts of Chinese diplomats in Nepal, and the presence of Nepali public opinion-shaping audiences such as “politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, academics, journalists, social activists, and students who are more active in X” (Acharya, 2019). Regarding Chinese diplomats in Nepal, the Ambassador to Nepal (Hou Yanqi at that time) joined in June 2019 (@PRCAmbNepal), and the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Nepal (known official account of the embassy) joined X in December 2021 (@PRCSPOXNepal) (see Table 2).

Table 2. X accounts and followers (30 April 2024).

X Accounts	Account Name	Created	Followers
PRCSPOXNepal	China Embassy Nepal	December 2021	2922
PRCAmbNepal	Ambassador Chen Song	June 2019	72,542

China strives to deepen its ties with neighboring countries like Nepal through various cooperations. Nepal is the South Asian neighbor of China, and the two countries share a 1414 km border. It is part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and China sees Nepal as a possible gateway to India and the wider South Asia region. Besides that, Nepal is a country that shares its border with Tibet of China, which has major strategic and international implications. This dynamic makes Nepal an important neighbor in South Asia for China to ensure a stable security environment internally and in China’s periphery. Relations between China and Nepal have been marked by friendliness, understanding, mutual support, cooperation, and respect for each other’s sensitivities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal, 2026). Both countries prioritize each other with mutual respect and win–win cooperation, and Nepal resolutely supports the One China policy. In order to continue these positive relations between China and Nepal, public digital diplomacy has emerged as an important tool for China.

This study analyzed China’s public digital diplomatic practice in Nepal. As the Chinese embassy and diplomats share the same content on both X and Facebook, the study chose their accounts on X. The data collected through two X accounts were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an Excel calculation tool. During the study period of sixteen months (1 January 2023, to 30 April 2024), there were 1216 total tweets posted by two accounts. The PRCAmbNepal account has 777 posts, whereas the PRCSPOXNepal account has 439 for the selected period (see Table 3). From this figure, the daily average tweets of the two accounts are 2.5, whereas the total views of 1216 tweets are 4,549,647, and the average view of a post is 3096.85. Similarly, the total retweets are 5086, and the average retweets per total post are 4.18. The favorite count of the total tweets is 62,451, and the average number of favorites is 51.35; there are 3690 replies to all tweets, which is 3.03 on average per tweet. The data shows that post frequency is regular, but engagement is less for Chinese X accounts in Nepal.

Table 3. Activities of Selected X Accounts.

Activities	PRCSPOXNepal	PRCAmbNepal	Total
Tweets	439	777	1216
Average Tweets in a Day	0.9	1.6	2.5
Views	3,41,432	42,08,215	4,549,647
Average Views	777.74	5416	3096.85
Retweets	384	4702	5086
Average Retweets	0.87	6.05	4.18
Favorites	2961	59,490	62,451
Average Favorites	6.74	76.56	51.35
Replies	121	3569	3690
Average Replies	0.27	4.59	3.03

Source: Data compiled by the authors using X API and calculated in Excel, accurate as of May 2024.

The study of the collected posts shows that the Chinese X accounts predominantly posted their contents in English, followed by Nepali. The number of posts published in English is 1069, which accounts for 88 percent of the total posts, whereas only 95 posts are in the Nepali language. Likewise, other remaining published posts are in Chinese, or a combination of Chinese and Nepali or English and Nepali (see Table 4).

Table 4. Language use in selected posts.

Accounts	English	Nepali	Other
PRCSPOXNepal	389	34	15
PRCAmbNepal	680	61	37
Total	1069	95	52

Source: Data compiled by the author using X API and calculated in Excel is accurate as of May 2024.

This study has categorized posts into original posts, retweets, and posts with other URLs. This was carried out to find out whether those X accounts posted content created by themselves or shared the content produced by other sources or users. This study finds mixed results from two accounts (see Figure 1). The authors found that the Ambassador's X account published original posts rather than sharing posts published by others' accounts, whereas the Embassy Spokesperson's account tends to repost tweets published by the Spokespersons of MoFA, China, government-controlled media such as Xinhua, CGTN, People's Daily, etc. The Ambassador account has 605 original posts and 116 retweets and has shared 56 URLs out of 777 posts. The embassy account has 126 original posts and 246 retweets and has shared 66 URLs from other accounts. The ambassador has tweeted about Nepal–China-related activities and the embassy's daily activities as original posts and retweeted China's domestic and foreign affairs-related activities. The embassy spokesperson's account has 151 retweets from the Spokesperson of MoFA, China's account, i.e., for @SpokespersonCHN, 46 are from PRCAmbNepal's accounts, 33 are from @XHnews, nine are from @CGTNofficial, and nine are from other accounts.

This research has coded posts and incorporated them into five themes. This is discussed in Section 3. The coverage theme patterns of both accounts are similar. So, this study analyzes the frequency of themes in one figure (see Figure 2). According to the defined themes, Nepal–China affairs-related posts are the highest (614 out of 1216 posts) in number. Similarly, 217 are about China's domestic issues, 301 posts are related to China's foreign affairs, 45 are related to Nepal's domestic issues, and 41 posts are about other issues.

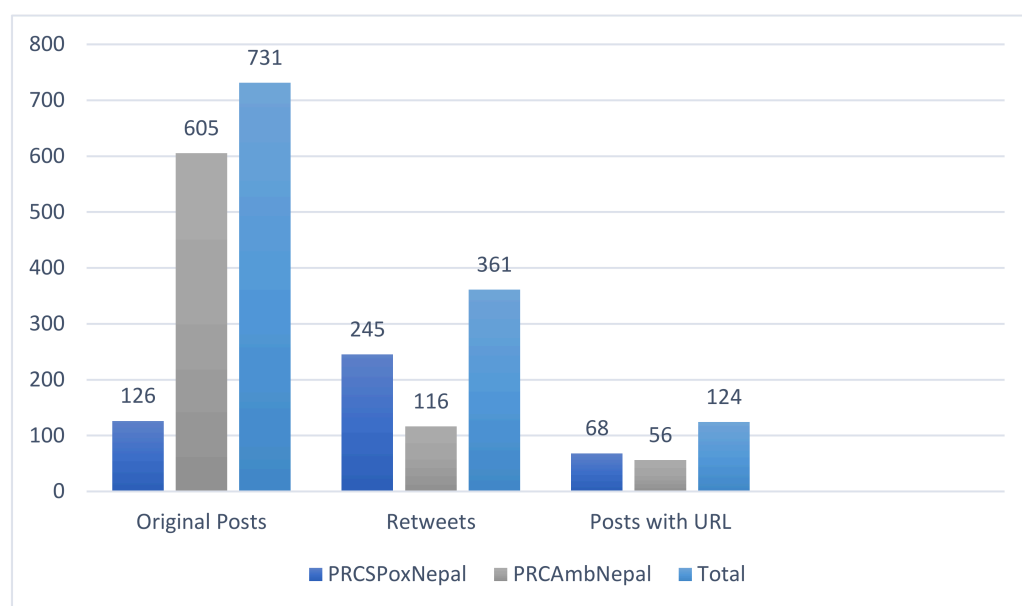


Figure 1. Post category. Source: Data compiled by the author using X API and calculated in Excel.

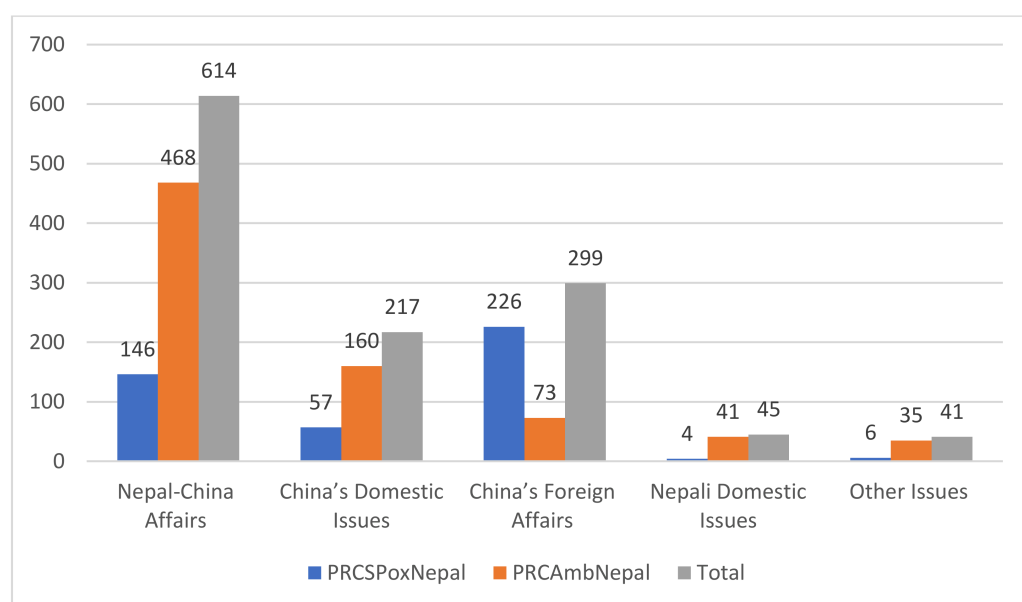


Figure 2. This is calculated according to the themes of the posts. Source: Data compiled by the author using X API and calculated in Excel, accurate as of May 2024.

This research illustrates that posts about Nepal–China affairs that highlight China’s assistance to Nepal in various aspects—including infrastructure, governance, education, health, agriculture, social, and cultural development—receive the most coverage. Similarly, posts about the Embassy’s programs, diplomatic activities between the two governments, activities of Chinese diplomats, cultural events, and economic activities, like trade and tourism, are focused more. After Nepal–China-related issues, China’s foreign affairs activities get more coverage, including posts about China’s foreign policy, neighborhood policy, Xi Jinping visits and speeches, issues related to China and Asia, Tibet, Hong Kong, Taiwan, issues between China and other countries; China international organization, international trade, the South China Sea, COVID-19 impacts, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)-related issues. When it comes to highlighting China’s domestic issues, the diplomatic bodies are found to be highlighting China’s

technological and innovative prowess, development, people-centered governance, activities of the CPC, Chinese culture, and positive sides of the economy. Similarly, posts about the lifestyle of Chinese people, their success stories, sports, and cultural diversity are also featured regularly. Regarding China's foreign affairs and domestic issues, the diplomatic missions retweeted posts published by accounts of the Spokesperson of the MoFA, China, and other Chinese organizations, such as Xinhua, CGTN, People's Daily, etc. However, such retweets only appear on feeds but do not receive any views, favorites, replies, or retweets directly. Another notable finding was that although the two diplomatic mission accounts did not post much about Nepali domestic issues or in the Nepali language, the few posts that did so, in fact, received comparatively higher popularity and engagement from the Nepali public. In other posts, international issues, technology, innovation, and competition with other countries are discussed. Moreover, the data indicates that posts that include images and video received more viewership than text-only posts.

If we compare the top five popular posts on both X accounts according to viewership, posts in the Nepali language actually have more engagements compared to the English ones (see Table 5), although the English posts constitute over 88 percent of the total posts. This shows that the Chinese public digital diplomacy might be more effective if the official social media accounts of diplomatic missions prioritize posts in the language of that particular country.

As Grunig's (2009) Global PR theory suggests, "practice in different countries should be different based on culture, political system, economic system, media system, level of economic development, and extent and nature of activism in a certain country". This study also suggests that telling China's stories in the local language can draw more engagement from the foreign public, helping build a positive perception of China. Besides the Nepali language, posts related to Nepal show more viewership and user engagement regardless of the language they are published in.

Social media used to its full potential can provide public relations with a more two-way and interactive, global, strategic, and socially responsible approach (Grunig, 2009). However, the practice of diplomatic missions' two-way communication on social media has illustrated the difficulties in fulfilling these goals (Jiang, 2017). As this research has focused on public digital diplomacy of China in Nepal, the authors have analyzed the frequency of replies in posts from each theme to know engagement and interactivity of the Nepali public (see Table 6). From the frequency analysis, posts related to Nepal-China affairs and Nepal's domestic issues have more engagement and interaction. Among the collected data, Nepal-China affairs-related posts have an average of 4.46 replies, and Nepali domestic issues have 5.688 average replies. Similarly, China's foreign affairs issues have 2.24, China's domestic issues have just 0.247 replies, and other issues have 3.24 replies on average. However, to know whether those interactions are two-way asymmetrical or symmetrical, research should look into interaction between diplomats and the public. For this purpose, researchers have checked the replies of the public in selected posts and found very rare responses to the replies by Chinese diplomats. Most of the posts do not have any response from diplomats (see Figure 3), and only a few replies are not two-way symmetrical communication. Two-way symmetrical communication encourages mutual understanding and dialogue between the organization (here diplomats) and its audience (Nepali public), aiming for a balanced exchange of information (Grunig, 1993). So, this research finds that the use of X by Chinese diplomats in Nepal is also considered asymmetrical, as for public diplomacy, the main task is to change the target public instead of the embassies themselves.

Table 5. The top five posts of two X accounts according to views.

Accounts	Posts	Views	Favorites	Retweets	Post Date
Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy (2023b)	Confucius Institute of Tribhuvan University... covering life, landscape and culture etc. *	66,546	94	27	3 January 2023
Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy (2023d)	Chinese Government Scholarship...more information. *	13,935	106	27	13 February 2023
Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy (2023e)	Counsellor Xie Yu attended the inauguration ceremony of Himalayan Airlines...our cooperation on all fronts! #AirSilkRoads.	11,634	27	2	3 December 2023
Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy (2023a)	CDA Wang Xin: Pokhara International Airport... common development and prosperity. *	11,037	123	2	1 January 2023
Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy (2023c)	On January 31, H.E. Mr. Chen Song presented his appointment letter...on relations between China and SAARC.	10,286	36	10	31 January 2023
Ambassador Chen (2023b)	It's been a privilege and a great honor for me to serve as the... I am impressed by people's kindness and warmth.	169,271	1621	82	8 January 2023
Ambassador Chen (2023a)	The China-Nepal friendship lives forever across the Himalayas.	89,616	1208	65	8 January 2023
Ambassador Chen (2023c)	Can you find it? Huawei phone.	81,608	445	65	12 February 2023
Ambassador Chen (2023d)	China as a first emergency response...more help is on the way.	78,948	1006	91	4 November 2023
Ambassador Chen (2024)	Dance with Pokhara.	77,182	406	32	12 March 2024

* Translated from Nepali Language.

Table 6. Replies on each theme.

Post Theme	Posts	Replies	Average Replies
Nepal–China Affairs	614	2738	4.46
China's Foreign Affairs	217	486	2.24
China's Domestic Issues	299	77	0.257
Nepali Domestic Issues	45	256	5.688
Other Issues	41	133	3.24
Total	1216	3690	3.03

Source: Data compiled by the authors using X API and calculated in Excel, accurate as of May 2024.

Due to limitations in the dataset, it is challenging to measure and determine the actual effects and interactivity. But this research does show that content related to Nepal–China

affairs tends to have strong user engagement, more posts, views, favorites, retweets, and replies. Similarly, posts in the Nepali language show more user engagement for both accounts. Consistent with prior research, this study finds that China's public digital diplomacy is increasingly active and effective, but user engagement remains two-way asymmetrical.



Figure 3. Screenshot of PRCAmbNepal's post and replies from the public, which are in Nepali language. **Post Translation:** As its first emergency response, China will provide approximately 100 million Nepali rupees worth of materials, including tents and blankets, to the earthquake-affected areas. This assistance will be provided by China's South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve. All these materials will arrive within one or two days. Additional assistance is on the way (Ambassador Chen, 2023d).

In summary, this research finds that both X accounts are active, give regular updates, and disseminate China's information. Second, both accounts tell China's stories to the Nepali public. Third, the selected data analyzed have received favorites, likes, replies, and shares from the public, but diplomats rarely respond to the Nepali public. So, from this, we can say that Chinese diplomats are actively using social media and frequently posting their activities on social media. But their activities and interactivity are more two-way asymmetrical rather than symmetrical. The Chinese diplomats still need to do more to fully adopt the two-way symmetrical model in their public digital diplomacy.

5. Conclusions

With China prioritizing public digital diplomacy practices, its diplomatic missions and diplomats have used social media tools in foreign countries to communicate about China's stance on global affairs, foreign policies, development, and other diplomatic activities and create a positive image of itself among the foreign public. Like in other countries, Chinese diplomats use social media to conduct their public digital diplomacy in Nepal. However, little research has been carried out on how they utilize social media for their digital diplomacy in Nepal and what their focus areas are. Since Nepal is an important neighbor that shares a border with Tibet, a region where China prioritizes territorial security, understanding how China conducts public digital diplomacy in Nepal could provide insights into its diplomatic priorities and how it works to shape its public image in a country-specific context. Thus, this research seeks to study China's public digital diplomacy in Nepal. By studying social media activities of two official X accounts run by the Chinese ambassador and the Chinese embassy's spokesperson and applying the explana-

tory sequential mix analysis, this research has found that the digital diplomacy for shaping public opinion in favor of China is a priority of its diplomatic mission, as made evident by its active presence on X. Regarding their active presence, posts published in Nepali language, as well as posts about China–Nepal-related affairs regardless of the language in which the posts were published, get higher viewership as well as user engagement through likes, comments, and retweets. However, the study shows that posts about China-specific issues that seek to promote its positive international image as a modern, rapidly developing country received less engagement among the Nepali X users.

Global public relations theory suggests that practices in different countries should be different based on the culture, political system, economic system, media system, level of economic development, and extent and nature of activism in a certain country (Grunig, 2009). Consistent with this theory, our data show that Nepal-related posts receive higher viewership and engagement than China-specific posts. Yet such locally oriented content constitutes a relatively small proportion compared to China-specific posts by Chinese diplomats in Nepal. This imbalance has potentially constrained the effectiveness of China's public digital diplomacy.

From the above analysis, it can be stated that X can be employed effectively in engaging with foreign citizens, which is one of the goals of public diplomacy. Similarly, interactive engagement has been emphasized in using social media like X for public relations work. But it is hard to say that social media makes communication fully two-way symmetrical, interactive, and dialogical in the case of diplomatic practice. Thus, our finding suggests that diplomats and diplomatic missions could enhance the effectiveness of public digital diplomacy by customizing their own country-related social media content to the local context that resonates more strongly with the host country's social, cultural, economic, and developmental priorities. Diplomats should be more interactive with the foreign public through social media like X to be strategic and two-way symmetrical. Similarly, use of local languages could improve social media impact, thereby contributing to the shaping of public opinion in favor of China and strengthening state-to-state relations, state-to-people relations, and people-to-people relations between the two countries.

Finally, this study is constrained by a limited dataset, which only focused on one social media platform X. Further research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's public digital diplomacy by drawing on larger datasets and multiple social media platforms. Similarly, conducting a comparative study of Chinese diplomatic missions with those of other major powers such as the United States, India, and the United Kingdom would better help comprehend China's strategy within the broader international context and generate deeper insights into similarities, differences and relative effectiveness.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki due to the nature of the study, which involved content analysis of publicly accessible posts from two X (formerly Twitter) accounts of Chinese diplomats in Nepal. Although this study involves human-related data, all information analyzed was obtained from publicly available sources and did not include any personal or sensitive data. Therefore, in line

with standard research ethics guidelines, this study was considered exempt from formal review and approval by an institutional ethics committee.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study were publicly available in X accounts of the Chinese mission in Nepal, which were extracted through the X API tool.

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