

Digital Celebrities as Grassroots Diplomats: A Case Study of "Ruige" in China's International Communication

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Abstract. In addition to official public diplomats, grassroots communicators on social media also influence modern digital diplomacy. This research considers how digital celebrities can act as grassroots diplomats in China's global communication practice based on a case study of "Ruige", a well-known Chinese content creator who has earned the nickname the "Chinese Trump" for posting cross-cultural videos that have generated significant international interest. The study considers the concept of digital celebrities as grassroots diplomats within intercultural public diplomacy, para-diplomacy, and source credibility theory. Therefore, a qualitative approach is adopted in the study, and it is designed using a single-case study methodology. Data are drawn from Ruige's five most-watched YouTube videos and several videos chosen using the constructed week method. This selection aims to observe changes in narrative strategies across a complete communication cycle. The findings suggest that he establishes his identity as a grassroots diplomat through the construction of his image as an ordinary Chinese person, platform-specific authenticity, humor and performance, and cultural references.

Keywords: digital celebrities, public diplomacy, China's international communication, social media influencers, narrative strategies

1. Introduction

In a highly interconnected world, international communication has become an vital component of a nation's soft power, whilst digitalization is reshaping diplomatic dynamics. Public diplomacy refers to efforts by international actors to understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences to advance national policies and interests [1]. Traditional public diplomacy was dominated by official actors through a top-down approach, yet it lacked effectiveness due to its inherent formality and bias [2]. Social media has given rise to digital influencers who bridge cultural differences through "authenticity, closeness, and genuine passion," consistent with China's "official guidance plus grassroots participation" approach and the goal of "telling China's story well" [3, 4]. As key grassroots public diplomacy actors, digital influencers produce messages based on personal experience and cross-cultural interaction. These messages are free from the rigidity and politicization of official communication, thereby resonating with global youth and bridging cultural gaps [5]. Research shows that audience-centered, non-combative narratives achieve better effects than confrontational or highly politicized stances [6]. As China's image in non-mainland regions

(such as Southeast Asia and Africa) has consistently faced challenges stemming from Western biases, the "China threat theory" and trust deficits [7], exploring the role of digital influencers in the positive promotion of China's image is of considerable significance. It addresses the gap caused by an overemphasis on official actors at the expense of grassroots diplomatic agents, whilst, in practice, helping to complement China's official communications, mitigate "Wolf Warrior diplomacy", and reduce the risks associated with over-reliance on one-way broadcast-style communication [6].

In relevant academic research, Huang & Wang proposed China's intercultural model, emphasizing the "coordinated management of domestic and foreign public opinion" via a "central kitchen-style" process [8]. As official practices face issues such as "inauthentic amplification" eroding "communication credibility" and a "lack of two-way interaction", as well as resistance triggered by official "confrontational narratives" [1, 2], the role of non-state actors have evolved from "supplementary to indispensable" in digital public diplomacy [9]. In grassroots research, Tian et al. identified strategies such as "the explorer" and "the expert," confirming that non-official actors can "break political biases through non-state identities" [3]. However, current research still exhibits several gaps, including inadequate study of the "unique operational models" of grassroots digital influencers due to an overemphasis on official actors; a failure to adapt core theories such as intercultural public diplomacy to the specific context of Chinese local influencers, thereby hindering clarity in role definition; and a lack of academic research exploring how grassroots influencers address official communication gaps or elucidating the mechanisms of synergy between grassroots influencers and official narratives [3, 8, 10].

Therefore, this study adopts the case of *Ruige*, a prominent Chinese influencer, and utilises intercultural public diplomacy, para-diplomacy theory and source credibility theory to examine *Ruige*'s content features, narrative strategies, audience interactions and its alignment with China's strategic narratives. Through analysis, this study aims to explore pathways for conducting grassroots diplomacy through "self-presentation and discourse construction", as well as the alignment of such narratives with China's top-down strategies, in order to reveal its "synergy and complementary logic". Furthermore, by analysing influencer-led diplomacy, this study proposes pathways for optimizing China's "pluralistic and collaborative" international communication system. This research enriches the understanding of non-state actors and grassroots public diplomacy in the digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. The evolution of public diplomacy in the digital age

With the advent of digital technology, public diplomacy has undergone tremendous changes, transitioning from its past state-centric form of one-way propaganda into a more dynamic and participatory field [9]. This development has altered the balance of power in international public opinion, which in turn has altered the logic of cross-border communication and provided China with new opportunities to accomplish the objective of "telling China's stories well." Three essential changes that characterize the development of public diplomacy include the shift from one-way propaganda to two-way interaction, the rise of non-state actors, and China's "intercultural" model.

2.1.1. From one-way propaganda to two-way interaction

Conventional public diplomacy functions through a top-down approach, with states and state-controlled media as the only sources of uniform messages. As noted by Pamment, the one-way

broadcast-style approach is characterized by ideological coherence but fails to account for the varying cultural backgrounds of foreign publics, thus producing inflexible and politically charged narratives [1, 2]. For instance, early Chinese foreign communication was primarily concerned with interpreting policies and showcasing accomplishments without any localization, which rendered it incomprehensible to overseas audiences [8].

The advent of the digital age has sparked a paradigm shift towards the "co-construction of meaning" through bi-directional interaction [11]. In digital media, audiences become engaged participants in narratives through commenting, retweeting, and creative collaboration [3]. According to Bause, the digital context facilitates the engagement of audiences in the process of opinion-making, where today's audiences engage in filtering, interpreting, and re-transmitting information, which renders old-fashioned models irrelevant [12]. This new trend was corroborated by Huang & Wang: during the China-US trade dispute, China's interactive digital diplomacy effectively targeted foreign audiences, thus boosting information acceptance [8]. The rationale behind the trend is simple: public diplomacy is driven by a shift from "persuasion through indoctrination" to "understanding through dialogue" through interaction [4].

2.1.2. The rise of non-state actors

Digital decentralization has shattered official actors' monopoly, elevating non-state actors - including digital celebrities - to an "indispensable" role in public diplomacy [9]. Bause defines these players as "political social media influencers (PSMI)" - individuals who build personal brands to reach dispersed audiences through self-produced political content, extending traditional opinion leadership into the digital sphere [12]. Unlike officials, non-state actors leverage authenticity, closeness, and genuine passion to avoid the "propaganda" label [3].

In the context of Western media dominance and the prevalence of the "China threat theory", this diversity is critical for China [7]. Mattingly & Sundquist show that grassroots narratives outperform "Wolf Warrior" rhetoric in terms of improving China's image [6]. Bause adds that PSMIs differ from traditional opinion leaders in their strategic reliance on algorithms and professional skills [12]. Specifically, their influence stems from navigating digital ecosystems to optimize visibility and engagement [12]. Non-state actors have evolved from supplements to core pillars, embodying public diplomacy's de-authorization trend [9].

2.1.3. China's "intercultural" model

China has established a distinctive "intercultural" strategy by leveraging both domestic and international public opinion through the "central kitchen" approach [8]. This strategy eliminates the distinction between domestic and international communication efforts, treating them as integrated components that influence one another. Domestic communication efforts facilitate the formation of international narratives, and conversely, international narratives influence domestic ones [4]. This model ensures consistency of information whilst accommodating the diverse expressions of other stakeholders, which serves to consolidate resources and foster an credible environment through mutual validation.

However, this strategy struggles to achieve equilibrium between uniformity and diversity. Excessive centralisation may lead to narrative rigidity, thereby leaving opportunities for non-state actors to exploit. According to Bause, the functioning of PSMIs is in constant conflict between autonomy and platform dependency, since the former allows them to express themselves freely, while the latter forces them to coordinate with the government agenda [12].

2.2. Digital celebrities as grassroots diplomats

Among non-state actors, digital celebrities have emerged as core grassroots diplomacy players due to their broad reach, emotional resonance, and narrative flexibility [3]. As "grassroots diplomats," they combine (semi-)professional communication with authentic, daily-life content [12], building cultural bridges through non-official identities to dissolve political prejudices.

2.2.1. Defining the grassroots identity

The competitiveness of grassroots diplomats stems from embodying authenticity, closeness and passionate authenticity [3]. Audrezet et al. Have refined this into a dual framework passionate authenticity (motivation-driven content) and transparent authenticity (open disclosure of affiliations) [13]. This combination builds trust by blending emotional sincerity with credible information sharing. The "authenticity" primarily stems from personal experiences of online influencers who share daily life in China, helping to disrupt stereotypical perceptions of the country [7]. "Closeness" uses accessible language and formats (e.g., short videos) to lower cross-cultural barriers [2]. Moreover, "passionate authenticity" fosters emotional resonance, a key tool for breaking political biases [12]. These emotional narrative approaches are demonstrably more effective than official rational persuasion in engaging overseas audiences [6].

2.2.2. Strategies of influence

Digital celebrities adopt tailored personas: the Explorer and the Expert [3]. Explorers share non-politicized content (cuisine, travel) to humanize China through relatable narratives. Experts use data and analysis to counter Western misinformation, reinforcing credibility through authoritative citations [2]. Bause notes that Experts strengthen professionalism through structured arguments and fact-checking [12].

Many use hybrid strategies, combining emotional connection with professional authority [3]. Consistency is critical: Audrezet et al. warn that inconsistent personas undermine authenticity [13]. These strategies enable subtle influence by avoiding overt political labeling and framing narratives as personal perspectives [3].

2.2.3. Overcoming official constraints

Digital celebrities have bypassed the official "rigidity and politicisation" through three ways. First, they have expanded the themes beyond politics to include daily life and offer a complement to official macro-narratives [7]. Second, they have reduced the formality of officialese by adding humour and candour [3]. Thirdly, they give equal attention to all audiences and modify the story content according to changes overseas [8]. According to Baum, association is linked to a degree of consumer consciousness [12].

Sharing daily life, such as cooking, commuting and festivals, reveals "ordinary people's views" that are contrary to the "China threat theory" [6]. Audrezet and others believe that in-line with one's own values, they will be more effective [13]. Research shows that these "depoliticised" stories are more likely to win over the public quietly over time than direct propaganda.

2.3. Synergy between grassroots and official narratives

Digital-age public diplomacy is a cooperative system where grassroots and official narratives work together [4]. Digital celebrities' narratives support the government's strategic goals; thus, autonomous and compliant must be balanced to avoid conflict.

2.3.1. Complementary logic

The diversity and trustworthiness of grassroots narratives address China's "trust deficit" and Western bias [7]. The two stages of complementary logic are perspective and aim. Official narratives focus on macro-level strategies, and grassroots cases offer micro-experiences to build a "macro + micro" system. Official goals (policy dissemination) and grassroots goals (emotional resonance) work together to achieve "rational understanding + emotional identification" [4]. Bause adds PSMIs to reach a younger generation not covered by official media [12].

2.3.2. Alignment with grand strategies

Grassroots narratives indirectly support the grand strategy of "national rejuvenation" through personal growth stories. Tian and others have found that pro-China celebrities adopt official frameworks (e.g., "system superiority") and present them through relatable experiences, such as linking technological innovation to daily life [3]. Hobbs and others have found that a "top-down + bottom-up" cooperative mode can make abstract ideas more concrete [4]. Bause agrees with the national goal and will implement it at the local level. The two are related and have influenced each other over time [12].

2.3.3. Risks and limitations

"Wolf Warrior" diplomacy's confrontation and grassroots narratives' audience-oriented approaches are in conflict [14]. Contradictory messages will confuse the audience, and excessive politicalisation harms grassroots sincerity [8]. Bause thinks that excessive alignment of officials hurts the credibility of PSMIs [12].

Other risks include Western "over-interpretation of grassroots content as "disguised propaganda" [7] and a lack of transparency in official-grassroots cooperation [13]. Good cooperation should be both autonomous and coordinated, and otherwise, there will be no communication. Research Questions (RQs) were proposed:

RQ1 (Individual level): How does *Ruige* develop his identity as a grassroots diplomat through his narration and presentation to reach out to the global audience?

RQ2 (Strategy level): To what extent do the narratives of *Ruige* relate to or differ from China's strategic narratives such as "telling China's stories", and how is the synergy generated?

RQ3 (Systemic level): What are the particular advantages and disadvantages of employing digital influencers such as *Ruige* in dealing with the "Wolf Warrior effect" and maximizing China's international communications system?

3. Methodology

This study seeks to examine the realization of the diplomatic role by the digital celebrity *Ruige* through certain narrative techniques. In order to make sure that the research is conducted scientifically and systematically, this study uses the qualitative single case study method,

considering *Ruige* as an example of a typical Chinese grassroots diplomat in an international communication context. The research design will employ the use of two methods of analysis, namely, multimodal discourse analysis and content analysis.

3.1. Sampling strategy

A two-phase sampling strategy is implemented in the current study to achieve both depth and breadth of the study.

(1) Typical case sampling: Applying the purposive sampling technique, the five most watched videos in the official YouTube channel of *Ruige* were sampled. The view count was chosen as the criterion since it is related to international communication and represents *Ruige*'s most characteristic narrative style.

(2) Full sample scanning: This paper chose the entire communication cycle within a year, starting from March of the previous year and ending in March of the current year. In order not to be affected by temporary factors, a so-called "constructed week" sampling was used, which means that one structural week was selected every quarter, resulting in 28 samples altogether.

3.2. Data analysis dimensions

Based on the three core research questions (RQ1 - RQ3), this study constructs a multi-layered analytical framework. In the identity construction analysis (RQ1), multimodal discourse analysis examines visual and nonverbal symbols: casual attire, street/restaurant settings, Trump imitation, tone, and gestures. Special attention is paid to self-framing as "an ordinary Chinese citizen" to reduce political connotations. Regarding the strategic synergy analysis for RQ2, content analysis codes videos by theme: daily life, cultural exchange, social commentary, and response to Western doubts. It analyzes how macro concepts such as national rejuvenation are translated into concrete daily experiences. For communication effect evaluation (for RQ3), sentiment analysis of comments (positive, neutral, skeptical) assesses audience acceptance. Key phrases indicating attitude change are identified to evaluate debiasing effects and reduction of "Wolf Warrior" stereotypes.

3.3. Research steps & coding scheme

The study is implemented in three stages: first, qualitative coding is conducted to analyze visuals and lines (RQ1); second, narrative perspectives are statistically analyzed (RQ2); finally, the degree of "meaning co-construction" is evaluated through comment section mining (RQ3).

In order to guarantee the reliability of the quantitative statistics analysis, a preliminary coding scheme will be created for this study which includes variables such as general metadata, setting characters (explorer, expert, etc.), authenticity enactment, main topic, and audience engagement polarities. Piloting coding will take place throughout the course of the research and 5 samples will be chosen for classification adjustment purposes.

3.4. Coding procedure

This study is conducted by following a systematic approach to research methodology. Selection of case studies, sampling, transcribing videos, developing a coding scheme, conducting a pilot test, and analysis were all conducted within the communication cycle from March 2025 to March 2026.

3.4.1. Sample selection and data collection

This paper chooses the digital celebrity *Ruige* as a typical case. This paper uses two methods in the process of sample selection:

- Typical Case Sampling Method: Choose five most watched videos in the official YouTube channel of *Ruige* as core samples for analysis.
- Constructed Week Sampling Method: Select four structured weeks per quarter, which means selecting 28 samples in order to track his changing phases of narrative and avoid deviations due to fluctuating communication performance.

All 33 videos are uniformly archived. Metadata such as titles, release dates, links, view counts, likes and comment volumes are fully collected. Video content, non-verbal symbols and comment section feedback are transcribed and recorded frame by frame to establish a standardized research database.

3.4.2. Coding system design

Combined with the research questions and the requirements of multimodal discourse analysis and content analysis, this study constructs a 9-dimension coding table to conduct unified coding for all video samples:

- Character Persona: Explorer, Imitator, Civilian Observer, Expert
- Authenticity Performance: Passionate authenticity, Transparent authenticity
- Narrative Style: Sincere / Straightforward, Humorous / Satirical, Conflict / Debate
- Non-Verbal Signs: Accent imitation, characteristic gestures
- Core Themes: Urban / Infrastructure, Cultural Customs, Response to International Conflicts, International Exchange, Entertainment Script, Satire on Trump,
- Macro-Concept Mapping: Chinese-style modernization, Mutual benefit and win-win results, Institutional superiority, Community with a shared future for mankind, National rejuvenation
- Non-Synergy Logic: Macro-themes microcosmized, Official discourse popularized,
- Non-Audience Interaction Polarity: Positive, Neutral, Skeptical
- De-biasing Effect: Yes, No

Before formal coding, 5 videos are randomly selected for pilot coding to calibrate category boundaries, unify judgment criteria, optimize the reliability and validity of the coding table, and finally form a stable coding system.

3.4.3. Formal analysis process

Identity Construction Analysis: Multimodal discourse analysis is carried out on 5 core high-traffic videos to decode the construction strategy of *Ruige*'s image as an "ordinary Chinese" grassroots diplomat from the dimensions of visual symbols, non-verbal behaviors and identity labels.

- Narrative Synergy Analysis: Content coding and statistics are conducted on 28 constructed-week videos to analyze their theme distribution, macro-concept mapping and synergy logic, revealing the implicit matching mechanism between grassroots narratives and national official narratives.

- Communication Effect Evaluation: Combined with likes, comment data and high-rated comment content, sentiment polarity analysis is conducted to judge audience acceptance attitudes, and evaluate its effects of cross-cultural de-biasing and national image repair.

- Triangulation: Cross-verification is carried out among video content coding, audience interaction data, core cases and public diplomacy theories. Conflicting information is reviewed by tracing back to the original materials to ensure reliable research conclusions.

4. Findings

4.1. Ruige's grassroots diplomat identity construction

4.1.1. The construction of an ordinary, non-official Chinese persona

It should be noted that *Ruige* is considered a grassroots diplomat due to the simple reason that he always acts as a common Chinese citizen as opposed to being an authorized diplomatic representative. This is clearly observed through his videos where he describes Chongqing, Shenzhen, and cross-culture dialogues. In doing so, he portrays himself as a common citizen instead of an official speaker. As a result, the idea of propaganda does not exist while he speaks from personal experience.

4.1.2. Multimodal performance of authenticity and closeness

In creating authenticity, *Ruige* relies on casual clothing, familiar settings such as streets and restaurants, informal language use, and mimicry of Trump's style of speech, body movements, and facial expressions. Audiences' responses applaud the performer for accurately imitating the character's mannerisms in a realistic yet entertaining way.

4.1.3. Narrative strategies for building relatability across cultures

The strategy that *Ruige* uses to improve cross-cultural relations is through everyday life narration and humor. The man does not use big political slogans; instead, he focuses on narration about life events. Even while talking about important issues like taxes, he does it in a casual and relaxed atmosphere by narrating the issue in relation to everyday life such as streets, restaurant conversations, and interpersonal relationships. Besides, he manages to bring down barriers that exist between cross-cultural interactions through imitating other people and situational communication. By imitating Donald Trump, a globally famous figure in politics, and talking about international issues in an informal manner and without much jargon, he brings down the level of complexity that exists in those issues and makes people understand them better through everyday life situations and communication.

4.1.4. Typological positioning: explorer, expert, or hybrid

In summary, one might say that *Ruige* is not just an explorer but also an expert, rather he is a kind of grassroots diplomat. It is clear from his videos that he possesses everything that an explorer possesses, as he captures videos of the streets of Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Shanghai, which include the urban setting, interactions between people, and a glimpse of life in China. *Ruige* makes the psychological distance smaller by capturing his videos in an informal way that suits the explorer perfectly, complete with humor.

Yet, he does not just create a lifestyle for viewers to join in on "seeing China". The purpose of the videos is to make commentaries about global politics. The 3rd Video mocks Trump's statement about Canada, the 5th one is a caricature of tariffs using restaurant dialogues, while the 2nd and 4th

videos have been construed by the audience as comments on the tensions between China and America.

Therefore, *Ruige* also has some weak traits associated with experts, as he does not use facts, theories, or arguments to defend China but provides "acceptable explanations" for any misunderstandings or problems that occur abroad in humorous and personalized ways.

4.2. Narrative alignment and strategic synergy with China's official discourse

The categories in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive but rather intersecting. A single video often takes daily life as its surface form while embedding cross-cultural interaction or responses to international issues. For instance, the 5th video was classified as "everyday life" in the material, yet its title and top comments clearly reference the tariffs issue; the 4th video appears to be an interaction with Dana White, but comments include politicized readings such as 700% tariffs for dana. This indicates that *Ruige's* content is not one-way communication, but achieves narrative synergy through multi-layered encoding.

Table 1. Theme classification of the five sample videos

Theme	Quantity	Proportion	Representative Video
Daily Life Display	4	80%	<i>Chongqing, a multilayer city.; Visiting Shenzhen; Dana feels great about Shanghai; If I don't get it, nobody gets it!</i>
Cross-Cultural Interaction	2	40%	<i>What is that you're drinking?; Dana feels great about Shanghai</i>
Social Commentary	1	20%	<i>What is that you're drinking?</i>
Response to Western Doubts/ International Issues	3	60%	<i>Visiting Shenzhen; Dana feels great about Shanghai; If I don't get it, nobody gets it!</i>

On the whole, *Ruige's* narrative synergy is not simply "saying the same thing as the government", but translating grand national narratives into folk-oriented, micro-level, perceptible life stories. The most prominent content type in the samples is daily life displays. The 1st video focuses on the streets of Chongqing and its "mountainous feature", and the material clearly states that it "captures a glimpse of life in Chongqing". The 2nd video shows the urban streets of Shenzhen and its "clean urban characteristics". The 4th video focuses on "recording the meeting with Dana White", which uses the urban space of Shanghai as a realistic interactive space. That is to say, *Ruige* seldom mentions anything about "China's development", "institutional advantages", or "national strategies"; instead, he allows the viewer to initially perceive the layers, the cleanliness, the open atmosphere of a city, and the natural interaction between people, and then forms an impression of China through these scenes. It is such a narrative way, starting from the urban convenience, social order and living atmosphere, which effectively completes the translation from the macro to micro.

Ruige's idea of 'telling China's story well' is grounded in the facts and images of daily life rather than political rhetoric. The videos he makes have the real essence of the Chinese city and the intercultural communication, conveying positive significance without any explanation from the government. This is the basic synergy mechanism, known as "show, not tell".

When dealing with politics on the international arena, *Ruige* is not combative, but he always tries to state his message in language that does not confront. Performer uses mimicry, satire, dialogue

rather than actual arguments. In this respect, he resorts to satire in his discussions with politics in the context of a conversation, and elucidates the tariff issue in a conversation over a meal.

Hence, it would be fair to say that *Ruige's* relationship to the official ideology could be used as an example of implicit conformity, or lack of propaganda. *Ruige* avoids these very specific ideas, such as "national rejuvenation", "institutional superiority", or "telling Chinese stories well", but he does so by creating a synergy that is produced through "indirect resonance", "depoliticized translation" and "personalized narrative". From the 5 videos one can conclude that *Ruige* fulfills this description very well. When filming his videos about cities, *Ruige* has no plans to speak about any political systems; when shooting about restaurants, *Ruige* doesn't speak about any political system; when making fun of Trump, *Ruige* doesn't speak about any political system. In seemingly political topics, however, modernity, orderliness, open-mindedness and folklore as characteristics come from the Chinese cultural aspect.

But, on the other hand, *Ruige's* content does not fully follow the official rationale, and his moderate departure actually lends him credibility. He focuses on entertainment and the communicative function at the expense of accuracy and fidelity to the policy, relying on performance and jokes to bring viewers. While he talks about international issues, he does not analyze the political situation. In fact, his partial independence grants him credibility as an "average Chinese person".

4.3. Communicative effects, strengths, and limitations

Regarding the overall performance, videos of *Ruige* can obtain good visibility and acceptance from the foreign audience, although the acceptance is mostly on the level of the platform and does not denote a stable attitude shift. Firstly, all the selected videos have an exceptionally high number of views with even more viewed videos having over 12 million views while the least viewed video has above 2.5 million views, along with the number of likes and comments on these videos. Secondly, sentiment analysis reveals a predominance of positive sentiments in almost all of his videos.

Audience comments can be divided into four types: supportive, discursive, neutral, and lowintensity skeptical, with supportive and discursive comments as the majority. Supportive comments highly praise his imitation performance and express appreciation. Discursive comments go beyond entertainment and connect his content with real international affairs such as tariff negotiations. Explicitly hostile or opposing comments are rare, suggesting that skeptical responses are not a dominant type in this case.

From this, we can infer that the communication of *Ruige* is not just an output process but also possesses preliminary capabilities for meaning co-construction. By producing videos, *Ruige* allows international audiences to get a glimpse of real-life situations in China and makes them readily receptive to his ideas, which leads them to re-evaluate their preconceptions about China instead of just being subjected to one-sided indoctrination. In this sense, his content creates a lowthreshold interactive field for cross-cultural perception adjustment.

As a grassroots diplomatic digital celebrity, *Ruige* has four core strengths. First, high authenticity: his identity as an ordinary Chinese citizen helps him avoid being seen as an institutional mouthpiece. Second, strong accessibility: daily scenes, colloquial language, humorous performance and imitation lower cross-cultural thresholds. Third, better reach to young overseas audiences: shortvideo format fits platform logic better than official communication. Fourth, strong contextualization ability: he translates complex political topics into understandable daily experiences. Accordingly, his expression effectively alleviates overseas audiences' impression of the tough and confrontational "Wolf Warrior" style in China's international communication.

5. Discussion

From the findings, it becomes clear that digital celebrities can be considered effective grassroots ambassadors within China's international communication. The main significance of grassroots diplomacy lies in its de-institutionalized identity creation and platform-tailored narrative construction. Through the analysis of the case of *Ruige*, it is clear that his grassroots diplomat identity is constituted through three different yet interconnected factors. First, he establishes his identity as an ordinary Chinese citizen so as to eliminate political branding. Second, *Ruige* performs authenticity through casual situations and the imitation of Donald Trump. Third, he transforms grand narratives into everyday stories to reduce cultural barriers in cross-cultural communication. Different from rigid and politicized official communication, the content created by *Ruige* does not include any explicit political slogans or threatening words but uses humorous language and situational conversations to achieve implicit alignment with official strategies like "telling China's story well" and national rejuvenation.

From the perspective of communication effectiveness, the videos posted on YouTube by *Ruige* secure a good number of views and likes, as well as positive comments, showing that grassroots digital celebrities have an undeniable advantage in influencing overseas youth through digital platforms. They help to mitigate the negative perception of China's diplomatic style of "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" by removing politics from complicated international affairs and offering a real picture of China. Nevertheless, statistics on platform interaction do not provide evidence of stable changes in attitudes towards China; instead, they show only initial results.

From a theoretical point of view, this study attempts to overcome the current deficiency of over-reliance on official actors and under-recognition of the role of grassroots influencers within the field of public diplomacy. This research empirically supports the assertion that grassroots diplomacy should follow an independent logic of communication rather than functioning merely as an extension of official diplomacy and provides a new concept of synergy between grassroots and official discourses, namely "indirect resonance" and "experiential translation" rather than consistency.

6. Conclusion

This study uses the Chinese digital celebrity known as *Ruige* as a single case study and adopts qualitative research methods involving multimodal discourse analysis and content analysis to analyze the construction of grassroots diplomatic identity, narrative strategies, synergy mechanisms with official discourses, and the communicative effectiveness of digital celebrities as grassroots diplomats in China's international communication. The findings of this study show that *Ruige* constructs a credible grassroots diplomatic identity as a regular Chinese citizen through platform-based authenticity and humorous situational narratives, creates implicit synergy between his content and China's macro-narratives through storytelling, and achieves positive communication effects on platforms, making him effective in reducing the confrontational tone of China's "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" and improving its reception abroad.

Several drawbacks can be found in this study. Firstly, this study takes a single-case approach by focusing only on *Ruige*, and hence it will not be able to generalize its conclusions to other Chinese grassroots international communication influencers. Secondly, all data gathering for this study took place on YouTube, without taking into account the effect that variations in algorithms, users, and interaction on different social platforms may have had on this research. Thirdly, the data used for this study mainly includes videos that have active participants; as a result, it will not be able to

capture negative and neutral comments. Fourthly, the communication effects have been measured by means of sentiment analysis and platform interaction but not in terms of change of audience attitudes and behavior. Finally, there is little literature that has been cited in this paper.

In future research, the author can enlarge the sampling range by covering various forms of grassroots digital celebrities through a comparative study of multiple cases. At the same time, cross-platform investigations of TikTok, Instagram, and X should be conducted to analyze platform-based differences in grassroots diplomacy. In the measurement of communication effects, a mixed method combining big-data statistical analysis and in-depth interviews can be applied to analyze the lasting influence of grassroots influencers on audiences' cognition of China. Theoretically speaking, some frontier theories concerning cross-cultural and digital diplomacy will enhance the theoretical understanding of grassroots diplomacy mechanisms. In addition, future research can be oriented toward the exploration of risk prevention and management strategies in grassroots diplomacy to contribute to China's diversified international communication system.

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