An Examination of Factors Influencing National Reputation
of India Among South Asians on Social Media

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Social media play a central role in governments' communication with foreign citizens, but little is done to understand how such platforms build national reputation. To fill this research gap, the study examines online engagement, online social relations, and information use that predict national reputation in the social media context. National reputation is examined through a survey of 387 South Asian social media followers of the Indian government. Results show that online engagement of users with the Indian government and their information use related to India are positively associated with national reputation. However, users' online social relations with Indians is negatively associated with national reputation. The study provides empirical support to understand how public diplomacy operates in an online-only context and in the case of India specifically.

Keywords: online social relations, online engagement, diplomacy, information use, structural equation modeling

Governments are increasingly using social media to talk directly with citizens because these platforms, to some extent, allow state officials to surpass filters that control how citizens perceive their messages. Through such communication on social media, governments engage with the public, especially foreign citizens, to build national reputation (Bjola, 2015). Like most Western nations, India has integrated social media in its public diplomacy apparatus to manage its foreign public relations. India has 166 diplomatic missions and embassies on Twitter and 172 on Facebook through which it communicates with foreign citizens (Swarup, 2016). India's prime minister is the second most active politician on Twitter, and India ranks second in the use of social media diplomacy among the G20 nations (Digital Diplomacy Index; https://digital-diplomacy-index.com/; Tewari, 2020). Despite this, reputation building for India through social media is not known to have been examined. To address this gap in literature, this study investigates perceptions about India's reputation among social media users.

National reputation refers to collective judgments about a country's culture, policy, and behavior that define its national image (Mercer, 2010; J. Wang, 2006). One of the reliable indicators of national reputation is public opinion; hence, this study measures national reputation through a survey of social media users, who follow the Indian government diplomatic accounts on Twitter and Facebook. In this study, national reputation is the sum total of users' perceptions toward India on aspects of political, emotional, cultural, economic, and

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regional standing. The study measures these aspects using the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index that Kiambi (2017), Seo (2013), Yang, Shin, Lee, and Wrigley (2008) and others have employed to examine national reputation. According to Yang and associates (2008), it is essential to measure national reputation before constructing strategies to build and manage it. Hence, this study investigates factors that predict reputation in the social media context by examining the case of India in South Asia.

The South Asian region—which consists of India and its seven neighboring nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka that border India—is politically unstable and faces civil unrest, extreme poverty, terrorism, and corruption, among other issues. Through regular foreign aid, infrastructural plans, and other bilateral projects with its neighbors, India is pursuing a stable neighborhood to safeguard its national security (Ranjan, 2019). In the process, India assumes the role of a regional leader, but, given its large population, economic resources, and global leadership aspirations, it is perceived as a regional hegemon (Destradi, 2012). To change this perception, India began extensively using social media to reach and initiate conversations with South Asians, pursue its foreign policy agendas, and help interpret and clarify its political, regional, and developmental intentions to South Asians (Garud-Patkar, 2021). An examination of India's reputation is therefore essential to understanding whether its policies are positively perceived in South Asia.

Previous studies have shown that national reputation is influenced by factors such as familiarity of citizens with a foreign nation (Kiambi, 2017; Kim, Choi, Kim, & Cai, 2020), their relationships with foreign citizens (Seo, 2013), and the extent of citizens' use of media sources to get information about a foreign nation (Yang et al., 2008). In her study on the reputation of the United States among South Koreans, Seo (2013) found that South Koreans who had stronger online social relations with U.S. citizens rated the United States more negatively than others. Likewise, Yang and colleagues (2008) found that U.S. citizens' preferences for communication channels—such as personal communication, online media, and national mainstream media—to get information about South Korea were highly correlated with South Korea's national reputation. However, online social relations and information use have not been examined in the context of India's national reputation.

A few scholars have found that users' online engagement with the social media accounts of corporate firms predicts reputation (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016; X. Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). However, online engagement with governments on social media, particularly the Indian government, and its relationship with India's national reputation have yet to be examined. Thus, this study examines three factors that influence national reputation in the social media context: (1) users' online engagement with Indian government accounts on Twitter and Facebook, (2) users' online social relations with Indians, and (3) the extent of users' utilization of sources to get information about India.

The study surveys social media users defined as foreign citizens (South Asians who are citizens of India's neighboring nations) and who are followers of Indian diplomacy accounts that target South Asians, including Indian Diplomacy, and Ministry of External Affairs, on Twitter and Facebook. The study makes several implications: First, an examination of national reputation on social media contributes to the understanding of key factors that are vital for an effective social media diplomacy. Second, the specific focus on South Asia offers implications to strategize government communication for building reputation in the region and managing relationships with South Asians through Twitter and Facebook. Third, for India, the

measurement of national reputation, particularly among its social media followers, evaluates the influence of its social media diplomacy strategies.

National Reputation Building

National reputation refers to collective judgments about a country's culture, policy, and behavior that define its national image (Mercer, 2010; J. Wang, 2006). As a result, national reputation conceptualized in this study measures South Asian social media users' perceptions about India on political, economic, regional, and other aspects that the Indian government attempts to make appealing for its social media followers. The study examines national reputation in the social media context—a novel approach that is not known to have been studied.

National reputation has been investigated from different "discipline-specific theories, models, and terminologies" (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2017, p. 2) and does not have an absolute definition (Kim et al., 2020). Scholars have explained national reputation in terms of nation building (Taylor & Kent, 2006), strategic public diplomacy (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005), nation branding (Anholt, 2007), and, more recently, country reputation (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2014), place branding (Govers & Go, 2016), and the model of country concept (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2017). These approaches are not explicated in detail here because a comprehensive inquiry revealed that, at the core, all scholars examined the same mechanism that aims to change the perceptions of foreign citizens about a nation. Moreover, there were few variations in the theoretical conceptualizations given by these scholars.

A positive national reputation boasts development and attracts wealth because foreign audiences perceive the nation as a reliable location to set up businesses, take vacations, study, or buy goods produced by the nation (Anholt, 2016). For instance, Spain has built a positive national reputation using quick-fix rebranding techniques (Gilmore, 1998). The Spanish government promoted its nation-building activities under the symbol of the sun created by artist Joan Miro. Modernization was achieved through privatization and expansion of Spain's corporations beyond its national boundaries, rebuilding of its cities, and a rise in the prominence of its celebrities in foreign nations (Gilmore, 1998). Further, Spain used the 1992 Barcelona Olympics to attract world attention and changed the public perception of itself from a poor nation to the world's second most popular tourist destination (Gilmore, 1998).

There is an absence of such scholarly work on India's reputation of despite the relevant actors' (e.g., prime minister, president, the ministry of external affairs, embassies, media, Indian diaspora, and entrepreneurs) involvement in reputation-building efforts at the regional and international levels through social media. Before a government's efforts to manage its national reputation can be examined, Yang and colleagues (2008) stated, it is essential to measure a government's national reputation. Hence, this study measures the national reputation using the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index.

National Reputation and Social Media

Scholars have examined the media's significant role in shaping public opinion (McCombs, 2014). The media also play a fundamental role in building national reputation among foreign audiences, whose

familiarity with a nation is generally through experiences that the media provide (Kiambi, 2017). Increasingly, new communication technologies have paved the way for governments to use social media for building a national reputation. For instance, in an online experiment, Schultz, Utz, and Göritz (2011) compared the effects of traditional and social media strategies on social media users' perception of reputation and found that crisis communication via Twitter leads to a higher reputation than crisis communication via blogs and traditional newspapers.

In recent times, politicians, celebrities, and athletes have used social media to repair their image and build a reputation. For instance, former president of the United States, Donald Trump, artfully used Twitter to develop a base of followers during the 2016 elections. In the case of corporations and governments, social media provide the resources to polish information shared in the media, thus boosting the process of reputation building. One example is the image restoration strategies that the company BP used after an oil spill that polluted the Gulf of Mexico.

The U.S. government has been at the forefront of using social media for national reputation building. During the Obama administration, the U.S. Digital Outreach Team was formed to build reputation particularly among Arab citizens after the United States had gained a negative image for itself during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The outreach team engaged users in online forums in Arabic to facilitate positive discussions about U.S. foreign policy, helping the United States to build a positive reputation (Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2012). Another project was Café USA, which was created to reach out to Korean youth, who were known to have anti-American sentiments. A majority of Koreans on the forum reported that direct conversations with the U.S. embassy officials helped them better understand American foreign policies, whereas a few said that the talks did not influence their perspectives about America (Seo & Thorson, 2010). Do such conversations between the Indian government and their followers on social media impact India's national reputation? Our study examines this.

National Reputation and Social Media Diplomacy

Scholars have examined the significant role of media in shaping public opinion (McCombs, 2014). Social media have added a new dimension to the process of diplomacy, which has advanced from "behind the closed door" talks between elites to open and direct conversations with the public on the Internet. Public diplomacy conducted using new information and communication technologies such as social networking sites—which allow governments to engage citizens in conversations and understand their perspectives—is defined as social-media-based diplomacy. Given that this field is still new and largely unexplored, diplomacy experts have not yet concurred on a concrete term, but many have called it *e-diplomacy*, *digital diplomacy*, *cyber diplomacy*, or simply *social media diplomacy* (Gilboa, 2016).

Diplomatic goals largely aim at maintaining and improving a nation's reputation by communicating its stand on political, economic, and other issues. When conveying these policies to citizens, journalists, and politicians of a foreign nation, a diplomat's job gets more challenging because these policies have to appear appealing and convincing (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009). Diplomats in many nations, including India, have taken to social media to assist in their duties of making foreign citizens understand, interpret, and modify perceptions on their foreign policies and bolster national reputation (Bjola, 2015; Garud-Patkar, 2021). Likewise, foreign citizens

use social media for to have quick and direct conversations, address queries, and start virtual relations with diplomatic elites (Bjola, 2015). This two-way relationship between diplomats and foreign citizens makes social media diplomacy unique; in the traditional diplomacy era, diplomats had few opportunities to connect and listen to foreign natives, who in-turn had limited access to diplomats because of bureaucratic restrictions.

The Indian government has leveraged the reach and power of social networks as a two-way platform to build and improve its reputation. For instance, in 2015, during Saudi Arabia's invasion of Yemen, traditional communication was cut off, leaving many people in the midst of a war. Many foreign and Indian nationals tweeted for help, and the Indian external affairs office continually replied to them, directing the evacuees to move to safe pick-up locations. India rescued not only its own citizens, but also citizens from 26 other nations (Tharoor, 2015). Likewise, the former external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj used Twitter as a complaint box and resolved a multitude of small bureaucratic issues, such as helping a woman get a visa to join her husband on the couple's honeymoon. Her quick and round-the-clock actions on matters that could have been handled by her staff earned her the sobriquet, "Supermom of the State" (Lakshmi, 2019, para. 2). Furthermore, the Indian government's separate social media accounts for its ministries and embassies (@IndiaInSriLanka), unique hashtags and pages for its campaigns (#SwatchBharat, MakeInIndia), and catchy hashtags to promote its prime minister's foreign tours, particularly those to South Asian nations, reflect India's social media initiatives.

In its race with China to be a regional leader in South Asia, India must ensure that the perceptions of South Asians are favorable toward its policies. Despite having strong historical, cultural, and economic ties with its neighbors, India is challenged by issues of disputed borders, illegal immigration, and internal politics, among others (Ranjan, 2019). Given its size, geopolitical position, and huge population, India is often perceived as a regional hegemon (Destradi, 2012). The Indian government's social media accounts can be effective soft power tools, given that social media are rapidly being adopted and impacting the sociopolitical attitudes of the South Asian locals (Garud-Patkar, 2021). Thus, an investigation into the social media factors that influence India's reputation will contribute to an understanding of how India can strategize its social media diplomacy to build reputation among South Asians.

Factors Influencing National Reputation

In the next few sections, we look at three factors that are known to influence foreign citizens' perceptions about a nation, and we examine these in the case of India.

Engagement on Social Media

Engagement is a multidimensional concept that is scrutinized from different social science perspectives, but still lacks a universal definition. Corporate firms, like nations using social media, aim for high level of engagement with their audiences to improve their reputation (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Individuals' psychological state takes centrality when we consider their engagement in an activity. Scholars, especially in marketing research, take a three-dimensional approach to the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional connection of customers with a brand to measure engagement (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyukcan-Tetik, & Beukeboom, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). However, with the advent of social media, scholarly interests in brand engagement have shifted from behavioral-cognitive intent measures to instant quantifiable interactions with a

brand (Kozinets, 2014). On social media, engagement is a combined measure of creative and consumption activities related to the brand's content (Schivinski et al., 2016). In this study, we define creative engagement as the extent to which users create content related to India through activities such as liking, sharing, and commenting. Consumption refers to users' utilization of such content through activities such as reading posts, watching videos, and viewing photos related to India. Such online engagement positively influences consumers' behavior in terms of loyalty and dedication to the product (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Hollebeek et al., 2014), and consumers' cognition in terms of an increased likelihood of purchase intentions and brand awareness (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013). Moreover, virtual engagement with the product also impacts the emotional dimension as customers exhibit fanlike behavior by frequently visiting the brand store (Dholakia & Durham, 2010) and spreading positive information about the product (Hutter et al., 2013).

Users' social media engagement with a company's activities also positively influences the firm's reputation. Dijkmans and associates (2015) found that higher user engagement in terms of familiarity with (cognition) and following (behavior) of an airline's social media activities led to positive perception of the airline's reputation because customers were exposed to positive content that aroused favorable sentiments about the company. Just like firms create online communities that are specific to themselves to actively engage their social media audience (Li, Berens, & de Maertelaere, 2013), governments also create user groups that network around their social media channels. A good example is the Indian government's diplomacy accounts—considered in this study—that have attracted followers who share, like, and comment on India-related content and, at times, are involved in conversations. Hence, these quantifiable variables are a good measure of India's reputation.

Based on the preceding discussion and following Schivinski and colleagues (2016), we define engagement with a nation on social media as the sum total of creative and consumption activities (following and reading posts from foreign government channels, watching videos, photos, and images related to these channels, etc.). Hence, we hypothesize:

H1:   *The engagement of users with the Indian government on social media is positively associated with the reputation of India.*

Online Social Relations

Online relationships develop when "two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan" (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, p. 246). When individuals associate on virtual platforms, they can present their opinions to a large audience and influence users in their network and beyond (X. Wang et al., 2012). Thus, virtual relationships influence behavior in terms of the ability to trust and to stay honest and committed (Gunter, 2013). Only one known study found that individuals who had stronger online social relations with American citizens rated the United States more negatively than others (Seo, 2013). But many scholars, especially in the marketing field, agree that peer-to-peer relationships in the social media context positively influence perceptions toward the product and the company (Kozinets, 2014; X. Wang et al., 2012). We argue that this could also be true for a nation. To conceptualize online social relations, we borrow from Seo (2013), who measured online social relations at two levels: network size and network time. Following Seo (2013), we define network size as number of Indian friends a user is connected with on a social network, and

network time is the amount of time a user spends communicating with Indians. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

H2:   *The degree of social media users' online social relations with India is positively associated with the reputation of India.*

Information Use

Scholars state that reputation builds when information is circulated about a firm and its activities through media sources that act as advertisements to provide an image about a firm to individuals who do not have direct contact with the firm (Deephouse, 2000). To enhance awareness about how national reputation builds, it is critical to know the extent to which foreign citizens depend on certain communication channels for their knowledge about a country (Deephouse, 2000; Seo, 2013). In their study, Yang and associates (2008) found that the U.S. citizens' use of information sources, such as online media and their native media, including national television, national newspapers, and cable television, to get information about South Korea was highly correlated with national reputation. In this study, we define information use as the extent to which users utilize native traditional sources and social media sources to get information about India. "Native traditional sources" measures the extent to which users stay informed about India from movies, radio, newspapers, and television that originate in their home country. Given that the extent of information use has not been examined in the case of India's national reputation, we hypothesize:

H3:   *The extent of social media users' information use to stay informed about India is positively associated with the reputation of India.*

Personal Experience

Recent studies show that hearing about the nation from family and friends and the media or using the nation's products influence perceptions about a nation (Jain & Winner, 2013; Kiambi, 2017). However, a majority of studies demonstrate that people who have personally visited a nation tend to have positive perceptions about the nation (Kiambi, 2017; Kim et al., 2020). Personal experience was included as a control variable.

Method

A cross-sectional survey of users on social media was conducted in June 2017. The goal was to survey users who follow the Indian government's diplomatic accounts on Twitter and Facebook. A social media user is defined as an individual 18 years of age or older who follows at least one of the Indian government's diplomatic accounts on Twitter or Facebook. These accounts include Indian Diplomacy, Ministry of External Affairs, and the Indian embassies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Users who are not Indians by citizenship, but are citizens of the mentioned nations were recruited because the aim was to examine the perceptions of foreign citizens and limit the examination of national reputation to a region—in this case, South Asia.

A list of social media users who follow these accounts was obtained using Twitter API and Facebook Graph API. In addition, the present study only recruited active social media users, defined by Naaman, Boase, and Lai (2010) as those who (a) have at least 10 followers and have posted at least 10 self-composed messages on either their Twitter or Facebook profiles and (b) are tweeting/posting as individuals and not as organizations, institutions, or marketers who have something to sell. These criteria were set to eliminate fake profiles, which rarely publish original content (Brown, 2018).

Sampling and Recruitment

The study used convenience sampling. Respondents were recruited from Twitter and Facebook because the objective was to examine the attitudes of users who follow the Indian government accounts on these platforms. To recruit participants, we followed Yuan, Bare, Johnson, and Saberi (2014), who sent direct messages with information about their study and a survey link. This required us to visit all participants' profiles to manually authenticate their accounts based on their profile photos, visible friends, and posted content (Brown, 2018). The direct message feature also helped the researchers to address respondents' doubts about authenticity of the survey link, use of the data for nonpolitical purposes, and data privacy. The questionnaire was pretested on 14 participants who were citizens of the South Asian nations considered in this study. Respondents from different countries were likely to interpret questions differently, and to ensure multinational validity, a pretest was necessary (Kalyango et al., 2017). After in-depth discussions with the respondents, several questions and choices were rephrased to enhance clarity. The final survey version was administered through Qualtrics. To encourage participation, the study offered respondents a chance to participate in a lucky draw and win 10 gift cards worth $5 each. The survey instrument recorded participants' responses on the measures that follow.

Reputation Index

To measure respondents' thoughts about India's reputation, measures from the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005) were adopted. The index was modified to include questions indicating regional appeal as a measure of India's position in South Asia. Respondents indicated, on a 7-point scale, how much they agreed or disagreed on 14 items measuring emotional appeal (e.g., "I feel good about India"; "I like India"), economic appeal (e.g., "India's infrastructure is strong"; "India produces quality products"), political appeal (e.g., "India's democratic institutions are strong"; "Indian politicians follow rule of law"), and regional appeal (e.g., "India works for peace in South Asia"; "India works to unite South Asia").

Engagement With the Indian Government Content

Respondents indicated all the Indian government accounts that they followed on social media and the extent to which they engaged in 14 activities related to creation (e.g., "I comment on their posts, I share their photos, videos, etc.") and consumption (e.g., "I read their status updates, I watch their videos, photos, etc."). This was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Online Social Relations

This construct was adopted from Seo (2013), who measured online social relations in terms of network size and network time. Online network size was measured by asking respondents, "How many Indians are you connected with on each of these sites?" (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp). Network time was measured by asking respondents to rate the amount of time they spent communicating with Indians on these sites. This was measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Information Use

Two constructs were measured under this variable: native traditional media sources and social media sources. On a 7-point Likert-type scale, respondents rated the extent to which they used native traditional media sources (e.g., "Movies produced in my country"; "newspapers of my country") and social media sources (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to receive information about India.

Demographic and Other Variables

Level of education was estimated by asking respondents to indicate the highest level of education completed. Age, gender, employment status, and nationality, along with the types of social media (Twitter or Facebook) respondents used to connect with the Indian government, and the Indian government channels they followed on these platforms were also included.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Approximately 800 South Asians (non-Indian citizens) who followed the Indian government diplomatic accounts on social media were invited to participate. Of these, 650 users answered the survey, yielding a response rate of 80%. However, 387 responses were considered because only these participants identified themselves as citizens of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka.

Of the 387 respondents, 18.9% ($n = 73$) were Afghan citizens; 18.3% ($n = 71$) were Bangladeshi citizens; 16.8% ($n = 65$) were Bhutanese citizens; 16.5% ($n = 64$) were Nepali citizens; 17.3% ($n = 67$) were Pakistani citizens; and 12.1% ($n = 47$) were Sri Lankan citizens. In terms of gender, 82.9% ($n = 301$) were male, was substantially larger than the percentage of females, 17.1% ($n = 62$).

Respondents were mainly between 19 and 39 years old. A majority were in the 19–29 age group (69.1%, $n = 266$) and the 30–39 age group (23%, $n = 88$). Five were younger than 19 years, 16 (4.1%) were in the 40–49 age-group, eight (2.1%) were in the 50–59 age group, and three (0.8%) were in the 60–69 age group. No one was 70 years or older. Respondents reported the highest level of education completed. A majority of the respondents had earned a bachelor's (44.7%, $n = 173$) or a master's degree (31.9%, $n = 122$). Forty-nine respondents (12.8%) had attained higher secondary education, 16 (4.2%) had completed a vocational diploma, and only five (1.3 %) had attained education up to secondary school. None reported lack of any formal education.

Respondents were asked about their employment status: About 70.9% (n = 292) said they were employed, which included 58.7% (n = 227) who were employed full time, 10.9% (n = 42) who were employed part time, and 1.3% (n = 5) who were employed but not working due to temporary work closure. Only one (0.3%) respondent was retired, and 76 (20.5%) were not employed. Respondents were also asked if they had visited India. A majority of respondents (43.2%, n = 167) had never visited India, 128 (33.1%) had visited one to four times, 38 (9.8%) had visited five to nine times, and 54 (14%) had visited India 10 or more times.

Data Analyses

In SPSS Version 26, the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm was used to estimate missing values because EM produces excellent estimates of means, standard deviations, covariances, and correlations necessary for conducting exploratory factor analysis (EFA; Weaver & Maxwell, 2014).

Exploratory Factor Analyses

To ensure factor structure, an EFA with maximum likelihood and promax rotation was conducted. Items with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained, and those with factor loadings below .40 on a single factor or with cross-loadings on multiple factors were removed (Williams, Onsman, & Brown, 2010). For national reputation index, four items were removed. Of the 20 items, 15 were retained with factor loadings ranging from .50 to .98; this explained 60% of the variance and resulted in an adequate Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of .926, which indicated that the strength of the relationships among variables was high. A significant Bartlett's test of sphericity showed that there were sufficient correlations among variables to proceed with factor analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). The items loaded on four constructs: emotional, cultural, political, and regional appeals.

For online engagement, of 11 factors, one was removed because of cross-loadings. Factor loadings for the remaining items ranged from .51 to .96, explaining 72.32% of the variance with a KMO measure of .89 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity. The items loaded on two constructs: creation and consumption. For online social relations, of the 21 items, three were removed. For the remaining items, factor loadings ranged from .422 to .931; the KMO measure was .78, with a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity. The items explained a variance of 73.85% and loaded on two constructs: network size and network time.

For information use, 10 items with low loadings were removed. For the remaining items, factor loadings ranged from .495 to .851, explaining 70.21% of the variance with KMO measure of .70 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity. Two constructs were created: native traditional media sources and social media sources.

Normality of Scales

After EFA, we assessed for data normality because EFA permits nonnormality, and reducing sample sizes before EFA could result in loss of important information (Wegener & Fabrigar, 2012). For all the scales, the values were within range based on the cutoff of 2 for skewness and 7 for kurtosis (Kline, 2005). See Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alpha, Skewness, and Kurtosis for Constructs.

	M	*SD*	Cronbach's alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis
National Reputation				−.09 to .95	−.09 to 2.71
Emotional Appeal	4.62	1.70	.911		
Economic Appeal	4.42	1.20	.716		
Political Appeal	3.74	1.67	.780		
Regional Appeal	4.00	1.84	.940		
Online Engagement				−.57 to .47	−.60 to .84
Consumption	4.23	1.722	.905		
Creation	4.64	1.668	.794		
Online Social Relations					
Network Size	2.25	1.58	.681		
Network Time	2.47	1.81	.849		
Information Use			.	−.03 to .44	−.59 to .57
Native Traditional Media Sources	4.64	1.66	.794		
Social Media Sources	3.31	1.72	.787		

Note. To attain normality, skewness values should be < 2, and kurtosis values should be < 7 (Kline, 2005).

Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using AMOS Version 26, was conducted to assess the adequacy of the factor structure for the scales. The factor loadings on all the scales ranged from .49 to .96. For reputation index, online engagement, and online social relations, the models met the goodness of fit criteria (Hair et al., 2014; Kline, 2005); see Table 2. However, the information use model resulted in an unsatisfactory fit, x^2 = 155.7, df = 26, x^2/df = 4.04, p = < .000, comparative fit index (CFI) = .885, root mean squared error approximation (RMSEA) = .114, standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = .0641. Error terms on two items on native traditional media sources were covaried, x^2 = 100.4, df = 25, x^2/df = 4.04., p = < .000, CFI = .933, RMSEA = .088, SRMR = .056, and then errors on two other items on social media sources were covaried resulting is a satisfactory model fit, x^2 = 63.6, df = 24, x^2/df = 2.65, p = < .002, CFI = .965, RMSEA = .065, SRMR = .051. The measurement model resulted in a satisfactory model fit, x^2 = 76.9, df = 28, x^2/df = 2.74, p = < .001, CFI = .954, RMSEA = .067, SRMR = .048, suggested by Hair and colleagues (2014).

Table 2. Goodness-of-Fit Indexes for CFA Models.

	x^2	df	x^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
National Reputation	264.1	94	2.839	.953	.074	.051
Online Engagement	66.7	23	2.90	.984	.074	.051
Online Social Relations	24.8	8	3.00	.979	.074	.042
Information Use (revised)	63.6	24	2.65	.965	.065	.051

Note. x^2/df = chi-square/degree of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean squared error approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean squared residual. Goodness of fit criteria: x^2/df ≤ 5, CFI = ≥ .90, RMSEA ≤ .08, SRMR < .08.

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

We calculated the convergent and discriminant validity (see Table 3) to ensure that items measured the same construct and were unrelated. All the variables had an average variance extracted (AVE) value of above .05, thereby establishing convergent validity. The square root of AVE was calculated and was found to be greater than the correlations among the variables, thereby establishing discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 3. Convergent and Discriminant Validity for the Constructs.

	M	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. National Reputation	4.4	1.57	0.606	.77			
2. Online Engagement	4.62	1.70	0.661	.72	.81		
3. Online Social Relations	4.42	1.20	0.510	.61	.68	.71	
4. Information Use	3.74	1.67	0.527	.21	.24	.54	.72

Note. Convergent validity is established when factor loadings are with AVE ≥ .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The values in bold are the AVE square roots, which are greater than the correlations for the constructs. AVE = average variance extracted.

Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using AMOS Version 26. Age, education level, nationality, type of social media channel and Indian government account that a user follows, gender, employment status, and personal experience were controlled. According to Collier (2020), if a control does not have a significant effect on any dependent variable, it should be removed because "it has an inconsequential effect on the model" (p. 148). Only personal experience had a significant relationship with national reputation and was retained. Figure 1 shows the model with the significant paths. The structural model resulted in an accepted model fit, x^2 = 123.7, df = 41, x^2/df = 3.01, p = < .001, CFI = .934, RMSEA = .070, SRMR = .050.
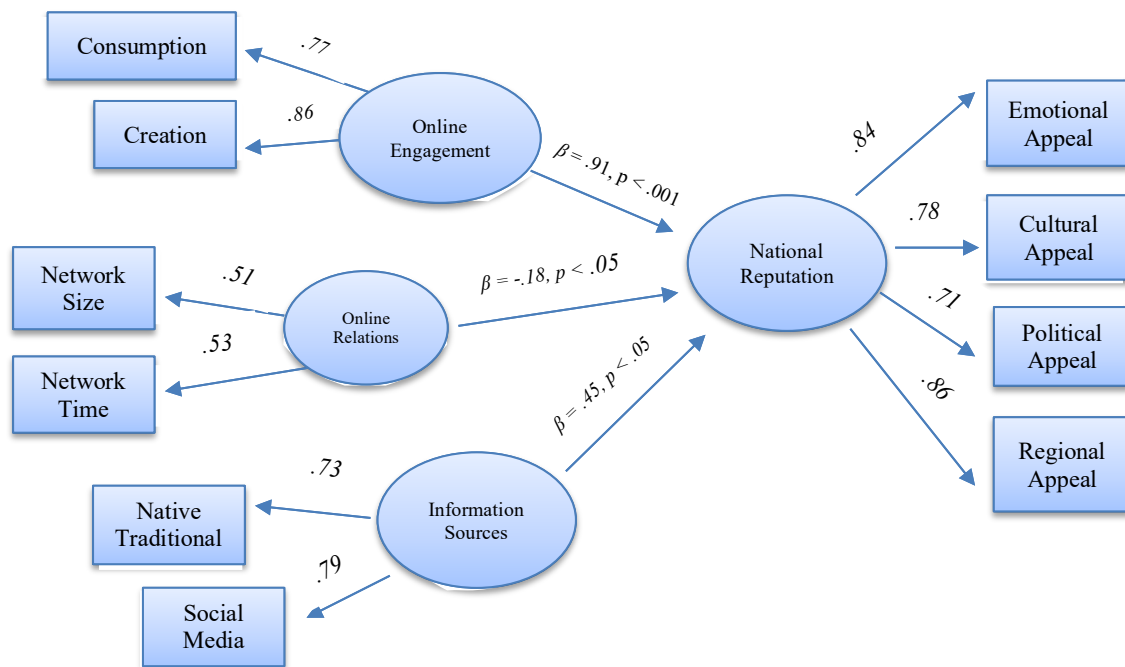
Figure 1. The tested model for the national reputation of India with standardized path estimates.

H1 is supported (β = .91, p < .001) because users' engagement with the Indian government on social media has a positive association with India's reputation. Users' online social relations has a significant negative relationship with the reputation of India (β = −.18, p < .05), thereby rejecting H2. Users' information use and their rating of India's reputation are positively associated, β = .45, p < .05, thereby supporting H3.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors of online engagement, online social relations, and information use that predict India's national reputation among South Asian social media users. National reputation was measured on four dimensions: emotional, economic, political, and regional appeals. The mean score for national reputation was high, indicating that the reputation of India among South Asians is positive. The South Asian nations are part of a single landmass, and their religions, culture, and languages are extensions of Indian subcultures, explaining their strong emotional connection with India. The positive perceptions about India on economic, political, and regional dimensions could be rooted in India's aim to have a united South Asia through supply of foreign aid and economic resources, and development of infrastructure projects in South Asia (Ranjan, 2019). In recent years, India has also restructured its social media diplomacy strategies along the lines of the United States and aligned its agendas to match the priorities of South Asians; this could be the reason for the positive acceptance of India's foreign policies in South Asia, resulting in a high national reputation (Garud-Patkar, 2021). Other the key findings of our study follow.

National Reputation and Engagement

The more engaged users are with the Indian government on social media, the more positively they rate India's reputation. This finding is in line with marketing and public relations scholars such as Dijkmans and associates (2015), Li and colleagues (2013), and Van Doorn and cohorts (2010), who also have demonstrated that high engagement improves organizational reputation. Engagement was a measure of two activities: creative and consumption. Virtual engagement—more specifically, through content creation activities such as liking, sharing, or commenting—involves emotional involvement on part of the users (Dijkmans et al., 2015). On official embassy accounts, it is expected that this emotional state is strengthened as politicians, diplomats, and the staff who manage the accounts post content focusing on mutual-country initiatives, successful developmental projects, and beneficial partnerships. Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) argue that an emotional relationship between customers and an organization results in increased customer loyalty, commitment, and trust, which explains why high engagement improves reputation.

In the case of India, users' high engagement was not a surprising element given that the Indian government Twitter and Facebook accounts focus on involving users in conversations. As illustrated earlier, many former and present Indian ministers give personal attention to users, answer their queries on time, and elevate their issues in the case of administrative obstacles. Moreover, users surveyed in this study followed many diplomatic accounts; one such account, the Facebook page of the Indian embassy in Nepal, India in Nepal, organized weekly quizzes to foster a two-way symmetrical conversation with its followers. Through these quizzes, the Indian government disseminated positive information about India. The quizzes were framed to encourage social media users to return to the India in Nepal page. Moreover, just like brands and corporations that offer lucrative deals to ensure customers' return, the embassy account offered free tickets for Bollywood films and embassy-sponsored trips to India. Such initiatives encouraged users to stay highly engaged with the government of India.

National Reputation and Online Social Relations

The more engaged users are with the Indian government on social media, the more positively they rate India's reputation. This finding is in line with marketing and public relations scholars such as Dijkmans and associates (2015). The strength of online social relations (a measure of network size and network time) was negatively associated with national reputation. This means that social media users who were friends with Indians (network size) on social media and spent time communicating with Indians on social media (network time) negatively rated India's national reputation. Our findings concur with Seo (2013), who also showed that South Koreans with strong online social relations were less likely to positively rate the reputation of America. The plausible explanation for this lies in the literature on virtual relationships and their impact on real-life behavior. For instance, Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) asked bankers and college students to evaluate the quality of their online and offline relationships and concluded that these groups needed virtual media to have social interactions, but they could not build or sustain relationships using these media. This influence seems to be more pronounced in case of South Asian societies, which in general are traditional and collectivist. The focus is more on group relationships with family, friends, and relatives, who are more influential and trustworthy. Hence, it is likely that South Asians trust their personal experiences more than their online network.

The high personal experience that was positively related to national reputation is also an indication of why the strength of online relations did not positively predict national reputation. Physical visits to a country provide multiple experiences and connectedness with people, culture, arts, and geography, in comparison to online experience, which is not likely to positively influence one's perceptions about a nation.

National Reputation and Information Use

In this study, information use—comprising of the extent of utilization of native traditional media sources that originate in the social media users' home countries (native to foreign citizens), and social media sources—was positively associated with perceived national reputation. Information use positively predicting India's national reputation could be due to elites in the targeted foreign nations promoting a positive image of India to their respective media. India regularly contributes to numerous infrastructural and development projects in South Asia and is also among the top financial aid providers to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. It is likely that such support gets the attention of foreign elites to positively portray India's image, which in turn is reported in the news media and plausibly picked up by social media users. In theory, mediated public diplomacy scholars such as Entman (2008) stated that governments have to first influence foreign elites and then expect them to influence the media, journalists, nongovernmental organizations, and others in their country media to build a favorable national reputation.

Implications

The study provides several implications for social media diplomacy. First, it emphasizes that initiating conversations with foreign publics on social media and keeping them engaged with discussions on issues of interest allow a nation to bolster its positive image. Second, the finding that online users get information about a nation not just using their virtual network, but also through their native media highlights that public diplomacy—conducted using traditional media—is still vital in an era dominated by new media technologies. Therefore, diplomats should continue to target local journalists and politicians through traditional diplomacy channels to improve national reputation. Further, the social media realm could be used for building trust through an explanation of a nation's policies; this information is often somewhat distorted when it reaches foreign citizens through their native traditional media. Third, the study makes vital contributions to the area of relationship-based public diplomacy, as it operates on social media, noting that to build relationships, nations need to strengthen their social media connectedness based on the number of followers. Last, the implications of the study are unique, with its specific South Asian focus, and its findings provide new perspectives on the understudied behavior of South Asians on social media.

Limitations

A challenge, which is also a possible limitation of this study, stems from social media being a vast sphere where multiple factors interact with each other. The factors of engagement, online social relations, and information use examined here were hypothesized from previous studies. However, these factors may be only a few plausible variables that influence the national reputation of India. Nonetheless, they provide important explanations of the relationship- and reputation-building models in the context of government communication. Future studies can expand the scope of analysis to include other individual-level factors—

such as personality traits of users and their political inclination, among others—that are likely to influence national reputation in the social media context.

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