

# Choosing the right tone in digital diplomacy

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## INTRODUCTION

The spread of the internet marks a drastic change for many aspects in the world, and the field of politics is no exception. This means that many political processes, including diplomacy efforts, are being forced to adapt to the new era of the internet. Whereas elites were previously in control of spreading information, knowledge is currently available to more people than ever. Additionally, messages can reach an unprecedented number of people in a very short time. Social networking sites (SNSs) play an important role in this process. SNSs moreover have drastically altered the way states are able to interact with public audiences. SNSs enable states to reach public audiences directly, without intervention of the media. This makes it easier for states to spread ideas, and promote their point of view. This can be a very important tool for the spread of soft power. SNSs have thus started to play an extremely important role in the modern era of public and digital diplomacy. Consequently, it is very important for states to know if their digital diplomacy strategies are effective in eliciting the positive responses they desire.

Due to the relative novelty of digital diplomacy, the topic is still quite under researched. Clear, universally accepted digital diplomacy strategies have not been determined yet. Unsurprisingly, the digital diplomacy strategies employed by states are currently quite diverse. When looking at states' official social media accounts the tone of messages seem to differ considerably, even when looking at messages within the same account. Academic research into a consistent strategy for the tone of messages to be used in digital diplomacy seems to be lacking. This has led to the following research question: What tone of messages elicit positive responses in digital diplomacy?

In the text below the reader will first find a literature review, placing this research within the broader context of academic research. Second, the research design and methodology will be discussed in depth. Third, the findings of the research will be presented. Finally, the findings of the research and their matching implications will be discussed.

## THE DIGITAL DIPLOMACY PHENOMENON

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### ORIGINS OF SOFT POWER

Power is the ability to influence others to achieve an intended objective. There are two types of power, soft and hard power (Nye, 2008 p.94). Hard power is enforced by using the "carrots and sticks" method. Coercion, threats, punishments and rewards are hard power instruments to obtain the intended results. Soft power however, is different. Soft power is also based on persuasion, but its methods are mostly based on the aspect of attraction. Nye (2008, p.96) states that a country's soft power mainly depends on its culture, political values and (foreign and domestic) policies. Nye identifies these as the assets that form the basis for an attraction to a certain country. If these assets are found to be attractive, the amount of soft power that a state can exert will be greater.

Soft power is very important in the sphere of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy aims to influence (foreign) non-state actors. It tries to influence the public opinion of these audiences as they can be an important tool to help further a state's interests. In other words, public diplomacy relies on the use of soft power, and aims to increase it. Digital diplomacy can be a form of public diplomacy

(Holmes, 2015 p.18). With the expansion of the digital age throughout the last decades, it seems only natural that diplomacy has also been subject to changes. After all, new technologies and the internet have had a great impact on the way societies and states interact with each other (Holmes, 2015 p.14). Through public diplomacy as well as digital diplomacy, states can tactically cater to the public's need for information filtering. Through public diplomacy states thus compete for gaining a reputation as a source of credible information. By doing so, a state can improve its soft power and can engage in so called "nation branding" (Sotiriu, 2015 p.34).

Social networking sites (SNS) have drastically changed the way states are able to interact with foreign audiences (Holmes, 2015 p.18). SNSs therefore serve as the perfect tool to conduct public and digital diplomacy, and can play a very important role in a state's ability to improve its soft power. SNSs have enabled a two-way communication between state and non-state actor, which makes public diplomacy more effective (Nye, 2008 p.104). Ministries of foreign affairs (MFA's) all over the world have joined SNSs to join the process of digital diplomacy (Kampf, Manor & Segev, 2015 p.3). In 2013, the US Secretary of State John Kerry even said: "the term digital diplomacy is almost redundant- it's just diplomacy, period" (Holmes, 2015 p.14). Digital diplomacy can thus bring new possibilities for a state to build its soft power.

However, opinions are divided on the effectiveness of digital diplomacy strategies. Some call the use of social media in politics ineffective and dangerous. Social media can also be seen as dangerous as posts can be created effortlessly, without putting sufficient thought into them (Holmes, 2015 p.19-20). This is related to the following problem: "The need for real-time diplomacy is at odds with diplomacy's need for time. Connected publics expect governments to immediately comment on world events as they unfold while policy makers find themselves operating in a non-stop news cycle." (Manor, 2016 p.23). Also, older generations of diplomats are often not very familiar with the use of social media. Special training may be needed, as senior diplomats are more likely to have high profile positions, whose social media use can be under high scrutiny (Manor, 2016 p.19).

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## THE USE OF HUMOR

The internet has become one of the main channels through which humor is used (Laineste, 2013 p.30). SNSs in particular have become flooded with humorous messages, targeted at and available to large audiences. Consequently, taking humorous messages into account when analyzing digital diplomacy strategies can be of essential value. Especially as research from other academic fields has shown that the use of humor can have significant effects on an audience. The field of advertising for instance has done extensive research on the effects of portraying humorous messages to public audiences and how these messages are received.

There is a wide acknowledgement that humor in advertising affects product liking. Humor supposedly has beneficial effects for the advertisers as it brings consumers to view the product more positively (Zhang, Zinkhan, 2006 p.113). This acknowledgement is due to multiple researches. First of all, humorous messages are more likely to attract attention to the advertisement than non-humorous messages. For a message to be humorous it often contains an element of incongruity with its surroundings or context. This makes the joke or humorous message surprising, and in turn entertaining (Vaid et al., 2003 p.1432). This combination of incongruity, surprise and enjoyment brings extra attention to a humorous message. Madden & Weinberger (1984) also confirmed that humor attracts attention. Senior advertising practitioners were surveyed on their view on the effects

of humor in advertising. A large majority (94 percent) agreed that humor had positive effects in drawing attention to an ad. Moreover, humor could improve a message's persuasive power as it increases the inclination to digest an ad, as audiences find this process more enjoyable (Zhang & Zinkhan, 2006, p.114). Third, humor could distract the audience from forming counterarguments, which can increase its persuasive effects on the audience (Madden & Weinberger, 1984).

However, the positive effects of humor are not uncontested. Previous research has also noted that humor could possibly distract from the general message. Especially irrelevant humor that does not relate to or support the general message can act as a distraction and work counterproductively (Strick, van Baaren, Holland, van Knippenberg, 2009 p.35). Other researchers even argue that the persuasive powers of humorous ads are not notably higher than those of serious messages. Their research indicated that humorous messages only led to significantly higher positive responses when the recipients already had a positive opinion of the source of the message (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990 p.466-472). Chattopadhyay & Basu (1990) also suggest that the empirical evidence for the success of humorous messages is anecdotal, and point to possible methodological and conceptual weaknesses in previous research. For instance, Madden & Weinberger (1984) surveyed senior advertising practitioners, whose opinions could be biased and possibly not correspond with reality. Because of this, the validity of their research can be called into question.

Nevertheless, the idea that using humor does have positive effects for advertisers remains rooted in an intuitive feeling that is not easily abandoned. The use of humor in advertising remains high, despite the remaining uncertainty about its superiority over serious messages (Weinberger & Gulas, 1990 p.35).

Considering the previous research, the first hypothesis is suggested:

- Humorous tweets in digital diplomacy are more likely to elicit positive responses than non-humorous tweets.

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## THE USE OF VERBAL AGGRESSION

The use of verbal aggression is not an uncommon occurrence in politics. Aggression has always been a part of society, but it is somewhat limited in face-to-face communication due to social customs. SNSs reduce this barrier as there is no face-to-face contact, thus making aggression easier and more common online than in real life (Laineste, 2013 p.30). The presence of aggressive messages has thus become quite common on SNSs. Moreover, using verbal aggression has proven to have significant effects on an audience. Taking aggressive messages into account when analyzing digital diplomacy strategies can thus present valuable information.

In the field of political science, verbal aggression can often be viewed as a hard power instrument as it can consist of threats, deterrence or coercion. Whereas soft power methods of persuasion are based on attraction instead of deterrence. Nevertheless, displays of hard power (like verbal aggression) can sometimes boost admiration and respect for a state and elicit positive responses from an audience. This in turn can reinforce a state's soft power (Gallarotti, 2011 p.25). However, special attention must be paid to the fact that producing positive responses through verbal aggression depends on many different factors, like its success and context.

Other research on verbal aggression states that verbal aggression that is directed towards political opponents, especially if it contains direct attacks on them, can improve the attackers own political position. Particularly discrediting a rival is widely believed to be an efficient strategy. However, some say this should not be done out in the open. It is best to have front men to do this by proxy, as the use of verbal aggression can have possible backfiring effects for the attacker. If one is often seen attacking political opponents, one's messages can lose their credibility as it becomes obvious that they are intended to discredit a rival. This can have negative effects on the attacker as they can gain a reputation for often using verbal aggression to improve their own position. Verbal aggression is also said not to accomplish major policy objectives as voters tend to simply stop listening to politicians who use verbal aggression very frequently. Whereas the impact of verbal aggression by someone who is usually restrained, can be much larger (Dmitriev, 2008 p.68-74).

Previous studies have also shown a relationship between the use of verbal aggression and the way a person is perceived. Rocca's (2004) research has shown that college students were less likely to attend their lectures if the instructor often used verbal aggression. She relates this to the fact the students' perception of the instructor's credibility was negatively affected by verbal aggression (p.188-190). Students felt uncomfortable and intimidated in an environment where verbal aggression was used and were more likely to dislike their instructor. Consequently, students were less likely to attend the lecture if verbal aggression was used. This research seems to suggest that verbal aggression leads to negative responses.

The Anger Activism Model states that the use of anger or aggression can facilitate a message's persuasive power on an audience, but only if the audience already possesses a similar attitude. Audiences' preexisting feelings of discontent can be reinforced by reading similar angry messages and can motivate further engagement and positive responses. However, if an audience disagrees with an aggressive or angry message, this effect will not be the same. In this case, an angry message will lead to unfavorable responses directed at the author of the message. Angry messages thus can lead to reinforcement of existing attitudes, but will not incite attitude changes (Turner, 2007 p.116-117).

Considering the previous research, the second hypothesis is suggested:

- Aggressive tweets in digital diplomacy are less likely to elicit positive responses than non-aggressive tweets.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A case study was used to answer the research question and test the hypotheses. This means that a single case was selected, and analyzed intensively to understand a larger population of similar cases. The selection of a single case allows for a more thorough and detailed analysis than with multiple or large N-researches. This enables the research and its results to be more in-depth. As previously explained, social media has started to play an extremely important role in the modern era of public and digital diplomacy. As a majority of states predominantly use Twitter to conduct digital diplomacy (Holmes, 2015 p.14), it seemed only natural to use Twitter for my research. Considering the research

question and hypotheses, and the inability to analyze every Twitter account and tweet in digital diplomacy, a case study of one account thus seemed appropriate.

The selected case needed to be representative of a larger population as well as have useful variations in relation to previous theoretical works (Seawright & Gerring, 2008 p.296). In other words, a single Twitter account that conducted digital diplomacy and met these criteria was selected. Though case studies are usually mainly associated with qualitative methods, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this research (Bryman, 2012 p.67-68).

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## CASE SELECTION

While in the process of case selection, a case was to be selected that met the previously mentioned criteria. A method that can be used is to search for the “most likely case” or the “most unlikely case” in relation to the hypotheses. The long historic roots of tensions between the western world and Russia originating in the Cold War, are strong indications that Russian digital diplomacy strategy could be a “most likely case” for producing aggressive tweets directed at the West.

Identifying Russia’s digital diplomacy strategy as a potential case was not sufficient however. A specific Twitter account operated by the Russian state needed to be selected. Upon further inspection, the state indeed appeared to openly critique western powers and decisions through specific Twitter accounts. Especially the Twitter account of the Russian embassy in the UK (hereafter “the Russian embassy”) was used for these purposes and stood out. The account is very well known for its criticism directed at Europe (as the embassy is situated there), but surprisingly also at the US and other western powers (Taylor, 2017).

The US election and transfer of powers has been a critical event in the last year involving Western powers. Considering that Russia’s relationship with the West remains strained at times, Russia was unsurprisingly also quite vocal on the subject. The Russian embassy’s account is seen as a prime example of Russian efforts trying to undermine the West (Taylor, 2017). All in all, the account uses Twitter to promote the Russian state to a western audience; a public diplomacy method to promote Russian soft power. As its criticism is directed at Europe as well as the US, and many other western powers, the account is a suitable case to select due to its possible “most likeliness” to elicit aggressive tweets.

Surprisingly, the account employs a combination of humorous and seemingly uncontentious messages with more aggressive messages (Taylor, 2017). So even though one might suspect the Twitter account as a most likely case for producing aggressive tweets, humorous and uncontentious or neutral tweets are also used very often. The account’s Twitter feed is thus loaded with tweets with different tones. This makes the account very suitable to answer the research question and test the hypotheses.

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## TIMEFRAME

In this research, a specific timeframe was chosen and only tweets that were posted during this period were analyzed. The chosen timeframe was two months before and two months after the US presidential inauguration on 20 January 2017. Thus, the timeframe for the analysis of tweets is between 20 November 2016 and 20 March 2017.

This timeframe was chosen due to the massive importance of the event. The US is still seen as the most powerful state in the world, and a transfer of power can be of large significance to the rest of the world. Therefore, issue salience is very high during this period. Large groups of the population are in a state of high alertness on the subject as it is a very important issue. This makes people more likely to engage in political conversations. Response-rates, are thus expected to be relatively high (Sheehan & McMillian, 1999).

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## DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

The Web Scraper extension (Martins Balodus, 2014) within the web browser Google Chrome was used to scrape data from the Russian embassy's Twitter account. As previously mentioned, data were only scraped that were posted between 20 November 2016 to 20 March 2017. The days 20 November and 20 March were also included.

The tweet's date, text content, number of received likes and replies, its URL, the username under which it was posted, and the URL of the Twitter page used for scraping were collected. The data were then exported to Excel. A total of 770 tweets were collected.

Due to the very large number of tweets, a selection had to be made from the collected 770 tweets to be able to code them meticulously. I chose to include 25 percent of the collected cases for the sake of collecting a representative sample of the collected data. 25 percent of 770 tweets equals 192,5 tweets. 193 tweets were thus selected.

I proceeded by randomly selecting 193 cases using random sampling procedures through an online number generator (Randomness and Integrity Services Ltd, n.d.). However, after coding these cases it became apparent that relatively very few humorous tweets were included. The absolute number of humorous tweets within the dataset was simply much smaller than the number of aggressive tweets. As sufficient humorous tweets were required to analyze my hypotheses, I proceeded by oversampling humorous tweets. An additional 20 humorous tweets were collected from the collected data by hand. An attempt was therefore made to compensate for the lack of humorous tweets by oversampling. This meant that a total of 213 cases were eventually selected.

Outliers within the selected cases were identified using boxplots in SPSS. Outliers were identified by having a "\*" icon in the boxplots. Eight outliers were identified and removed from the dataset. This was done as some tweets had gone viral, and possessed extremely high number of likes compared to the rest of the tweets. This would dramatically increase the mean likes per category, as well as the affect of the standard deviation. To prevent this from happening, outliers were removed.

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## VARIABLES

The independent variables in this research are the "presence of aggression" and "presence of humor" in a tweet. These variables are nominal, which meant that thorough operationalization of the variables was necessary ahead of starting the data coding and analysis.

For "presence of aggression, tweets were considered "aggressive" when emotions related to aggression were found to be present in the text of a tweet. The easiest indication of aggression is an attack and/or heavy criticism directed at a certain target (Rocca, 2004 p.187). Often the intention of an aggressive message is to discredit the target, and improve one's own position (Dmitriev, 2008

p.68-71). Following the research of emotion appraisal researchers, aggression was furthermore recognized by a presence of anger, contempt, disgust and fear (or inciting fear) in a text (Matsumoto et. al, 2013 p.457). Other indicators can be: “typographic attributes as capital letters, repetition of interrogative, exclamative points, suspension points after allusive attack, as well as a very large usage of sarcasm, intimidation, insults.” (D’Erico, 2014 p.108-109). Examples of aggressive tweets are: “President Obama expels 35 RU diplomats in Cold War deja vu. As everybody, incl US people, will be glad to see the last of this hapless Adm.” or “Putin: Allah has punished the rulers of Turkey by depriving them of reason. They will regret what they have done.” or “Putin: Those who ordered fake report on ‘Trump dossier’ are ‘worse than prostitutes’”.

For “presence of humor” tweets were considered “humorous” when an element of incongruity with the context was found in the text. This makes the joke or humorous message surprising, and in turn entertaining. An example of a humorous tweet: “It's like epidemic, or fashion? In the West with everybody claiming being hacked by Russia.” (February 12, 2017). By comparing western claims to a fashion trend, this would be considered a humorous post. Fashion trends and Russian hacking allegations are incongruent with one another. Another indication of humor can be self-ridicule, for example using the hashtag #russiansdedit in cases where Russians obviously were not the culprits. Another example is: “Most devastating blow of them all”: Russia accused of leaking new Sherlock episode before BBC airing. The final straw as it is, innit?”. Comparing the leaking of a TV-episode to the most devastating blow of all time is completely out of proportion. This comparison is so ridiculous that it would be considered humorous. Additionally, it contains an element of self-ridicule by suggesting this was “the final straw” on Russia’s part.

However, there are also examples where characteristics of humor and verbal aggression were found in a tweet. Tweets that combined an aggressive message or attack with humorous characteristics were coded as “aggressive” as well as “humorous”.

The dependent variable in this research is the amount of likes a tweet has received. This variable was chosen as I am to test the relationship between the presence of aggression and/or humor in a tweet and the amount of positive responses it receives. There are three types of responses a tweet can receive on Twitter: replies, likes and retweets. Replies are written comments that could be neutral, negative or positive. The intention of retweets is also contested, and thus cannot be labelled as continuously positive. The number of likes is the only type of response that can be seen as a truly positive response, and was thus chosen as the dependent variable. This is a continuous variable.

Two control variables were used. The first being the number of replies a tweet has received. The number of replies is thought to be linked to the number of likes a tweet receives. However, replies cannot be seen as a truly positive response so it is not the prime focus in my research. Replies nevertheless could function as an interesting control variable.

The second control variable is the total number of posts sent from the account on a single day. This is also said to have an influence on the number of likes a post receives (Patel, 2016). There are different theories on the relationship between the number of likes and the frequency of posts. Posting too many tweets on a single day for example, could possibly have a negative influence on the number of likes. This could happen because audiences can become reluctant to like multiple posts from the same source in a limited time span. However, Patel (2016) also states that there are other reasons to believe that posting very frequently does not bring any negative side effects for the source. It all

depends on what the objectives are for posting. For increasing replies for example, he recommends tweeting as much as possible. For this reason, the total number of tweets posted on a given day were included per selected tweet as a control variable. For example: The embassy tweeted 4 times on 20 November 2016. The number of total tweets that day is thus 4 and selected tweets that have been posted on this date get a value of 4 (even though not all 4 tweets had been randomly selected from the data). Both control variables are continuous.

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## METHODOLOGY

The text content of the selected tweets was coded using the codebook (which can be found in the appendix). Following the codebook, tweets were assigned the coding values 0 or 1 for both independent variables. For the variable “presence of humor” a value of 0 meant non-humorous, and 1 humorous. For the variable “presence of aggression” a value of 0 meant non-aggressive, and 1 aggressive. Only one coder was available to code the text content due to time limitations. The data was then exported to SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016) to start data analyses.

Two independent-samples T-tests were used in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016) to compare the mean likes of the compared categories. The values 1 and 0 of the independent variables were compared per T-test. This means humorous (1) was compared to non-humorous (0), and aggressive (1) to non-aggressive (0). By doing this, it becomes apparent if the categories have significant differences in scores. Also, a T-test shows if the variability of the categories differs greatly from each other. By doing a T-test I can test if certain categories have a significant higher or lower mean of likes than other categories. This is exactly the type of information I need to answer my hypotheses.

To analyze the relationship between the presence of humorous and aggressive tones and likes further, and more in depth, a multivariate linear regression was done in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016). The control variables, daily tweets and replies, were also included in the regression. Multivariate regression is a method through which the relationship between a single dependent variable and multiple independent variables is analyzed (Argyrous, 2011 p.557). The regression analysis then analyzes if a tweet’s likes can be predicted by the presence of a humorous or aggressive tone, or the control variables. This method can be used to check the results of the T-tests in a more advanced analysis.

## FINDINGS

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### INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TESTS

Two independent-samples T-tests were used. The first to compare tweets with a humorous tone and non-humorous tone for the variable “presence of humor”. The second to compare tweets with an aggressive tone and non-aggressive tone for the variable “presence of aggression”. These T-tests brought the following results:

#### **T-test 1**

There was not a statistically significant difference in the scores for humorous tone (M= 98.41 SD= 90.163) and non-humorous tone (M= 72.57 SD= 86.226) conditions;  $t(203) = 1.322$ ,  $p = 0.188$ . The

means alone seem to suggest that there is a difference in scores, however the small number of humorous cases makes it hard to reach statistical significance. Moreover, the Sig. value in the Levene's test is higher than 0.05. This means that the variability of both conditions do not significantly differ from each other.

#### Group Statistics

	Tone	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likes	Humorous	22	98.41	90.163	19.223
	Non-humorous	183	72.57	86.226	6.374

#### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Likes	Equal variances assumed	0.607	1.322	203	0.188

#### T-test 2

There was not a statistically significant difference in the scores for aggressive tone (M= 75.53 SD= 79.220) and non-aggressive tone (M= 75.28 SD= 89.540) conditions;  $t(203) = 0.018$ ,  $p = 0.986$ . The Sig. value in the Levene's test is higher than 0.05. This means the variability of both conditions do not significantly differ from each other.

#### Group Statistics

	Tone	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likes	Aggressive	53	75.53	79.220	10.882
	Non-aggressive	152	75.28	89.540	7.263

#### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			
		Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Likes	Equal variances assumed	0.737	0.018	203	0.986

## REGRESSION ANALYSIS

A linear regression analysis was used to investigate my hypotheses further. The regression aimed to predict likes based on the presence of humor and presence of aggression in the tone of a tweet. Daily tweets and replies, being the control variables, were also included in the regression as independent variables. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(4,200)= 4.147, p < 0.003$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 0.77. A tweet's predicted likes equals  $80.57 + 16.30$  (presence of humor)  $- 2.559$  (presence of aggression)  $- 2.236$  (daily tweets)  $+ 0.786$  (replies). The daily tweets variable is measured in the total number of tweets posted that day. Presence of humor is coded as 0= non-humorous and 1= humorous. Presence of aggression is coded as 0= non-aggressive and 1= aggressive.

A tweet's number of likes increased by 16.300 likes when moving up a coding category in presence of humor. Likes decreased by 2.559 when moving up a coding category in presence of aggression. Likes also decreased by 2.236 for each extra tweet in daily tweets. Likes increased by 0.786 for each extra reply. However, apart from replies ( $p=0.001$ ), none of the above mentioned were significant predictors for likes.

### Model summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.277 <sup>a</sup>	0.77	0.058	84.239

a. Predictors: (Constant), Replies, Daily tweets, Presence of humor, Presence of aggression

### ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	117721.468	4	29430	4.147	0.003 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	1419254.630	200	7096.273		
Total	1536976.098	204			

b. Dependent Variable: Likes

c. Predictors: (Constant), Replies, Daily tweets, Presence of humor, Presence of aggression

### Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	80.578	14.613		5.515	0.000
Presence of humor	16.300	19.825	0.058	0.822	0.412
Presence of humor	-2.559	13.926	-0.013	-0.184	0.854
Daily tweets	-2.236	1.599	-0.096	-1.399	0.163
Replies	0.786	0.229	0.240	3.437	0.001

a. Dependent variable: Likes

## DISCUSSION

The results of the T-tests showed no statistically significant differences in scores for any of the compared categories. This means that there were no significant differences in means of likes between humorous and non-humorous tweets or between aggressive and non-aggressive tweets. These results thus seem to suggest that the use of humorous messages do not lead to more positive responses than non-humorous messages. Moreover, aggressive messages also do not seem to lead to more negative responses than non-aggressive messages.

However, when interpreting T-test 1 attention must be paid to the fact that the number of humorous cases is much smaller than the number of non-humorous cases included in the T-test. The difference in mean does seem to suggest a difference between the two, but statistical significance was very hard to achieve due to the lack of humorous cases. Even though the variability of the two categories could be assumed statistically equal, the lack of humorous cases could have had an important impact on the results of the T-test. However, there were simply not enough humorous cases to correct this difference. In the case of T-test 2, comparing aggressive tone and non-aggressive tone, the difference in number of cases was not as large. This makes the result of this T-test possibly more interesting than the other test. The variability of the two categories could also be assumed to be significantly equal. Still, no significant difference in mean likes was found.

The results of the multivariate regression analysis showed that “presence of humor” and “presence of aggression” were not significant predictors for the number of likes a tweet received. This confirms the findings of the previously explained T-tests. The regression thus showed no significant relationship between the presence of humor or aggression in a tweet and the number of positive responses it elicits. Again, special attention should be made to the fact that the number of humorous tweets was relatively small compared to the number of non-humorous tweets. This could have had an influence on the results of the analysis. Nevertheless, the regression analysis did show one control variable, replies, to be a significant predictor for likes. Even though this is a non-finding for this specific research, it could be an interesting aspect to explore in further research. The other control variable, Daily tweets, was not found to be a significant predictor for the number of likes a tweet received.

The results of the T-tests and regression analysis seem to challenge the existing literature that humorous messages are a better strategy to obtain positive responses than non-humorous messages. Also, the results do not suggest that aggressive messages should lead to less positive responses than non-aggressive messages. Previous literature suggested that sending aggressive messages would harm the reputation of the source of the message and diminish its credibility (Rocca, 2004). Whereas humorous messages should have beneficial effects for the source of the message. My research did not indicate the same findings. However, the small scope of this research must be taken into account, as a case-study with a relative small number of selected cases was used. The literature might still hold in different situations. Nevertheless, when only considering the obtained results of my T-tests and regression analysis, my previously stated hypotheses could be rejected.

Yet, the Anger Activism model (Turner, 2007) could form an alternative explanation for the results of my research. It is possible that aggressive messages did not lead to a significant different mean of positive responses due to this model’s previous findings. The model states that an audience’s pre-existing feelings of discontent can be reinforced by reading similar angry messages and can motivate

further engagement and positive responses to the message. This effect could have had an influence on the amount of likes a tweet received. If a large audience had pre-existing feelings of discontent, a skewed number of likes could be given to an aggressive tweet. Whereas negative responses would not be noted by measuring the number of likes. Chattopadhyay and Basu's research led to similar indications (1990 p.466-472). Humorous messages only led to significantly more positive responses when the subject already had a favorable opinion on the source of the message.

When placing my research within a broader context of the existing academic literature, it can be stated that a small but still useful contribution has been made. A state's interest in increasing its soft power remains a very important driving factor behind public diplomacy strategies. Moreover, the massive popularity and reach of social networking sites have forced diplomacy to take on new forms. Yet, due to it being a relatively new contemporary phenomenon, digital diplomacy remains a very under researched topic. By finding out what tone of messages elicit positive responses digital diplomacy strategies could be adjusted accordingly. In this specific research, no significant relationship has been found between the presence of humorous or aggressive tones in a message and positive responses. This could have large consequences for digital diplomacy strategies. It could mean that positive responses are predicted by other factors (such as the subject of the tweet or other external factors) which would be interesting areas for further research. As eliciting positive responses for a state's digital diplomacy message is crucial in spreading a state's soft power, more knowledge on the subject would be very interesting for states and their public diplomacy strategists.

## APPENDIX

### Codebook

Code each of the following variables for each tweet:

**Presence of aggression:** Enter either "aggressive" or "non-aggressive".

- This field consists of the tone of a tweet that is posted on the Russian Embassy in the UK's (@Russianembassy) Twitter page.
- "Aggressive" tweets are recognized by the presence of an attack in a tweet with an obvious target. Other indications of aggression are: "typographic attributes as capital letters, repetition of interrogative, exclamative points, suspension points after allusive attack, as well as a very large usage of sarcasm, intimidation, insults." (D'Erico, 2014 p.108-109).

**Presence of humor:** Enter either "humorous" or "non-humorous".

- This field consists of the tone of a tweet that is posted on the Russian Embassy in the UK's (@Russianembassy) Twitter page.
- "Humorous" tweets often contain an element of incongruity with its surroundings or context. This makes the joke or humorous message surprising, and in turn entertaining.
- Tweets with the hashtag #russiansdidit were coded as "humorous".

**Examples:**

- "It's like epidemic, or fashion? in the West with everybody claiming being hacked by Russia." (February 12, 2017). → Tone = humorous & non-aggressive. By comparing

western claims to a fashion trend, this is a humorous post. Fashion trends and Russian hacking allegations are incongruent with one another.

- “Most devastating blow of them all”: Russia accused of leaking new Sherlock episode before BBC airing. The final straw as it is, innit?” → Tone = humorous & non-aggressive. Comparing a leak of a TV-episode to the most devastating blow of all time is completely out of proportion. This comparison is so ridiculous that it is considered humorous. Additionally, it contains an element of self-ridicule by stating that this is the final straw on Russia’s part.
  - “President Obama expels 35 RU diplomats in Cold War deja vu. As everybody, incl US people, will be glad to see the last of this hapless Adm.” → Tone = aggressive & non-humorous.
  - “Putin: Allah has punished the rulers of Turkey by depriving them of reason. They will regret what they have done.” → Tone = aggressive & non-humorous.
  - “Good morning! (Kunara, Sverdlovsk Region)” → Tone = non-humorous and non-aggressive.
- Tweets that combined humor and aggression were coded as both “aggressive” and “humorous”.
  - Sometimes to evaluate a tweet a degree of context was needed. For example, needing to view the image that was included in the tweet, or take the occurrence of certain events into account.

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