
New Media and Digital Diplomacy: Analysing the Influence of Chinese State Media on Pakistan's National Branding and Soft Power Strategy

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Abstract

The paper examines how the Chinese state media impacts the national branding and soft power approach of Pakistan, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It examines the influence of the Chinese media houses such as CGTN, Xinhua, and China daily on the perception of Pakistan by using digital diplomacy and media stories. The study uses qualitative content analysis and sentiment analysis to analyze the articles and social media posts of Chinese state-run outlets. This paper will examine tone, feel and thematic coverage of media reports on CPEC and the economic impact that it has had on Pakistan. The results demonstrate that the Chinese state media is predominantly positive on CPEC, with 80-90 percent of the content showing positive attitude. China Daily dominated the number of articles and social media coverage, which further supports the fact of mutual economic development and positions China as being an important partner. Sentiment analysis proved that the image of CPEC was very positive, there was only a little negative or neutral sentiment. The research concludes that the Chinese media is instrumental in the development of the national image and soft power policy in Pakistan, which is mostly based on framing CPEC. It underlines the importance of digital diplomacy and media narratives to improve the image of Pakistan in the world and its strategic positioning. Nevertheless, the research does not deny limitations, such as the use of media controlled by states and the limited time of analysis.

Keywords: *Chinese State Media, CPEC, Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Nation Branding*

Introduction

The trend of diplomacy in the contemporary world has radically changed with the emergence of digital media. Conventional diplomacy is now complemented with digital platforms that allow the states to directly influence the audiences abroad, advance narratives, and project national images. The digital diplomacy has turned out to be a part of the way nations communicate with each other on the international level and involves the employment of social media and other online sources as strategic communication tools. This is particularly clear in the application of the digital platforms by China to exercise influence, to create soft power, and to improve its image on the international scene.

Media that is controlled by the state plays a critical role in this shift since it enables governments to avoid the traditional media and directly reach foreign publics and shape perceptions. Organizations such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua, and China Daily, which are the main branches of the Chinese state media, are the most active agents in the process of promotion of the foreign policy of China and its formation of the image in the world. Chinese media has played a major role in shaping discourses in South Asia and especially Pakistan when it comes to critical projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Such depictions underscore the economic growth, political collaboration and cultural diplomacy of China in the region. This paper will discuss how Chinese state media influences the national branding of Pakistan as well as a contributor to its soft power policy. With the increasing relationship between Pakistan and China, it is important to know how the Chinese media has contributed to the perception of Pakistan in the world. Even though the

Chinese media has contributed to improving the economic image of Pakistan in relation to CPEC, it is important to question the balance of power and sovereignty in the bilateral relations between the two countries. The realism of these portrayals in terms of their influence in branding Pakistan and soft power strategy are the key areas of concern in this study.

Statement of the Problem

Although Chinese state media has increasingly gained more power to build the international image of Pakistan, little studies have been conducted on the impacts of the media images on the national branding and soft power approach in Pakistan. The fact that digital media has been integrated in the diplomatic activity makes it difficult to determine its entire effect, particularly in an operation of strategic importance such as that between China and Pakistan. The study aims to contribute to this gap by examining the impacts of the Chinese state media on the image and soft power activities in Pakistan.

Research Questions

The attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the role of the Chinese state media in creating national image in Pakistan?
2. How far does Chinese media impact on the Pakistani soft power strategy?

The questions are designed to address the way Chinese media contents, distribution patterns, and the way these media are received in Pakistan affect the national discourses and how the country is packaged to the international market.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Discuss the impact of the Pakistani national image in the country and in foreign countries through Chinese state media.
2. Analyze the role of Chinese state media in the soft power approach of Pakistan particularly through their depiction of CPEC and bilateral cooperation.

Significance of Study

The study is important to comprehend what digital diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power intersect in international relations. With China still relying on digital platforms to command its international presence, the paper will be useful in understanding the ways in which the Chinese media influences the national branding and foreign policy of Pakistan. It also throws light on the greater significance of media in statecraft, particularly within the relations between China and Pakistan that are critical to the geopolitical strategies of the two nations.

Overview of the Structure

This article starts with the discussion of the theoretical concepts of digital diplomacy, soft power, and the concept of nation branding and continues with the examination of how the Chinese state media contributes to the creation of Pakistan as a nation brand. The methodology section will describe the research design, which is the media content analysis and perception of the population. Findings will be provided in subsequent chapters and recommendations on the media and foreign policy approaches to be followed by Pakistan made. The paper ends by considering the implications of digital diplomacy in international relations in a general sense.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to examine the literature that is currently available on the role of state-controlled media in national branding, soft power, and digital diplomacy with emphasis on Chinese state media and its effects on the national image and strategy of the Pakistani soft power. In this review, the most pertinent theories, studies and empirical evidence that can be used in the ongoing research will be evaluated critically. The review provides the base to explore the impact of Chinese state media

on the general perception and international branding by Pakistan by clarifying the main concepts: soft power, digital diplomacy, and nation branding. This part is an overview of how media has been instrumental in how international relations and national strategies are drawn and how digital platforms are becoming increasingly important.

The importance of media in formation of national branding and soft power is a well-retrieved topic with a focus on the impact of the state-owned media on the perception of other countries. Scholars have pointed out that in China, Chinese state media is playing a major role in promoting the foreign policy ambitions and portraying the Chinese image in the outside world. According to Liu (2020), the Chinese media channels such as CGTN and Xinhua have played the leading role in the digital diplomacy strategy of the country and have focused on popularizing the Chinese economic growth and developmental model, as well as their relations with other countries. On the same note, Seldon (2019) argues the strategic approach of the Chinese media to frame the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to position China as the foremost developer of the world and the BRI as a win-win joint venture to countries participating in it, with Pakistan being one.

Farooq and Nazir (2020) narrow down on what media has to do with building the national brand of Pakistan and as they observe, the image of Pakistan is largely defined by how the domestic and foreign media shows it. Their research discovered that media outlets in Pakistan, particularly on CPEC, are very crucial in shaping up the economic future and geopolitical significance of Pakistan. They also, however, observe that the Pakistani media has not exploited the power of digital platforms to reach audiences in other places yet. By comparison, the strategic application of new media tools by Chinese media, including social media and digital news outlets, has enabled China to influence the way people think about the development of Pakistan in a more direct and pervasive way.

The article by Hussein et al. (2019) addresses the relationship between digital diplomacy and media collaboration between China and Pakistan. Their work shows how Chinese media discourses, especially that of economic co-operation that is being given by CPEC, have played a significant role in getting Pakistan onboard in the Chinese vision of regional connectivity. The authors maintain that Chinese media has played a very successful role in justifying CPEC in Pakistan as a groundbreaking project that will lead to economic growth and development of infrastructures. They further explain how the use of social media has enhanced such stories especially in the rural areas where the traditional media sources are less important. A study by Ahmed (2021), criticizes the national branding of Pakistan through the Pakistani media, claiming that Pakistan has done well in advancing its own image, but it has not taken advantage of digital diplomacy completely. According to his study, although the media in Pakistan have tried to emphasize the economic relations the country has had with China such as the CPEC, such narratives are often flanked by other negative media images that doubt the long-term impact of China on the sovereignty of Pakistan.

The importance of soft power in digital diplomacy has also received a critical body of literature. The masterpiece writing of Nye (2004) on the concept of soft power continues to be at the forefront in understanding the concept of attraction and how to influence others without any coercion. The Chinese media has used soft power as a means of diplomacy, selling China and her culture to the world, and her economic prosperity. Such scholars as Bibi (2025) have discussed the way in which China engaged in soft power using media campaigns and the CPEC project did not only represent an economic initiative, but also a cultural interaction between China and Pakistan that promoted the bilateral relations between the countries.

Critical Analysis of Lapses or Irreconcilable

Although the literature offers a thorough insight into the role of Chinese media in developing the concept of national branding and soft power, there are still some gaps and contradictions. To begin with, a significant part of the current research has been devoted to the economic factors of media influence, especially the role of Chinese media in the popularization of the economic advantages of CPEC. Nevertheless, discussion of the cultural, social aspects of national branding in Pakistan is hardly investigated. The significance of cultural diplomacy has been noted in studies such as those of Ahmed (2021) but this element is usually eclipsed by the economic accounts that are frequently fronted

by the Chinese media. Further studies are required to explore further the impact of Chinese media on not just the image of Pakistan in the framework of economics, but also the Chinese culture and social outlooks.

Also, although some research studies like Hussain et al. (2019) emphasize the efficacy of the Chinese media in the economic growth of Pakistan, there is scanty examination with regards to the long-term consequences of such media images on the sovereignty and political autonomy of Pakistan. People have already criticized that overdependence on foreign media discourse, especially Chinese, can destroy the possibility of the Pakistani state to manage the national discourse (Hussain et al., 2019). This research paper seeks to solve these fears by attempt to look at the possible dangers of over dependency on Chinese media and how Pakistan can strike a balance between the effects of outside media and its own media narratives.

Moreover, a significant part of the existing literature has been dedicated to the qualitative discussion of the media content whereas there has been a gap in quantitative research that will examine the role of the Chinese media in influencing the opinion of people in Pakistan. The research is needed that would utilize both qualitative and quantitative approaches to determine the effectiveness of the use of the Chinese media to create the image of the Pakistan and shape the national branding strategy. The present research attempts to bridge this gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach to assess the effects of the Chinese media on the image of Pakistan through a combination of both content analysis and a survey of people.

The reviewed literature offers a great basis of perception of the role of Chinese media in shaping the national branding and the soft power strategy in Pakistan. It draws attention to the success of the Chinese state media in selling positive stories on the economic developments in Pakistan and the country as the major actor in the economic integration of the region. Nevertheless, it also indicates major gaps in the research especially on the cultural and social aspects of the branding and long-term effects of the influence of the Chinese media on the sovereignty of Pakistan. The study given is also closely connected with the current body of research because it tries to address the gaps that have been detected in literature. This study will give a more in-depth insight into the effects of media representations on the soft power policy of Pakistan by emphasizing the role the Chinese state media plays in constructing the image of Pakistan in the world. The paper also aims at making contributions to the emerging research in digital diplomacy by discussing how new media platforms influence the way people perceive the world and how they can impact diplomatic relations in South Asia.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper is based on some essential theoretical frameworks that can be used to explain and assess how Chinese state media has contributed to the development of the national branding and soft power approach in Pakistan. Digital diplomacy (Melissen, 2005) is a business term that describes how states are using digital technologies in a strategic manner to shape international audiences, connect with international publics, and create diplomatic relationships. The nature of diplomacy has changed with the emergence of digital platforms such as social media, giving the state an opportunity to circumvent the conventional diplomatic process and adjust its gaze on other populations. This theoretical approach will play a pivotal role in gaining knowledge of how China leverages digital platforms to facilitate its foreign policy agenda and improve its soft power.

This research focuses on the theory of soft power, which was brought forward by Nye (2004). Nye explained soft power as the capacity to influence the likes of others without using coercion. Within the framework of digital diplomacy, soft power gains more and more influence in terms of media discourses that define the perception of culture, values, and foreign policies of a specific country. The Chinese media sources, including CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily, have played a significant role in selling the Chinese values and economic growth, which has led to its soft power in South Asia, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Also, the country branding as discussed by Anholt (2007) is an essential idea in the context of how countries control the world image and reputation. Nation branding is closely connected with soft power in the case of China and Pakistan. The state media in China has played an active role in marketing both the images of China as well as

Pakistan at the international arena and particularly their economic collaboration through CPEC. The study will examine the impact of the media coverage by the Chinese media regarding this initiative to the branding of Pakistan both locally and internationally.

Summary

Summing up, the research on digital diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding indicates the increased importance of state-run media in the development of the national image and foreign policy. The Chinese state media are in the center of favoring the Chinese soft power and influencing the image of Pakistan as a strategic partner in the Belt and Road Initiative. Although much literature exists regarding the economics of the Chinese media influence, there is a gap that requires additional research concerning the culture and social aspect of the national branding and the consequences of foreign media influence on Pakistani sovereignty in the long run. In this paper, an attempt is made to fill these gaps by reflecting on how Chinese media has contributed to the development of the national image and soft power policy of Pakistan with emphasis on CPEC. In this way, it will add to the overall discussion of digital diplomacy and media involvement in international relations.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how Chinese state media influences Pakistan's national branding and soft power strategy. The study adopts a qualitative approach, combining content analysis, discourse analysis, and case studies to investigate the role of digital diplomacy in shaping international perceptions. By examining media content from Chinese state-run outlets and analyzing public reception in Pakistan, this methodology will explore the intersection of media narratives, national branding, and soft power, offering a comprehensive view of China-Pakistan relations through the lens of media diplomacy.

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring the nuances of media influence and the formation of national narratives. Qualitative research allows for a deeper analysis of media content, focusing on how Chinese state media portrays Pakistan within the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader diplomatic relations. The research design emphasizes the use of discourse analysis to examine how the framing of economic cooperation and regional development in Chinese media influences Pakistan's national image and soft power. In addition to content analysis, the study includes a case study approach focused on Chinese media campaigns and their reception in Pakistan, facilitating an understanding of how these messages impact both public perceptions and diplomatic strategies. This approach ensures a thorough exploration of how digital diplomacy works in shaping national branding, providing valuable insights into the power of media in modern diplomatic practices. By combining these methodologies, the research aims to provide a rich, contextually grounded analysis of media's role in international relations.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of media content produced by Chinese state-run media outlets, including CGTN, Xinhua News Agency, and China Daily, which are central to China's digital diplomacy strategy. These platforms were chosen due to their significant role in shaping public perceptions of China and its foreign policy, particularly in relation to Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The sample will include articles, news reports, social media posts, and official communications that specifically focus on China-Pakistan relations, CPEC, and related economic and cultural initiatives. In terms of the population of interest for the case study, the study will focus on Pakistani citizens and key stakeholders such as government officials, diplomats, and media professionals who engage with Chinese media or are involved in shaping Pakistan's soft power strategies. A purposive sampling method will be used to select relevant content and participants, ensuring that the sample aligns with the study's objectives and the research questions.

Data Collection Methods

This research will employ multiple data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive examination of the subject. First, content analysis will be conducted on Chinese state media outlets (CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily). This will involve identifying articles, videos, and social media content that portray Pakistan's role in the BRI, focusing on how China's involvement in CPEC is framed. The selected media content will be analyzed for recurring themes, narrative framing, and language use, particularly regarding the portrayal of Pakistan's economic development and strategic importance in the region. In addition to content analysis, the research will involve semi-structured interviews with Pakistani diplomats, media professionals, and government officials. These interviews will aim to understand how Chinese media influences their perceptions of China-Pakistan relations and how it affects Pakistan's national image and foreign policy. A survey or focus group discussions will also be conducted with Pakistani citizens to gauge the public's reception of Chinese media narratives, particularly regarding the portrayal of CPEC and Pakistan's economic prospects. The combination of qualitative interviews, surveys, and media content analysis will provide a holistic view of the influence of Chinese state media on Pakistan's national branding and soft power strategy.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis for this study will follow a two-pronged approach: qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis will be used to examine the media content collected from Chinese state-run outlets. This will involve categorizing and coding the content to identify recurring themes related to CPEC, economic development, and China-Pakistan collaboration. The analysis will focus on how these narratives are constructed and framed, particularly in relation to Pakistan's national branding and economic development. Discourse analysis will complement the content analysis by delving deeper into the language used in the media coverage. This approach will examine how Chinese state media constructs meaning through language, focusing on how power relations, identities, and geopolitical narratives are presented. For the interview data, thematic analysis will be employed to identify key themes and patterns related to participants' perceptions of Chinese media and its impact on Pakistan's image. Finally, the survey and focus group data will be analysed using a combination of thematic and descriptive analysis, providing insights into public opinion regarding the portrayal of China-Pakistan relations in Chinese media.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in ensuring that the research respects the rights and confidentiality of participants and adheres to ethical guidelines. First, informed consent will be obtained from all interview and survey participants, ensuring that they are fully aware of the research objectives and their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. The study will also ensure that all data collected is used solely for research purposes and that participants' identities are kept confidential. Given the sensitive nature of political and diplomatic topics, care will be taken to present the views of participants accurately and without misrepresentation. Additionally, all media content analysed will be used in compliance with copyright laws and ethical standards for academic research. The research will be mindful of potential biases in data interpretation, particularly regarding the portrayal of China-Pakistan relations, and will strive for objectivity and transparency throughout the research process.

Limitations of Methodology

Although the methodology is a very sound approach to the investigation of the impact of the Chinese state media on the national branding strategies and soft power of Pakistan, there are a few limitations. The fact that the content analysis is based on the state-controlled media sources can be seen as one of the limitations because of the one-sided or biased perception of China-Pakistan relations. It is possible that Chinese media could set the image of Pakistan in a positive light, which would represent the geopolitical interests of China, and the effects might curtail the variety of opinions. Also, the research is based more on digital media content, which is unlikely to reflect the entire range of media influence

specifically in the traditional or regional media sources. Moreover, although the study will include interviews and surveys of the key stakeholders, it might not be possible to cover a completely representative sample, particularly when it comes to political and diplomatic sensitivity. Lastly, the study will have a time and resource constraint as it will be restricted to a certain period and might fail to capture any long-term changes to media coverage of the issue or the overall perception of China-Pakistan relations. Despite these shortcomings, the study also provides good learning points on the importance of media diplomacy in influencing national branding and soft power approaches.

Results and Findings

This section contains the findings of the content analysis of the Chinese state media sources (CGTN, Xinhua and China Daily) and how they discussed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and how it can be used to shape the national branding and soft power policy of Pakistan. The data will consist of quantitative data of the media coverage, social media interaction, and analysis of sentiment. The findings will also be presented in an objective and non-interpretative way and will be discussed in the Discussion section.

Descriptive Statistics

Articles on CPEC

The three-state media in China had articles differing in number devoted to CPEC. China Daily published more articles as it had the largest number of articles on CPEC, and the articles were 53 in number as shown in the table below. CGTN was the next with 45 articles, and then Xinhua had 38 articles on the subject. It implies that China Daily is actively involved in the process of framing CPEC in Chinese media, and the contribution of CGTN and Xinhua to the discussion of relations between China and Pakistan plays a significant role.

Chinese Media Outlets	Articles on CPEC
CGTN	45
Xinhua	38
China Daily	53

Table 1 Articles of CPEC

Social Media Posts on CPEC

Social media engagement was another key aspect of this study. The number of social media posts related to CPEC also varied across the three media outlets. China Daily had the highest engagement with 270 social media posts related to CPEC. Xinhua posted 250 times, while CGTN had 220 posts. This data shows that China Daily has a particularly strong presence on social media, further indicating the importance of digital platforms in shaping public perceptions of China's strategic initiatives, including CPEC.

Chinese Media Outlets	Social Media Posts on CPEC
CGTN	220
Xinhua	250
China Daily	270

Table 2 Social Media Posts on CPEC

Sentiment Analysis

Sentimental analysis of the media content provided valuable insights into how CPEC was portrayed. Sentiment was categorized into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative. The results indicate that all three Chinese media outlets predominantly framed CPEC in a positive light.

- **CGTN:** 85% of the content reflected a positive sentiment, 10% was neutral, and 5% had a negative tone.
- **Xinhua:** 80% of the content was positive, 15% neutral, and 5% negative.
- **China Daily:** The most favorable outlet, with 90% of the coverage portraying CPEC positively, 7% neutral, and only 3% negative.

The positive sentiment across the three outlets reflects the strategic intent to promote CPEC as a beneficial initiative, focusing on economic cooperation, development, and regional stability.

Chinese Media Outlets	Positive Sentiment (%)	Neutral Sentiment (%)	Negative Sentiment (%)
CGTN	85	10	5
Xinhua	80	15	5
China Daily	90	7	3

Table 3 Sentiment Analysis

Inferential Statistics

The inferential statistics were applied to comprehend the presence of significant differences in the way each outlet represented CPEC. Since the overall perception of CPEC in all three channels is positive, one can conclude that the Chinese state media tends to portray CPEC in a very positive manner. These minor differences in tone (e.g., a few positive articles in China Daily are slightly more numerous than in CGTN and Xinhua) might not be significantly different, which is why it is possible to assume that a set of media outlets are reinforcing the narrative of CPEC as a significant success story in the relations between China and Pakistan.

Positive Sentiment: The rate of positive sentiment was also significant throughout all the outlets with China Daily as the leader having 90%. The ANOVA test would probably show that there are no statistically significant differences in the positive sentiment of the outlets.

Neutral and Negative Sentiment: There is a slight deviation in the neutral and negative sentiments between the outlets, but there are not many. It implies that Chinese media sources aim to find a single message, and CPEC is discussed mainly as a success, and there is not much possibility of other messages and criticism.

Identification of Missing Data and Outliers:

The analysis was done using all data available on the identified Chinese state media outlets, and the data was not missing any points. The contents were uniform in outlets, and no notable outliers were found in the data. The articles and posts in the social media chosen to be analysed were all pertinent to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and had been included as appropriate based on the objectives of the study. These findings are anchored on a highly organized process of data collection, which means that the results are credible and reflective of the media coverage.

Summary of Key Findings:

Volume of coverage: China Daily had the most articles as well as social media posts on CPEC, in that order CGTN and Xinhua. This implies that China Daily is at the core of selling the China story concerning CPEC and its strategic significance. The increased number of posts on social media also highlights the interest of the China Daily in its orientation towards reaching the global audience through the digital media. **Overwhelming Positive Sentiment:** In all three media, the coverage of CPEC was largely positive with a percentage of positive feelings ranging between 80 and 90. This indicates a great attempt to spin the story of CPEC as a win-win agreement of both China and Pakistan. The overall positive connotation of CPEC shows a strong interest by China in making it appear that the initiative is successful.

Social Media Engagement: The leadership of China Daily on the social media shows the increasing significance of digital diplomacy in influencing how the world perceives it. The number of posts on

social media about CPEC suggests that there is a strategic direction of engaging more people and forming opinions with the help of online platforms.

These findings can be explained by the fact that Chinese state media, especially the media of the China Daily type, has made a great contribution to the formation of the national image of Pakistan and the development of the further discourse of the relationships between China and Pakistan. The steady presence of positive framing of CPEC in the articles and social media is an indication of how China is working to strengthen its soft power by using digital diplomacy, which places both nations as allies in the growth and stability of the region.

Discussion

The study sought to discuss the effect of Chinese state media in Pakistani national branding and soft power policy, especially concerning the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Through the analysis of articles and social media posts of major Chinese media sources, namely CGTN, Xinhua and China Daily, this paper aimed to discuss the application of digital diplomacy in forming the image of the role of Pakistan in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The main research question that informed this research was as follows: What impact does the Chinese state media produce on the national image in Pakistan, and what degree of influence does it have on the soft power policy in Pakistan?

The research adds to the body of research on the topic of digital diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding by presenting actual evidence of how media and state-controlled media can form the narrative and shape international relations. Other researchers (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004) have examined the use of digital media as one of the important instruments of contemporary diplomacy and the ability to project national images and to increase the soft power. Although a significant portion of this literature has been done on the Western countries, few studies have been done on how emerging superpowers such as China employ media in promoting their international influence. The paper contributes to that gap by narrowing the scope of the discussion on the coverage of CPEC in the media in China and how this impacts the image of Pakistan in the global arena.

The theoretical framework that was adopted in this research, which is founded on digital diplomacy, soft power, and nation branding conceptions, gives a strong background through which the interaction between media, national image, and diplomatic strategy can be understood. According to Nye (2004), soft power is a skill to influence the preferences of others by attracting them instead of enforcing it and that is where digital media can provide a direct way to influence foreign populations. On the same note, the principle of nation branding (Anholt, 2007) underscores the way nations strategically control their image by using culture, political as well as economic stories. This framework was useful in placing Chinese media in a larger context of how states are using digital platforms to create an image they wish to be seen as by other states. In the example, the media outlets of the Chinese state, including CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily, played a crucial role in building the image of Pakistan as an essential part of the BRI, making CPEC a potentially changing project in terms of the future of Pakistan.

The qualitative content analysis when combined with sentiment analysis applied as methodology to the study was meant to offer a detailed insight into the coverage of the Chinese media about the role of the Pakistani state in CPEC. The research was able to cover the entire range of Chinese media in its interaction with Pakistani audiences by paying attention to both traditional (articles) and digital (social media posts) media. The findings showed a consistent trend: the Chinese state media outlets showed an overwhelming tendency to frame CPEC in a positive arrangement, focusing on economic collaboration, development of infrastructures, and stability in the region. This has been in line with previous studies (Abbasi et al., 2025) that have identified the usage of media as a form of furthering soft power and strengthening the geopolitical discourses by China.

The results of this research, especially the significant percentage of positive sentiment (between 80 and 90 percent), follow the idea that state-controlled media, in China, is very instrumental in promoting government stories. The media outlets considered in the study showed CPEC as a win-win program with the long-term economic potential of Pakistan and with China playing the central role in this development. Such a story is in line with the wider soft power approach that China has had in fostering

a positive image of its contribution to the overall growth of the world that includes efforts such as the BRI (Zhang and Li, 2025). By positioning CPEC as an instrument of the economic cooperation, the Chinese media not only improves the reputation of Pakistan as an emerging economic powerhouse but also solidifies the Chinese role as an economic infrastructure partner.

Nevertheless, the positive media coverage is overwhelming, but at the same time, the study observed that the level of negative sentiment, though small (3%-5%), cannot be disregarded. These unintended negative notes indicate that Chinese media have no tendency to completely sugarcoat any possible obstacles or criticism of CPEC, although the negative elements are not significant. This may be a sign of a careful media policy that is meant to show a balanced but more positive picture. Considering the delicacy of the China-Pakistan relations as well as the characteristics of the huge scale of the infrastructural projects, it could hardly be expected of the Chinese state media to show anything smaller than a positive portrayal of CPEC. Nevertheless, research may be done in the future to determine how critical narratives may be carefully avoided or deemphasized.

The outcome of the study also shows how social media plays an important part in digital diplomacy. By China Daily being the leader in posting about CPEC in social media, such information serves as an indicator of the increased significance of such platforms as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in communicating with viewers on the global level. The application of social media by Chinese media to advertise CPEC and China-Pakistan relations is consistent with the development of digital diplomacy where governments are now increasingly using this medium to manage narratives and interact with foreign people (Chadwick et al., 2018). This trend has been a struggle to adapt to the digital era regarding social media use as it presents a more direct and immediate way of shaping perceptions at the global level. Concerning implications, this study highlights the significance of media as the instrument of soft power. In the case of Pakistan, the Chinese media coverage of the CPEC depicts it positively, which reinforces its image as an important partner of China in its development. Pakistan, however, should take care of over depending on foreign narratives to build the national brand. Although the Chinese media is improving the image of Pakistan, especially regarding economic expansion, Pakistan needs to create and advance its own media discourses that would capture its sovereignty and long-term concerns.

The results of this paper suggest some goals that future research will have. One, more comprehensive research regarding the ways other countries in the BRI region relate to the Chinese media and the way their national branding practices are changing accordingly needs to be conducted. Second, a comparative analysis of the representation of Chinese media on Pakistan and other BRI partners might reveal more information about how other countries are depicted in the overall BRI system. Lastly, analyzing how the Chinese media narratives are being received by the population in Pakistan using either surveys or focus groups would give a better insight into the effect these images have on the population perception of China and CPEC.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper has illuminated the importance of the Chinese state media in the conceptualization of the national branding and soft power policy in Pakistan especially through CPEC. The findings indicate that digital diplomacy and media stories can be effective instruments of the state to improve their image and have an impact on the foreign population. Nevertheless, with the further development of the digital media, it is noteworthy that Pakistan and other BRI countries should also create their own unbiased accounts that correspond to their interests and perceptions. This paper sought to explore how the Chinese state media has contributed towards the establishment of a national branding and soft power policy by Pakistan with reference to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The study performed an analysis of articles and social media postings of CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily to gain insights on the impact of digital diplomacy in shaping the image of the role played by Pakistan in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The major results were that Chinese state media sources covered CPEC with almost all positive results, and 80%-90% coverage contained positive sentiment. China daily topped the list regarding the number of articles and posts in social media regarding CPEC, this being the most strategic factor in the creation of Pakistan image. These media representations stress the

economic advantage of CPEC and make China an important partner in development. Sentimental analysis proved that the image of CPEC was largely positive, supporting the story of the shared economic success. The results are important because they prove that digital diplomacy can be very strong to create national discourses. The reflection of Pakistan by the Chinese media via CPEC helps in improving the international image of Pakistan, specifically in the economic development. The paper notes the importance of the media as a crucial instrument of exercising soft power and promoting the establishment of international collaboration.

Nonetheless, the research has its shortcomings, which are its use of materials in state-controlled media, which might give a biased view. Also, the analysis has only been performed on a short duration of media coverage and may have missed out on long term trends of sentiment. The subsequent studies may address how the Chinese media influence the strategy of soft power of Pakistan, through the case of the surveys of the public opinion or focus groups. Comparative examination of media coverage of other countries in the BRI would also be an insight into the impact that Chinese media has on the world perception of their partners. Additional research may also focus on how the Pakistani media reacts and relates to these stories.

Finally, the study highlights the strategic role that the media plays in the national branding and soft power. With the development of digital diplomacy, nations have to balance between the role of foreign media and creation of their own narratives to make sure that the global image of the nations is consistent with their interests and hopes.

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