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Digital diplomacy in GCC countries: Strategic communication of Western embassies on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon online communication research, this study identifies six effective communication strategies for social media-based diplomacy on Twitter: interactive, personalized, positive, relevant, and transparent communication among a broad network of stakeholders. By using an extensive mix-method design (i.e., combining a manual content and automated network analyses, $N = 4438$ tweets), this research examines to what extent these communication strategies are adopted on Twitter by Western embassies active in countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council. We found that embassies are not utilizing social media to its full potential. Although embassies are transparent, use positive sentiment in their online communication and post relevant information to their stakeholders, they hardly engage in direct interactive and personal communication, and only reach out to a limited group of stakeholders. We recommend embassies to put more emphasis on two-way interactive communication with a vast variety of stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Social media opens windows of opportunities for public diplomacy as it enables engagement with the general public and specific audiences across national borders (cf. Glassman, 2008; Vergeer & Hermans, 2013; Wigand, 2010). Hence, public officials can make use of social media to communicate "directly, continuously and unrestrictedly with the audience" (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van't Haar, 2013, p.708), avoiding financial and bureaucratic obstacles.

Not surprisingly, governments encourage their public affairs practitioners and organizations alike to implement social media within their communication practices (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013; Righton, 2013). Nonetheless, there seems to be a gap between the broad vision to use social media and the actual implementation within governmental institutions (Criado et al., 2013; Meijer & Thaens, 2010). In particular, governmental representatives were found to be reluctant in using social media for interacting with stakeholders (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Graham et al., 2013; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Small, 2011). In an interview study, for example, embassy officers from the Arab League stated that new media represent a challenge to them, but at the same time offer new possibilities for public diplomacy (Khakimova, 2013).

Despite the growing interest in social media-based diplomacy and the increasing scholarly attention in the field, "the study of social media in government is still at its infancy" (Criado et al., 2013, p. 321) and public relations literature has failed to consider the role of social media in digital diplomacy up until recently (for a similar discussion see Waters & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, existing studies are primarily case studies or interview studies, investigating the reasons for publics to interact with foreign governments (Khakimova, 2013, 2015), or the efforts (messages, strategies) governments employ to reach out to publics (Zhong & Lu, 2013); but systematic quantitative empirical research on public diplomacy is lacking (e.g., Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009). In turn, we know little about how digital diplomacy is implemented on Twitter, with whom embassies and ambassadors engage online, or whether the information spread is actually in line with what their stakeholder groups desire.

In contrast, a growing body of communication research in other domains (e.g., political communication or advertising) offers theoretical foundation for investigating social media-based diplomacy. This study suggests that social media are powerful channels for digital diplomacy, but only when advantages and opportunities are seized, such as adopting communication strategies that fit and are tailored to the social medium context. Drawing upon theoretical and empirical insights from online communication research, this study identifies six effective communication strategies for social media-based diplomacy and examines to what degree these strategies are adopted on Twitter by Western diplomacy institutions based in countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). More specifically, this study poses the research question:

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To what extent do GCC-based Western embassies/ambassadors adopt effective communication strategies on Twitter?

To answer this question, we will examine the micro-blogging platform Twitter using an extensive mixed-method design (i.e., combining human content and automated network analyses). Based on previous research, we examine Twitter because of its popularity among politicians and diplomatic actors (i.e., twitplomacy), governmental representatives and public affairs professionals (Waters & Williams, 2011), its quality to facilitate direct (interactive) communication, and its accessibility to analyze communication strategies, as well as networks. As such, this study examines 4,438 tweets from four Western countries (US, UK, Netherlands and Sweden) that communicate on Twitter in GCC countries (i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). By focusing particularly on those countries, this article provides an opportunity to advance our understanding of the implementation of social media by embassies and ambassadors in countries where social media has recently played a crucial role (e.g., Arabic spring, The Green Wave; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). Furthermore, GCC countries belong to the fastest growing economies in the world (IMF, 2012), making engaging with stakeholders even more relevant for diplomacy institutions.

Subsuming, this study serves as an exploratory step in charting how embassies and ambassadors make use of social media for diplomatic purposes. Moreover, we add to the current literature by giving theoretical and empirical insights to the communication strategies used on social media by Western embassies in GCC countries. Although no precise *how-to formula* will emerge from this study, recommendations for improving social media-based diplomacy can be articulated. Eventually, this study offers a valuable baseline for future investigations on social media usage by governmental institutions.

2. Theory

2.1. Linking social media to public diplomacy: twitplomacy

Public diplomacy is defined as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). Thus, one responsibility of embassies and consulate staff is to interact with host governments, local businesses and nongovernmental organizations, the media, educational institutions, and private citizens (Rose, 2007) to promote and represent the home country in the host country (e.g., to stimulate export). Furthermore, one of the core activities of embassies is to collaborate with a diverse range of international organizations, such as other embassies, consulates, or public offices, thereby establishing networks and maintaining relationships with and between a diverse range of stakeholders in the country where the embassy is based (Dinnie et al., 2010; Waters & Williams, 2011).

Social networking sites (SNSs) are well suited for these purposes, as SNSs provide ambassadors and embassies with communication opportunities not available in the mainstream media. As such, SNSs can enable direct connectivity and interaction between stakeholders and individuals at low costs and efforts (see Waters & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, citizens do not only use social media to come in contact with each other, but they also engage with businesses and governmental organizations, for example, by asking specific questions or lodge complaints on Twitter. Hence, social media such as Twitter facilitate the core activities of embassies in multiple ways, creating and fostering relationships and networks (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

In fact, a new form of public diplomacy has emerged in recent years, called "twitplomacy" (Su & Xu, 2015). Being engaged in twitplomacy refers to actors such as the government, state, NGOs, or individuals who communicate on Internet platforms (e.g., Twitter). In doing so, the aim is to form their images, releasing diplomatic news and information, articulating opinions and emotions in order to sustain and develop diplomacy and foreign affairs (Su & Xu, 2015). Su and Xu (2015) distinguish three types of twitplomacy: The first form deals with official micro-blogging hosted by a diplomatic organization of the government of a state (e.g., the UK embassy in Qatar). The second type refers to micro-blogging hold by international government organizations (e.g., UN or EU). And the last form of twitplomacy covers micro blogs, which are maintained by government individuals, such as the Twitter account by the Dutch ambassador in Riyadh, Saudi-Arabia. Correspondingly, our study will investigate the first and third type of twitplomacy in GCC countries, Western embassies as institutions and Western ambassadors as individuals active on Twitter.

2.2. Communication strategies in digital diplomacy

Online communication research suggests that social media are powerful channels for digital diplomacy (e.g., Zhang, 2013), and particularly suitable to come in contact with diverse stakeholders (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). However, only if social media is used in an engaging way: using an appealing communication style that suits the media environment.

In the following, we will consult a diverse range of computer-mediated communication theories and empirical findings to identify six effective social media strategies on Twitter, which will guide us in answering the above posed research question. Additionally, subordinated research questions will be formulated to investigate social media usage (on Twitter) in the diplomacy context in more detail. In particular, it is examined to what extent communication by Western embassies on Twitter is interactive, personalized, positive, provides relevant information, is transparent, and represents a dialogue with relevant stakeholder groups.

2.2.1. Interactive communication

The first communication strategy that emerged from the literature review is engaging in interactive communication (reciprocal or two-way communication between online users; Liu & Shrum, 2002). Using an interactive style of communication on Twitter is effective as it helps to get stakeholders engaged. Previous studies found politicians to be more positively evaluated when the politicians use an interactive communication style on an online platform, such as Twitter (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012). In addition, scholars have shown that interactivity on Twitter had a positive effect on the quality of the relationships between organizations and the public (Saffer et al., 2013).

Although politicians and governments have been active on social media for a considerable amount of time, it seems that the public sector still fails to communicate interactively. Baxter and Marcella (2012), for instance, found that politicians only employed little direct or two-way engagement communication on social media during the UK Parliament Election in 2010. The authors identified a "general reluctance" (p. 109) on the side of politicians in responding to challenging questions or critical comments by citizens. Instead, politicians chose to ignore the questions and comments in order to prevent a "faux pas" (p. 120). Similarly, other studies identified that non-profit organizations and politicians mainly use Twitter to mediate one-way messages, focusing on the sharing of information, and retweeting of information that was already known—instead of building a relationship with stakeholders (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Graham et al., 2013; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Contrastingly, Mergel (2012) observes that government agencies are slowly trying to get actively in contact with citizens, asking for feedback, insights or encouraging user-generated content. In fact, some positive examples exist of interactive Twitter communication among a few political candidates (Graham et al., 2013) and some governmental agencies in the U.S. (Waters & Williams, 2011). To

investigate interactive communication on social media by Western embassies in GCC countries, the following subordinated research question is posed:

RQ 1. *To what extent do embassies and ambassadors communicate interactively on Twitter*?

2.2.2. Personalized communication

The second communication strategy, which derived from literature, is using a personalized communication style on social media. Personalization can be defined as the focus on personal aspects of an individual instead of focusing on organizations or parties in communication (Lee & Oh, 2012; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). In practice, online messages are more personal when demonstrating a personal or first person standpoint, an active voice, or pictures of the human source (Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated positive effects of personalization in political communication, such as an increase in message recognition of politicians' messages (Lee & Oh, 2012) and levels of attention for and retention of information on a political website (Warnick et al., 2005). Lee and Oh (2012) explain personalization effects by assuming that messages dealing with personal experiences might remind the recipient of analogous experiences, making it easier to build a cognitive link to the content, as well as to the source of information, eventually, supporting cognitive processing. In addition, the authors assume that personalized messages facilitate readers to get a vivid and human picture of the sender. Hence, we propose the second subordinated research question:

RQ 2. *To what extent do embassies and ambassadors use personalized communication on Twitter*?

2.2.3. Use of sentiment

The third communication strategy deals with conveying sentiment in a social media environment. According to previous studies (Liu, 2011; Pang & Lee, 2008), sentiment in (online) communication is used when "people are enabled to express their opinions, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions" (Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013, p. 796). Several scholars have demonstrated positive outcomes of the use of positive sentiment in social media messages. For example, it has been repeatedly shown that it increases users' likeliness to share information (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Furthermore, emotionally charged tweets seem to get more attention, being retweeted more often and even faster than neutral messages (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

While research has demonstrated positive outcomes for the use of positive sentiment, negative postings on Facebook seem to cause more reactions in the form of comments when compared to positive statements (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). An explanation for this phenomenon is that affective messages stimulate more cognitive processing (i.e., attention and arousal) which, in turn, has an influence on sharing behavior, feedback, and participation (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). However, negative sentiment can also have detrimental effects on social media users as well as on the reputation of the account holder (Park & Lee, 2007). Based on previous findings, we define sentiment in online communication in two ways: firstly, by including a specific tone (or valence; i.e., positive, neutral and negative), and secondly, by expressing positive or negative emotions (e.g., excitement or anger). Our third subordinated research question states:

RQ 3. : *To what extent do embassies and ambassadors use sentiment and emotions in their communication on Twitter*?

2.2.4. Relevant information

According to online communication research, effective social media-based diplomacy should also be characterized by relevant news or information (the fourth communication strategy). Principally, communicating relevant information can be achieved by using links referring to external sources such as news items, videos, or press releases (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Waters et al., 2009; Zuk, 2008), offering exclusive content and insights via tweets from events, or by launching viral marketing campaigns (Fathi, 2008). Moreover, embassies are also more likely to provide relevant information when addressing the various stakeholders with the appropriate content. This means that embassies should cover topics (e.g., political, cultural, educational, economical) in their tweets that are in line with the interests of their stakeholders.

Prior research in political communication mainly demonstrated the lack of meaningful communication during election times (Baxter & Marcella, 2012). Others observe that government agencies are only slowly trying to reach out to stakeholders (Mergel, 2012). Research that specifically investigates the relevance of information posted on social media in general and with regard to the interests of directed stakeholders is yet lacking. To close this research gap and to investigate this communication strategy, we formulate two subordinated research questions:

RQ 4a. *To what extent do embassies and ambassadors communicate relevant information to their stakeholders on Twitter*?

RQ 4b. *To what extent are the topics of the tweets in line with the interest of the embassies' stakeholder groups*?

2.2.5. Transparent communication

The fifth effective communication strategy requires embassies and ambassadors to be transparent. Transparency in social media is necessary in order to successfully communicate with organizations' stakeholders (Waters et al., 2009). The advantage of transparency for government-citizen communication is broadly acknowledged (Searson & Johnson, 2010), as it can foster public trust and democratic values, and make governmental operations be perceived as more effective and productive (Hong, 2013). As such, stakeholders should have sufficient information (e.g., objectives) about a governmental organization (Aharony, 2012).

Unfortunately, hardly any research exists on transparency in social media in the governmental context. Based on Aharony's (2012) analysis it can yet be assumed that political leaders use Twitter for their communication to be perceived transparent. In practice, transparency on Twitter can be achieved by including the organization's logo on the Twitter account, setting a link to the organization's website, and giving information about the administration of the account (Waters & Williams, 2011; Zuk, 2008). Hence, our fifth subordinated research question reads:

RQ 5. *How transparent are embassies and ambassadors in their communication on Twitter*?

2.2.6. Networking

One of the main aims of embassies and ambassadors is to establish and maintain a diverse network of stakeholders (e.g., Dinnie et al., 2010; Waters & Williams, 2011). The sixth communication strategy for diplomatic actors on social media is, thus, to build an extensive network with relevant stakeholders.

On social media, this can be realized by linking with a diverse range of different organizations and individuals and important online opinion leaders. Latter are perceived as major contributors on Twitter who are "heavy consumers of political information" (Small, 2011, p. 890), and whose function is to collect, read, edit, and disseminate information with others. Another feature of online networks, as identified by Borondo, Morales, Losada, and Benito (2012), is that those networks are dispersed. This means that regular people are not only connected to other regular people, but also connected

with popular accounts on Twitter, such as opinion leaders. This dispersion gives governmental institutions the possibility of attracting large communities of normal citizens via the network of popular accounts.

However, research in political communication demonstrated that governmental institutions and nonprofit organizations are facing difficulties when it comes to building and maintaining a heterogeneous and diverse network (e.g., Waters et al., 2009). Most of the followers or friends of politicians on social media belong to family, friends, or other acquaintances of the politicians (Baxter & Marcella, 2012). Furthermore, politicians mainly enter a dialogue with a selected network of users, such as media actors or other politicians (Borondo et al., 2012). As a result, communication on social media by institutional actors rather takes place within an 'in-crowd' (Borondo et al., 2012).

In practice, network possibilities are increased when a social media user allows followers to post on websites, comment, or send private messages. Furthermore, by showing the initiative to respond to questions or challenging comments by followers, embassies can expand their social media network (Baxter & Marcella, 2012). On Twitter, building networks is realized by interacting with other users by means of the @symbol. An @mention is used to send a message directly to another user by attaching an "@" before the Twitter user's name to whom the message is pointed to. The feature facilitates direct dialogue with other Twitter users, but it also shows a broader audience that the organization is willing to come in direct contact with followers (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Besides, @mentions are often regarded as the most straightforward operationalization of interactivity (Kruikemeier, 2014). Hence, to investigate with whom embassies and ambassadors interact on Twitter, we will examine how embassies utilize this network function. We propose the following question:

RQ 6. *With whom do GCC-based Western embassies prioritize to engage on Twitter?*

3. Material and methods

3.1. Case selection

Multiple steps have been carried out to select the objects of analyses: 1) the social medium used for diplomacy in GCC countries and 2) embassies and ambassadors of Western countries active in GCC countries.

The first step in this procedure was to identify the most important social media channels for public diplomacy in GCC countries. According to the GlobalWebIndex Q1 (Petersen, 2013), the top five social networks globally were, at the time of analysis (except for networks in China), Facebook, YouTube, Google+, Twitter, and LinkedIn. In the second step, a cross-sectional analysis was used to identify the presence of embassies and ambassadors of seven Western countries (The Netherlands, USA, UK, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland) in GCC countries on those five social media channels. The analysis confirmed that Twitter is extensively used by Western embassies in these countries. The third step in the procedure was to find the Twitter accounts of the embassies, and ambassadors respectively, in the selected countries. In order to find all existing embassies' and ambassadors' accounts from Western countries in the GCC region, Twitter was scanned thoroughly by means of search strings (i.e., terms combining a Western country and a GCC country as well as the words "embassy" or "ambassador"). In addition, the official websites of the countries were investigated for relevant Twitter accounts. As a result of this multiple step procedure, we found that embassies in the UK ($n = 8$), US ($n = 6$), The Netherlands ($n = 2$) and Sweden ($n = 2$), and a few individual ambassadors (belonging to these four countries,

$n = 4$) had Twitter accounts in the GCC region. No accounts from embassies of Denmark, Norway, and Finland could be identified at the time of investigation.

3.2. Data collection

The tweets for this study were collected using the website "AllMyTweets.net." All tweets that were sent by the eighteen selected Twitter accounts in the period from March 1 to April 30, 2014, were collected. Due to the fixed time frame of two months, the amount of tweets was not equally distributed among the accounts (i.e., not every embassy or ambassador tweeted equally often in this period). The total sample consisted of 4,438 tweets that were included in the automatic network analysis. A subsample of 846 (19.1%) tweets was used in the manual content analysis. This subsample was composed of 50 tweets that were randomly selected from each account. This enabled us to get a stratified sample from all the accounts in which no embassy is overrepresented.

3.3. Inter-coder reliability

For the content analysis and for the stakeholder analysis (see below), five coders were trained. A reliable coding of all measurements for the communication strategies used by embassies and ambassadors as well as the identification of stakeholder groups within the network analysis was achieved by several inter-coder reliability tests. To test the reliability of the items interactivity, personalization, sentiment/emotion, relevance of information, and transparency, five distinct coders coded 19 tweets. The inter-coder reliability test of the analysis of stakeholder groups in the Twitter networks of Western embassies was achieved by coding ten accounts in two coding rounds. Given that Krippendorff's alpha (Kalpha) is often regarded as too strict with nominal and skewed variables (see Fretwurst, 2013), we relied on Kalpha's for our analysis. They were overall satisfying (Krippendorff, 2003). In cases where Kalpha was below the threshold of .70, the average pairwise percent agreement (pairwise agreement) was at least above 68.4%.

3.4. Operationalization

3.4.1. Interactive communication

Based on previous studies (Saffer et al., 2013; Waters & Williams, 2011), interactivity was measured by the number of replies a *Twitter* account evinced, which can be identified by an @*mention* (Kalpha = .96). Secondly, interactivity was coded by identifying whether the tweet was a *regular public message*, a *retweet* (RT), or a *modified tweet* (MT; Kalpha = .94). RT and MT are used to forward an original tweet from another user and thereby acknowledging the original sender of the message (cf. Lovejoy et al., 2012). Thirdly, the presence of a *hashtag* within a tweet, illustrated by the "#," was coded (Kalpha = 1.00). The usage of hashtags indicates that a message belongs to a particular topic (bigger discussion/trend online; Lovejoy et al., 2012). Fourthly, we measured the number of *questions asked* (Kalpha = 1.00) as well as the *responses given to questions* (Kalpha = 1.00) by embassies and ambassadors to examine direct online conversations on Twitter (based on Baxter & Marcella, 2012). Lastly, derived from previous research (Waters & Williams, 2011), we coded whether the embassies or ambassadors mobilized their followers on Twitter to participate in *online action* (e.g., watch a movie, share content, Kalpha = .49; pairwise agreement = 88.5%) or *offline action* (e.g., demonstration; Kalpha = .90).

3.4.2. Personalized communication

Adopted from Warnick et al. (2005), personalization in this study was measured by coding whether the tweet was dealing with the *private life* of the accountholder (Kalpha = .15; pairwise agreement = 94.7%), whether *first person perspective* was used (e.g., 'I' or 'me,'

Table 1
Descriptives of social media communication strategies.

Communication strategy	Present (N)	Present (%)	Mean (Range = 0–1)	(SD)
Interactivity (N = 846)			.275	.14
@mentions	588	69.5		
Hashtag	555	65.6		
Retweet (or MT)	264	31.2		
Mobilize action online	78	9.2		
Response to answer	58	6.9		
Mobilize action offline	52	6.2		
Ask question	34	4.0		
Personalization (N = 846)			.197	.21
Informal use of language	397	46.9		
First person	82	9.7		
Personal picture	44	5.2		
Personal life	26	3.1		
Sentiment: Tone (−1 is negative; 1 is positive; N = 846)			.421	.59
Negative	46	5.4		
Neutral	398	47.0		
Positive	402	47.5		
Sentiment: Emotion (N = 846)	222	26.2	.260	.44
Relevance (N = 846)			.537	.26
Focus of the message (on host or home country)	638	75.4		
Link	593	70.1		
Promotion (of host or home country)	131	15.5		
Transparency (N = 18)			.568	.16
Description of activities	17	94.4		
Description of home and host country	17	94.4		
Link to official website embassy	16	88.9		
New (additional) information	13	72.2		
Logo present	11	61.1		
Mission Statement	6	33.3		
Administration	5	27.8		
Profile picture	4	22.2		
Background picture	3	16.7		

Kalpha = .49; pairwise agreement = 96.8%), whether the use of *language was official/formal* (e.g., passive voice) or *informal* (e.g., active voice; Kalpha = .43; pairwise agreement = 68.4%), and whether a *picture* of the accountholder (Kalpha = 1.0) was shown.

3.4.3. Use of sentiment

In order to measure sentiment in tweets, two items were used. First, the *valence* was coded by identifying whether the tweet depicted a positive, neutral, or negative tone (Kalpha = .67; pairwise agreement = 83.2%). Secondly, following Waters and Williams (2011), not only the presence of sentiment was measured, but also the *kind of emotion*. The list provided for the coding ranged from positive emotions (hope, enthusiasm, excitement, joy, surprise, proud) to negative emotions (shame, fear, anger, disgust, worry, outrage, sarcasm) (Kalpha = .59; pairwise agreement = 78.9%).

3.4.4. Relevant information

To grasp the relevance of information that the tweet provided, the topic of the message was identified. A list of *topics* was identified from a preliminary case study of 100 tweets (Kalpha = .69; pairwise agreement = 73.7%). Secondly, it was measured what the *focus of the message* was (e.g., home country of the embassy, country where the embassy is based, any other foreign country; Kalpha = .54; pairwise agreement = 71.6%). Another item captured whether the tweet was a *promotion* of the home country, a promotion of the country where the embassy is based, a promotion of the embassy/ambassador, or no promotion (Kalpha = .75). Additionally, drawn from Baxter and Marcella (2012) and Waters et al. (2009), relevant information was determined by examining whether the tweet contained a *hyperlink* that referred to

external content such as news items, videos, or other social media sites (Kalpha = .66; pairwise agreement = 94.7%).

3.4.5. Transparent communication

Transparency of Twitter accounts was measured according to Waters et al. (2009). It was checked whether the following aspects were present: a description of the organization's programs and services, outline of the organizational history, presence of a mission statement, the organization's official website, the logo, and the name of the administrators of the social media network profile. Because there were only eighteen accounts to code, it was not possible to calculate inter-coder reliability. However, to establish internal validity, two coders coded two accounts separately; one difference was found. After an elaborative discussion between the two coders, diverging coding patterns could be ruled out.

3.4.6. Networking

To get insight in the network of stakeholders of Western embassies and ambassadors on Twitter, an automated network analysis was conducted. Given that online networks are based upon interaction and engagement among Twitter users, the number of @mentions used by each embassy and ambassador was measured (Saffer et al., 2013; Waters & Williams, 2011). The @mention shows reciprocal communication between Twitter users (Lovejoy et al., 2012) and displays a connection between the embassy or ambassador and another Twitter user. Thus, analyzing @mentions is a useful approach to investigate which embassy or ambassador is interacting with whom and to what extent.

To be able to automatically analyze 4,438 tweets, a python script was written. By means of this script, we could not only detect the frequency of interaction (i.e., @mentions), but also the different stakeholders with whom embassies and ambassadors interacted. Hence, the script obtained the number of @mentions per account, as well as the usernames that were mentioned in the tweets.[1]

In a second step, the network file was imported in the platform Gephi, which resulted in a graph that provided a clear overview of the connections between Western embassies and ambassadors among each other and with other Twitter users (Wassermann & Faust, 1994), allowing us to infer conclusions about the interactivity and connectivity of Western embassies and ambassadors in GCC countries on Twitter. Visualizing networks like this is of importance, as they show direct connections between Twitter users (e.g., who communicates with whom; commenting, asking or answering questions), the intensity of such interactions (i.e., how often they communicate with each other), and how actors are connected with others via certain key communicators (cf. Wassermann & Faust, 1994).

To assess with whom embassies and ambassadors engaged online, the sources of @mentions were coded (N = 150). Specifically, we examined the communication partners (i.e., *stakeholder groups*) of the embassies. To do so, we coded categories to which the communication partners could be assigned (independent actor/citizen, media actor, political actor, organizational actor/company, education/research actor, other embassy/ambassador, unclear/ambiguous). Four coders were trained during two sessions (each time, N = 10). Krippendorff's alpha was satisfying (Kalpha = .90).

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[1] A self-developed regular expression was used to find the @mentions within the tweets. In other words, a sequence of characters that matches the general pattern of @mention is employed to search every @mention in the tweets. To be included in the GDF-file, the username had to occur more than twice in the set of tweets. There were several reasons for setting up a minimum of three mentions. Firstly, this goes along with ideas of higher levels of interactivity (for more information see Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007). Secondly, the network needed to be clear and organized to be informative. Including all the Twitter users that were mentioned once in the 4,438 tweets would simply result in a complex and unclear network. Thirdly, setting a minimum of mentions also prevents false positives that might have been obtained by regular expressions (e.g., "@vfshelpline. com").

4. Results

4.1. Descriptives

To examine to what extent the first five effective communication strategies were employed by GCC-based Western embassies on Twitter, we rely on descriptive analyses of the data collected through the manual content analyses (see Table 1). The results show that there is a vast variation in the use of communication strategies. Table 1 shows that specific forms of interactivity were included in tweets, while others were ignored (RQ1). For instance, in 69.5% of the tweets a @mention was included. However, when examining the features that should engage Twitter users, we found that the tweets were not mobilizing readers online or offline (9.2% and 6.2% respectively) and they also did not convey responses or answers to a question by Twitter users (6.9% and 4.0% respectively). Also, the analysis depicted that embassies and ambassadors failed to personalize their tweets (RQ2). Less than half of the tweets were informal (46.9%), were not often written in first person, rarely contained information about the private life of the ambassador, or included a photo of the accountholder. However, Table 1 shows that almost half of the tweets had a positive tone of voice (47.5%) or were written in a neutral tone (47.0%) (RQ3). Negative sentiment in tweets was rarely detected (5.4%). About a quarter of the tweets analyzed exhibited emotional content (26.2%), which primarily reflected positive emotions. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the messages on Twitter depicted relevant information (RQ4a). As such, the tweets were related to the host or home country (75.4%), but a promotion of the home or host country was less present (15.5%).

To examine the relevance of information (RQ4a), we looked at the frequencies of *topics* conveyed in tweets by Western diplomatic actors. "Culture" was the most frequently topic dealt with (25.1%). Examples of such tweets are the Queen's birthday, the British Festival 2014 in Qatar, art exhibitions, lectures, concerts, or book fairs. Due to the prevalence of English holidays during the time of analysis, embassies and ambassadors from the UK (11.5%) tweeted most often about cultural topics, followed by the US (6.4%), Sweden (4.6%), and The Netherlands (2.6%).

The second most frequently topic present in the tweets was "International Relations," coded in 13.8% of the tweets. Messages that conveyed this topic addressed cooperation between Western countries and GCC countries, for instance, in matters dealing with energy, transportation, education, terrorism, or the war in Ukraine/Russia. Furthermore, these tweets were also about meetings, discussions, and negotiations between representatives of Western and GCC countries. Here, the UK (6.1%) was also the country that made use of this topic the most, closely followed by the US (5.0%), Sweden (1.7%), and the Netherlands (1.1%).

Another topic that was frequently mentioned in the tweets by embassies and ambassadors was "Education," making up 11.3%. In such tweets, the focus was on agreements as well as on cooperation between universities of Western and GCC countries, conferences and fairs on education, or Q&As on studies abroad. Looking at difference across countries, the US (5.1%) picked up "Education" most frequently, followed by Sweden (2.7%), the UK (1.9%), and The Netherlands (1.7%). Other topics that occurred less often were: "Economy" (7.3%), "Service" (6.3%), "Women's Rights" (6.0%), "Criminality and War" (5.6), "Environment" (5.2%), and "Activities of Embassies" (5.0%).[2]

Lastly, it was found that embassies and ambassadors were relatively transparent on Twitter (RQ5). As such, the accounts of embassies and ambassadors exhibited a description of activities of the home and host country (94.4%), as well as links to the official websites (88.9%). However, Twitter profiles did not often include background or profile pictures (16.7% and 22.2% respectively had a picture) and it was also not always evident who administered the account (in only 27.8% of the accounts).

4.2. Multilevel analysis

To examine the differences in the usage of communication strategies on Twitter among Western embassies and ambassadors active in GCC countries, we estimated several multilevel models with random intercepts and two nested levels (see Table 2). In particular, there were 846 tweets nested within 18 Twitter accounts. For each multilevel (logistic) regression, we added two predictors at the second level to compare to what extent social media usage differed across countries to which the Twitter account belongs (Sweden, The Netherlands, UK, USA), and whether it was administrated by an embassy or ambassador. We also controlled for the language that was used (English, Arabic, Dutch).

Investigating the usage of communication strategies of Western diplomacy institutions in GCC countries, we did not find meaningful differences. More specifically, we found no varieties of strategies on Twitter used by ambassadors or embassies. Similarly, no significant differences concerning the sentiment (positive vs. negative) and level of personalization expressed in tweets across countries or across accountholders (embassy vs. ambassador) could be revealed. Only concerning the countries, we identified the UK to differ moderately from the US concerning the presence of interactivity in the tweets, $b = .055$, $p = .053$. In addition, merely concerning relevance of information, the Netherlands scored moderately higher than the US, $b = .202$, $p = .059$.

4.3. Network analysis

To examine with whom GCC-based Western embassies prioritized to engage with on Twitter (RQ6), we conducted a network analysis. Fig. 1 shows a graph of the network of interactions between embassies and ambassadors and other Twitter users. The nodes represent the Twitter accounts and the ties represent interaction via one or more @mentions. The thicker the node, the more @mentions were received or sent by an account; the thicker the tie, the stronger the connection between two accounts. Thus, the network shows us how much interaction the embassies and ambassadors have on Twitter, and with whom they have stronger connections (Park & Lim, 2014).

Fig. 1 shows that Nicholas Hopton, UKinSaudiArabia as well as USEmbassyQ8 and YvettevEechoud were the accounts that received and sent most @mentions. In contrast to them, some US, Swedish and Dutch embassies/ambassadors seemed to display rather limited networks, being connected to only a few other Twitter accounts. Additionally, embassies and ambassadors belonging to the same country were often connected, but rarely interacted with diplomatic actors from other counties. For instance, UKinQatar had strong bonds with Nicholas Hopton, UKinKuwait, and UKinSaudiArabia, but no linkages to Swedish embassies or ambassadors. However, there seemed to be single actors that connected the networks from embassies and ambassadors from diverse countries. For instance, Qatar University connected the Dutch ambassadors YvettevEechoud with Nicholas Hopton from the UK. Furthermore, IECHESA seemed to work as a linkage between the Swedish and UK embassies. More prevalent was yet that numerous cross-linkages could be detected among the individual ambassadors and embassies from countries themselves.

Besides the linkages among Twitter accounts, the network analysis gave insights with what kind of stakeholder groups Western embassies and ambassadors interacted. Referring back to the topics conveyed in the tweets (RQ4a: relevance of information), we could make an assumption to what extent the topics of the tweets were in line with the interest of the stakeholder groups (RQ4b).

The results show that embassies and ambassadors preliminary interacted with actors from organizations, companies, or people that

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[2] Other topics that accounted each for less than 5% of the tweets: sport (2.5%), defense (1.8%), social policy (1.7%), immigration (0.9%), agriculture (0.9%), health (0.4%), religion (0.2%), protests (0.2%). 5.8% could not be assigned to a specific category.

Table 2
Multilevel analysis.

	Social Media Communication strategies				
	Interactivity b (SD)	Personalization b (SD)	Relevance b (SD)	Emotions b (SD)	Sentiment[a] b (SD
Constant	.253[**] (.02)	.228[**] (.02)	.540[**] (.04)	−1.536 (1.71)	−.195 (.30)
Home country embassy:					
The Netherlands (ref. = US)	−.032 (.06)	−.006 (.05)	.202[†] (.11)	−1.842 (2.22)	−.504 (.87)
UK	.055[†] (.03)	−.01 (.02)	−.057 (.05)	.389 (.59)	.019 (.40)
Sweden	.019 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.007 (.07)	−.297 (.70)	.326 (.58)
Ambassador:					
Ambassador (ref. = embassy)	.008 (.05)	.019 (.041)	−.094 (.08)	1.439 (1.71)	.356 (.65)
Language tweets (control):					
Arabic tweets (ref. = English)	−.013 (.01)	−.151[**] (.02)	.034 (.022)	−2.192 (2.26)	.391[†] (.21)
Dutch tweets	−.017 (.05)	.157[*] (.07)	−.163[†] (.09)	1.655 (2.16)	.838 (.74)
Level 2 variance	.002	.001	.007	.244	.404
Level 1 variance	.014	.035	.051	3.786	.000
Deviance	−1050.62	−325.08	34.22	900.15	1070.51
N	846	846	846	800	846
Number of groups	18	18	18	18	18

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Interactivity, personalization and relevance were predicted using a multilevel analysis. Sentiment and emotions were predicted using a multilevel logistic regression.
  [a] Sentiment was measured using a dichotomous variable (positive vs. neutral).
[**] $p < .01$.
 [*] $p < .05$.
 [†] $p < .10$.

run businesses ($n = 65$; 43.3%). The findings are thus in line with the main topics coded, that revealed a prevalence of cultural topics and tweets dealing with international relations and economy. Other important actors in the stakeholder network analysis were independent citizens ($n = 22$; 14.7%), other embassies and ambassadors ($n = 21$; 14.0%), and political actors (n = 18; 12%).[3]

Thus, the results support the notion that embassies were indeed maintaining a network with citizens—one of the primary target groups of embassies and ambassadors. However, at the same time, they also seemed to stay primarily in contact with embassies and ambassadors from their country or from other countries. On the one hand, this finding reflects the salience of the topic "International Relations;" on the other hand, it can also be reasoned that the Twitter network of Western embassies and ambassadors rather seemed to be an exclusive network, in which like-minded ('in-crowed') people find access more easily.

Furthermore, it appeared that there was a gap between the prevalence of the topic "Education" in the tweets and the presence of educational/research actors in the network. Only nine stakeholders were identified as belonging to this sector (6.0%). This indicates that embassies and ambassadors neglected to interact with actors in the educational sector, such as universities, scholars, or students.

5. Discussion

Social media, such as Twitter, make it possible for public diplomacy officials to get directly and continuously in contact with various stakeholders (Vergeer & Hermans, 2013). Adopting social media for diplomacy activities, however, does not simply come down to the dissemination of information online (Glassman, 2008), but involves engagement and interaction. Based on findings in online communication research and

advertisement, we inferred that embassies can only successfully interact with their stakeholders via social media when developing and applying social media communication strategies and engaging with audiences and relevant stakeholders (e.g., Dadashzadeh, 2010; Dorris, 2008; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012). However, governmental actors (i.e. public diplomacy officers) seem to have hitherto been implementing social media without following a specific strategy, guidelines or keeping policy goals in mind (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Furthermore, only few studies have dealt with digital diplomacy so far (e.g., Twitter). This study has tried to fill this void by researching the phenomenon in an empirical and systematic manner by means of a mixed-method design (i.e., combining human content and automated network analyses).

5.1. Theoretical implications

Based on the literature review of online communication research from diverse fields, such as political, marketing and computer-mediated communication, six communication strategies could be identified that are supposed to lead to effective social-media based diplomacy. To repeat, these are: 1) interactive communication, 2) personalized communication, 3) use of positive sentiment, 4) communicating relevant information, 5) being transparent, and 6) communicating within a broad network. A manual content analysis and computer-assisted network analyses were applied to examine empirically how Western embassies and ambassadors adopt these effective social-media communication strategies in GCC countries on Twitter.

The results of the content analyses showed a somewhat disappointing picture. Although Western embassies and ambassadors seemed to use the interactive features Twitter provides (e.g., @mentions and retweets) extensively, overall, the embassies and ambassadors did not often engage in interactive communication with their followers, such as asking questions, giving responses, or engaging them in taking action online of offline. In fact, the accounts analyzed seemed to preliminary engage in one-way messaging, focusing on sharing information instead

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  [3] Education actor accounted for 6.0% and media actor for 2.7%. 7.3% were identified as ambiguous.
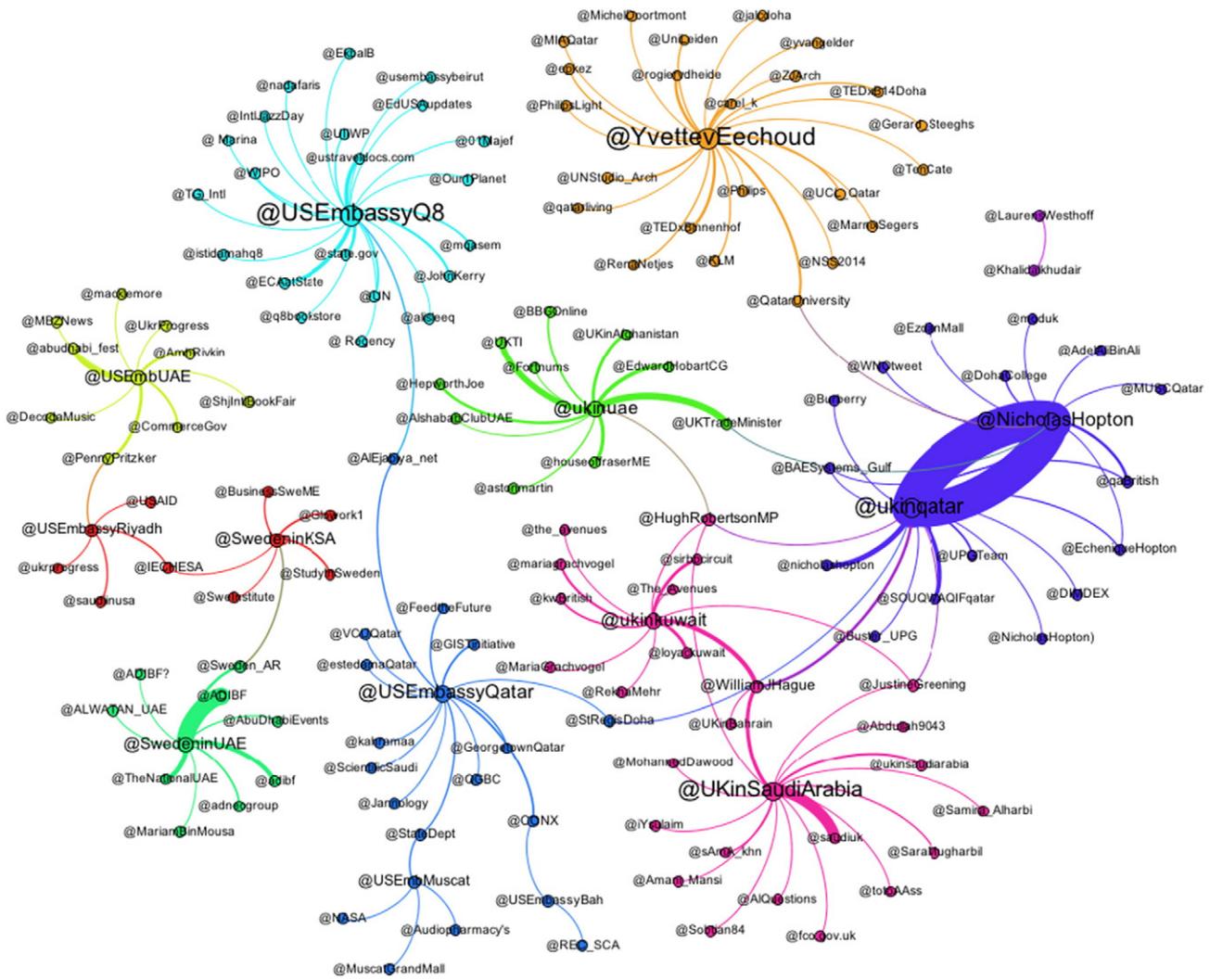
Fig. 1. Network analysis of tweets posted by Western embassies in GCC countries.

of building a relationship with stakeholders. This finding corroborates results from previous research in political communication that found politicians to use Twitter as a unidirectional form of communication (see e.g., Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Graham et al., 2013; Waters & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, studies dealing with microblogging by the Chinese government evidenced similar deficiencies (Kuzma, 2010; Park & Lim, 2014).

In line with the lack of interactions, this study found that embassies rarely made use of personalized elements on Twitter. This became evident by the absence of informal language, first person perspective, or information about the private life (e.g., photo) of the ambassador. Yet, these findings need to be relativized, given that only a limited number of individual persons (i.e. ambassadors) hosted the Twitter accounts investigated.

Contrasting to these pessimistic findings, we found that embassies are transparent and accessible in their communication online (see also Aharony, 2012; Waters et al., 2009). The administrators of the Twitter accounts exhibit seemingly sufficient information (e.g., mission statement, logo, link to website). Moreover, the tweets of embassies and ambassadors analyzed conveyed foremost a positive tone of voice. However, it is difficult to benchmark these results, as this study is among the first that provide empirical results on the prevalence of sentiment, information relevance, and transparency on Twitter by diplomatic actors. In this sense, this study has provided additional dimensions to investigate public diplomacy on social media, and thus

invites future research to substantiate these findings and the theoretical framework provided.

Interestingly, when looking at the most prevalent topics in the tweets posted by embassies and ambassadors, we can detect concurrences with previous studies. In this study "Culture" accounted more than 25% of the tweets, followed by "International Relations," "Education", and "Economy." This is partly in line with a recent study by Su and Xu (2015) who also identified "Politics/Society" and "History/Culture" to constitute approximately half of the 927 blogs analyzed (see for similar results, Zhong & Lu, 2013). Thus, we can conclude that culture seems to be a prominent topic for diplomatic institutions and individuals to tweet about on Internet platforms. This might have something to do with the fact that tweets or blogs about cultural events and activities are often characterized by easy to process information and engaging pictures, and are thus more appealing to citizens.

Eventually, the results of the network analyses of stakeholders revealed that embassies preliminary maintained a network with (cultural) organizations and citizens, which is important for building international relationships. However, embassies also seemed to connect strongly with other embassies and ambassadors, predominantly from the same country. The latter finding implies that Twitter is rather an exclusive network of like-minded actors for Western embassies and ambassadors in GCC countries. This is substantiated by the finding that embassies neglected to network with educational institutions, although the content of their tweets would have suggested doing so.

The disappointing findings concerning interactive, personalized and networking communication point to the absence of strategic communication guidelines for embassies and ambassadors on how to communicate with stakeholders online. This is in line with previous research that identified a lack of strategic plans on social media communication by governmental institutions (Bertot et al., 2012), ignorance of interaction with stakeholder groups on social media, and a general reluctance in exploiting the full potential of social media (Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

In fact, when reviewing the results of the network analysis from a public relations perspective and in light of the "Excellence theory" by Grunig and Grunig (1992), we might conclude that the embassies and ambassadors failed to set up successful two-way communication. By only focusing on a limited amount of accounts and not interacting with a range of external and internal stakeholders, Western embassies and ambassadors relinquish the possibility to exchange viewpoints and establishing mutual understanding of norms and values between Western and Middle East communities.

5.2. Practical implications

Based on our findings, we would like to seize the opportunity to introduce practical implications on which diplomatic and governmental actors can rely when setting up strategic communication guidelines and being active online.

Firstly, we would like to encourage embassies and ambassadors to *use a more interactive communication style* when communicating on social media platforms. More specifically, a more interactive communication style encompasses starting a conversation with stakeholders (by sending a direct tweet using an @mention) or engaging in conversations that have already been initiated by stakeholders (responding to tweets that have been posted by a stakeholder). In that way, daily and direct communications via social media channels, such as Twitter, might lead stakeholders to perceive public diplomacy actors rather like "peers" instead of "authorities" (Fisher & Brockerhoff, 2008).

Secondly, we believe that engaging in more personalized communication can be of advantage for embassies, given that previous research suggests that *using a personalized communication style* can engage stakeholders to feel connected with institutions (i.e., embassies) (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012). Examples of a personalized communication style are setting up a personal account (ambassadors) or using an informal and more personal communication style (e.g., using emotions in social media posts). Yet, in practice, governmental actors should be careful in becoming too personal in their interactions with stakeholders, or revealing too much of their personal life on social media. In this sense, Baxter and Marcella (2012) point to the inappropriate manner of posts by politicians in their study. Based on their findings, they propose a clever balancing of social presence: The aim is to create a popular social media actor, but at the same time preserving professionalism. In the same manner, governmental actors planning to express more emotional content on social media are warned of not overusing exciting or sentimental words as this might be perceived as unnatural and fake (cf. Waters & Williams, 2011).

Thirdly, in order to achieve a fruitful communication network, we advise diplomatic actors to *establishing interpersonal trust and credibility* (Zhong & Lu, 2013). From our point of view, embassies can only accomplish this by *communicating authentically, transparently, conveying relevant information, creating a positive atmosphere, and interacting with a broad network of various actors.*

Putting these guidelines in practice might, however, be challenging. For example, there might be cultural reasons for the lack of interaction between embassies/ambassadors and stakeholders from diverse countries online. Given the prevalence of monarchies, regimes, but also republics in the Middle East, which are more or less characterized by strong bonds of personal relationships within the "inner circle" (e.g., clans, sheikh, leaders, influential businessmen), negotiations are

often not carried out in public, but are shifted to hidden, exclusive meetings where ideas are exchanged, and decisions eventually made (cf. Selvik & Stenslie, 2011).

An interview study with embassy officers from Arab countries, indeed, revealed that personal relationships with decision makers and journalists as well as the establishment of trust were perceived more important than online communication (Khakimova, 2013). From the perspective of stakeholders, a descriptive study by Khakimova (2015) found that citizens were barely interested in engaging with governments online. The fear of becoming exposed or becoming a target for international games of tactics, were named as reason for this lack of interest. Instead, the interviewees preferred face-to-face interaction and personal engagement with the government at events.

Furthermore, a study carried out on micro-blogs by the U.S. embassy in China revealed contrasting results to the evidence we found (Zhong & Lu, 2013). In 96% of the micro-blogs the authors could identify interactive features, such as repostings, commentaries, dialogues, or reposting from other micro-blogs—of which the second largest group of contributors were Chinese, mostly students. Contradictory findings like these clearly highlight that engaging in public diplomacy in the online sphere is dependent on cultural backgrounds. In this sense, embassies and ambassadors should always *align their online communication strategies with regard to the cultural background* of the area they exercise public diplomacy, and the stakeholders they are engaging with.

Summing up, we believe that this study has yielded useful practical implications for embassies and ambassadors who are active online. As such, these results provide a starting point to develop a more thorough and effective communication strategy for digital diplomacy, ranging from stakeholder targeting to relationship, information and content management, promotion, and response and image repair strategies.

5.3. Limitations & future research

Despite its merits, this study also comes with limitations, which serve as stimuli for follow-up studies. First, this study focused on Twitter and GCC countries only. However, culture, media and political systems differ between countries, and this might influence whether and how people interact on social media (e.g., Howard et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Therefore, we advocate the examination of social-media based diplomacy in other parts of the world, based on the theoretical framework that we have developed in this study. By using an extensive comparative approach, future studies may provide more insights into the different usage of social media by embassies in diverse geographical areas.

Second, the data for this study was collected over a two-months period. Though we carefully selected this timeframe, making sure that there were no extraordinary events occurring in this period, the two months might have been sensitive to other external factors, which we were not aware of (e.g., political events in GCC countries). Therefore, we suggest a replication of our study, using a different (extended) timeframe.

Third, we only used Twitter to examine digital diplomacy in this study. Previous studies showed that different social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) gratify diverse social needs, such as the need to connect with others (e.g., Chen, 2011; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010) or informational needs (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). However, social media preferences might also differ among personalities (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012), which in turn might affect how people communicate and use social media. For that reason, we suggest taking additional social media in future studies into account, such as Facebook.

Fourth, because of the explorative and descriptive nature of this study, consequences of the use of social-media based diplomacy were not examined. Instead, we described the current state of Western digital diplomacy in GCC countries according to six communication strategies, suggesting effective online communication. Hence, future studies could

investigate how the implementation of those communication strategies by embassies influence attitudes and behavior of stakeholders. Experimental studies or qualitative interview studies could be an outset to gain insights in how social media (especially Twitter) influence diplomacy and the interaction between diplomatic actors and stakeholders. The results from such studies could provide useful in-depth knowledge, based on which embassies could further refine their social media communication strategies.

5.4. Conclusion

Reoccurring scandals of international politicians, posting inappropriate messages or images on social media (e.g., tweet by the British embassy commemorating the 200th anniversary of burning the White House in August 2014), highlight the relevance of our study for practice. When drawing conclusions, it can be subsumed that Western embassies and ambassadors are at a good starting point concerning the implementation of social media (i.e., Twitter) for public diplomacy in GCC countries. On the one hand, their tweets evince an adequate level of relevant communication, transparency and positive sentiment; on the other hand, the ambassadors/embassies ignore to communicate in an interactive and personal way, thus missing the opportunity to establishing and maintaining two-way engagement communication with their stakeholders on social media.

Moreover, the findings of the network analysis encourage embassies to extend their social network by engaging in communication with a diverse range of stakeholders, thereby avoiding to communicating with an already well-known "in-crowd." To realize this, we advise embassies and ambassadors, who are active on social media, to setting up a detailed communication strategy plan (see six communication strategies), providing necessary technical and human resources (e.g., monitoring tools, social media teams), and maintaining interactive, symmetrical communication with stakeholders.

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