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Workshop No. 2

Digital Media, Strategic Communication, and Soft Power in the Gulf: Public Diplomacy in a Transforming Region

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2. Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are undergoing rapid transformation under ambitious national visions that prioritize economic diversification, cultural diplomacy, and global engagement. With the region preparing to host future global events including Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup, digital platforms have become central to shaping long-term soft-power strategies. Central to these efforts is the strategic use of digital communication as a tool of soft power and public diplomacy. With some of the world's highest rates of social media usage, the Gulf has become a global laboratory for digital influence where governments, corporations, and individuals employ media platforms and influencers to shape international perceptions. This workshop explores how Gulf states deploy digital communication to project narratives of modernity, innovation, and cooperation across diverse domains including tourism, sports, culture, humanitarian initiatives, and climate diplomacy.

By situating the Gulf within broader debates on soft power and digital diplomacy, the workshop will advance theoretical and empirical understanding of how digital ecosystems—from influencers to algorithms—mediate global perceptions of the region. It will bring together scholars from communication, marketing, international relations, and Gulf studies to analyze case studies of successful campaigns, as well as the risks posed by misinformation, reputational crises, and dependence on global platforms. The workshop welcomes comparative, cross-national, and multidisciplinary contributions that illuminate the Gulf's role in shaping narratives across Africa, Europe, and Asia. Ultimately, it seeks to provide both academic insights and policy-relevant recommendations on how digital communication can enhance the Gulf's soft power and global standing.

3. Context

The study of soft power and public diplomacy has traditionally focused on states' cultural institutions, foreign policy instruments, and international broadcasting. However, the digital revolution has radically reshaped these practices, with social media platforms, influencers, and algorithmic communication becoming central to how nations are perceived globally. Scholars such as Nye have emphasized the importance of attraction and persuasion in foreign relations, but the Gulf states present a distinctive case: they are among the most digitally connected societies in the world while simultaneously pursuing ambitious national transformation agendas. This unique convergence makes the Gulf a critical site for examining how digital communication redefines soft power.

GCC countries consistently rank among the highest globally in per-capita social media use, with platforms like X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube central to daily life. This widespread adoption has created fertile ground for state-led campaigns, corporate branding, and influencer-driven narratives that extend far beyond entertainment. From Expo 2020 Dubai and Riyadh Season to Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022, Gulf initiatives have leveraged digital platforms to promote tourism, attract investment, and enhance their global image. Looking ahead, the Gulf is preparing for major global events that will further elevate the region's soft-power profile. Saudi Arabia's successful bid to host Expo 2030 and the FIFA World Cup in 2034, along with the UAE's leadership during COP28, illustrate how digital platforms and influencer ecosystems are integral to shaping international narratives around innovation, sustainability, and cultural diplomacy. These future events offer unique opportunities to analyze emerging forms of digital public diplomacy and the Gulf's evolving strategies for global engagement. These examples demonstrate how digital communication is not simply a supplement to traditional diplomacy but a primary channel of engagement.

Yet, despite these developments, academic research on the Gulf's digital diplomacy remains limited. Much of the existing literature on public diplomacy continues to focus on Western or Asian contexts, leaving Gulf practices underexplored. There is a pressing need for comparative and theory-driven studies that integrate the Gulf into broader debates on communication, nation branding, and international relations. Research gaps include how digital platforms amplify Gulf humanitarian aid, how influencers shape perceptions of Gulf politics and culture, and how global algorithms privilege or constrain Gulf narratives.

Equally important are the challenges that Gulf states face. High visibility on digital platforms exposes the region to reputational risks, from disinformation campaigns to human rights criticisms amplified online. Furthermore, reliance on global technology companies raises questions of digital sovereignty and regulation. Gulf states are increasingly aware that managing these dynamics is critical not only for their image but also for their broader strategic autonomy.

This workshop positions itself at the intersection of media studies, marketing communication, and political science to provide a timely and interdisciplinary platform for addressing these issues. By convening scholars from multiple fields, it will advance understanding of how digital ecosystems intersect with Gulf ambitions for global influence. It will also highlight the Gulf as a contributor—not just a case study—to international debates on the role of digital communication in soft power and public diplomacy.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The workshop will focus on the intersection of digital communication, soft power, and public diplomacy in the Gulf. Its central concern is to understand how Gulf states and non-state actors leverage digital platforms to shape perceptions, build cultural and political influence, and project narratives that support national visions and foreign policy goals. While traditional diplomacy has emphasized cultural institutions and state-controlled media, today's environment is defined by decentralized actors, algorithm-driven platforms, and transnational flows of communication. The Gulf's unique position as both a hub of digital connectivity and a center of geopolitical interest makes it an ideal setting for advancing scholarly inquiry and policy debate.

The workshop's primary objective is to analyze how Gulf states are deploying digital strategies as instruments of soft power. This includes state-led initiatives in tourism, culture, sports, and humanitarian diplomacy, as well as collaborations with influencers

and media professionals. By examining these efforts, the workshop will illuminate how Gulf countries seek to project modernity, innovation, and global cooperation.

A second objective is to investigate the role of non-state actors, particularly influencers, journalists, and corporations, in shaping international perceptions of the Gulf. Their activities often amplify or complicate official narratives, raising questions about authenticity, credibility, and alignment with national agendas.

Third, the workshop aims to advance theoretical debates on soft power and digital diplomacy. It will evaluate whether existing frameworks adequately account for the dynamics of algorithmic communication, cross-border influencer networks, and platform governance. By integrating Gulf case studies into these discussions, the workshop will broaden global perspectives on public diplomacy.

Fourth, the workshop will facilitate comparative analysis by inviting papers that examine parallels between Gulf practices and those of other regions such as Europe, Asia, and Africa. This comparative lens will highlight both the distinctive features of Gulf strategies and the universal challenges posed by digital communication in international relations.

Finally, the workshop will provide policy-relevant insights. Gulf governments face reputational risks from misinformation, disinformation, and online criticism, while also grappling with issues of digital sovereignty. By analyzing both opportunities and challenges, the workshop will offer guidance on how Gulf states can maximize the benefits of digital communication while mitigating its risks. In summary, the workshop will serve as a multidisciplinary platform to:

1. Examine how Gulf states and actors employ digital communication as tools of soft power.
2. Explore the role of influencers and media ecosystems in shaping perceptions.
3. Advance theoretical and comparative debates on digital diplomacy.
4. Identify both opportunities and vulnerabilities in Gulf digital strategies.
5. Generate insights of relevance to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

An additional focus will be placed on understanding how upcoming mega-events such as Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup will reshape the Gulf's strategic communication and international positioning.

Through these objectives, the workshop will make a significant contribution to understanding the Gulf's evolving role in the global communication order.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

We invite paper proposals that explore the role of digital communication, soft power, and public diplomacy in the Gulf from diverse theoretical, empirical, and comparative perspectives. Potential topics include, but are not limited to:

1. Influencers and Soft Power: The role of Gulf-based and international influencers in shaping perceptions of Gulf countries.
2. Sports and Mega-Events: Digital communication strategies around events such as the FIFA World Cup (2022 and 2034), Expo 2020 Dubai, Expo 2030 Riyadh, Formula 1, and Riyadh Season.
3. Tourism and Nation Branding: Online campaigns promoting Gulf states as cultural and economic hubs.
4. Humanitarian and Climate Diplomacy: Digital amplification of Gulf humanitarian aid, development projects, and environmental initiatives.
5. Crisis and Reputation Management: Digital strategies during political, economic, or reputational crises in the Gulf.
6. Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from EU, Asia, or Africa for Gulf digital diplomacy.
7. Platform Dynamics: The influence of algorithms, platform governance, and digital sovereignty on Gulf narratives.
8. Digital Sovereignty and Regulation: How Gulf states navigate platform governance, data policies, and geopolitical pressures shaping control of digital infrastructures.
9. Youth and Gender Dimensions: Contributions of Gulf women and youth as digital ambassadors of transformation.
10. AI and Emerging Technologies: The role of artificial intelligence, generative media, and automation in shaping Gulf communication strategies.
11. Ethics and Regulation: Normative questions about influencer diplomacy, state-sponsored content, and the governance of digital ecosystems.

These topics are designed to attract a wide range of contributions, ensuring sufficient diversity for a high-quality joint publication while also providing policy-relevant insights into Gulf communication strategies.

6. Publication Plans

The workshop directors plan to publish the strongest contributions from the workshop as a special issue in a such as, journal of Online Media and Global Communication (De Gruyter), an open-access peer-reviewed journal that has previously committed to

supporting Gulf-focused research. Selected papers (7–10) will be double-blind peer reviewed, ensuring both scholarly rigor and policy relevance.

The special issue will be framed around the theme “Digital Communication, Soft Power, and Public Diplomacy in the Gulf,” highlighting how digital platforms, influencers, and media ecosystems shape the Gulf’s global image and strategic relations. The publication will combine theoretical perspectives, empirical case studies, and comparative analyses. A provisional table of contents could include:

1. Introduction: Digital Diplomacy and Soft Power in the Gulf (Editors)
2. Influencers as Soft Power Actors in Gulf Public Diplomacy
3. Sports, Tourism, and Nation Branding in the Gulf’s Digital Sphere
4. Humanitarian and Climate Diplomacy Online
5. Crisis Communication and Reputation Management in the Gulf
6. Comparative Perspectives: Gulf Digital Diplomacy and Other Regions
7. Algorithms, AI, and Digital Sovereignty in Gulf Communication
8. Gender and Youth as Digital Ambassadors of Transformation
9. Conclusion: Future Directions for Gulf Digital Diplomacy

The planned special issue will broaden Gulf studies, advance communication theory, and provide practical insights for policymakers. If needed, the editors will also explore the possibility of developing an edited volume with a leading academic press to expand the reach of the research.

7. References

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8. Workshop Directors

Dr. Mohammad Hatim Abuljadail is Associate Professor of Marketing Communication and Vice Dean for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at the Faculty of Communication and Media, King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He also serves on KAU's Scientific Council and chairs several academic committees overseeing graduate programs, research initiatives, and conferences. Dr. Abuljadail has been instrumental in launching new executive master's and PhD programs in communication, establishing the KAU Media Lab in collaboration with the Social Media Research Foundation and Jarir Bookstore, and directing the inaugural Digital Communication Conference, one of the largest regional academic-industry events in media and communication.

His research examines social media marketing, influencer communication, consumer engagement, and brand loyalty. He has published in journals such as *Online Media and Global Communication* and has co-directed international research projects, including a UNESCO-sponsored study on journalists and influencers. He is a member of the Global Social Media Lab and the editorial board of *Online Media and Global Communication*. With prior professional experience in aviation, consulting, and corporate communication, Dr. Abuljadail bridges academic research with industry practice, advancing Gulf studies in digital communication while mentoring the next generation of scholars.

Dr. Guo Ke is a distinguished professor at Shanghai International Studies University. He is also the co-editor-in-chief of the *Online Media and Global Communication* (OMGC) journal and a member of the Teaching Guidance Committee for Journalism and Communication under the Ministry of Education. His research interests include international communication, communication effects, international journalism, and public opinion. He has edited and authored seven books, including "World Images in China Media and Global Perceptions of the Public" and "Global Knowledge Building and International Academic Publishing: Cross-National Comparison and Case Studies," as well as over 90 papers in both Chinese and English. In December 2024, he kicked off his second National Social Science Key Project on "Research on Design and Mechanism Construction of an International Communication Effectiveness Evaluation System" (24&ZD216).

