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Thematic Analysis of Power Relations in Politicians' Social Media: A Case Study of Donald Trump's Tweets on Iran

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Extended Abstract

Donald Trump's presidency was marked by his distinctive and extensive use of the Twitter platform as a primary tool of communication, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. This approach challenged traditional diplomatic norms and created a novel space for analyzing the political discourse of world leaders. Simultaneously, U.S.-Iran relations during this period witnessed escalating tensions and profound complexities, a significant portion of which was reflected in Trump's tweets. Understanding how power relations are constructed, negotiated, and represented in the digital political arena—especially by global leaders—has become increasingly important. The case study of Trump's tweets regarding Iran offers a rich opportunity to analyze

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these dynamics of power. This study seeks to uncover the various layers through which power is exercised and represented in one of the most contentious international relationships of the contemporary era, by conducting a thematic analysis of these tweets.

Main Research Question: How are power relations represented and exercised in Donald Trump's social media messages about Iran?

Sub-questions:

How does Trump represent U.S. power, Iranian power (or its absence), and his own position as a global actor in contrast to Iran and international agreements (such as the JCPOA) in his tweets?

What discursive strategies (e.g., threats, sanctions, negotiations) does Trump employ to establish, exercise, or alter power relations with Iran, and how do these strategies contribute to the portrayal of power dynamics?

This study employs qualitative content analysis, specifically the thematic network analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach comprises six systematic phases that allow the researcher to identify, analyze, and report semantic patterns (themes) within qualitative data. These six phases-which will be elaborated in subsequent sections-include: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme network mapping, theme network analysis, and final report writing.

In the following sections, the study will detail the steps taken to implement thematic analysis on the dataset of Donald Trump's tweets concerning Iran. First, the process of data familiarization and initial coding will be presented. Then, the procedures for identifying and refining themes and mapping the theme network will be explained. Next, the thematic network will be analyzed and interpreted in depth. Finally, the study concludes by presenting key findings, answering the research questions, and offering suggestions for future research.

At this stage, a final review was conducted to ensure full coherence between the developed themes (listed in Table 3) and the set of initial codes (listed in Table 2). The objective was to ensure that all codes related to power relations were meaningfully incorporated into either basic or organizing themes, leaving no significant portion of the coded data unrepresented. This review confirmed that the developed themes effectively captured the coded data and conveyed

their core meanings.

Following this validation, the themes were organized based on logical and hierarchical relationships among them. This process involved identifying which themes were broader and more encompassing (organizing themes) and which ones reflected more specific aspects of those broader themes (basic themes). This initial arrangement set the stage for selecting the types of themes and mapping the final thematic network.

Global Theme:

In alignment with the main research question, the global theme of this analysis is defined as “The representation and exercise of power relations in Trump’s tweets about Iran.” This serves as the overarching conceptual framework that guides all subsequent analyses.

Organizing Themes:

The five main organizing themes presented in Table 3-“Displaying U.S. hegemony and directly threatening Iran”, “Undermining the past to construct present power: The JCPOA and the Obama administration”, “Applying maximum pressure: Sanctions and economic isolation”, “Delegitimizing the Iranian regime and supporting internal opposition”, and “Personalizing power and projecting Trump’s individual authority”-function as the structural pillars of the theme network. Each represents a major dimension of how Trump constructs and represents power in relation to Iran.

Basic Themes:

The basic themes listed under each organizing theme in Table 3 serve as more specific building blocks that elucidate the various dimensions and details of the organizing themes. These themes are more directly derived from the initial coding of the data.

The thematic analysis of Donald Trump's tweets concerning Iran reveals that his discourse in this area is heavily centered on the projection and exercise of unilateral U.S. power and his own personal authority. Power relations are constructed and represented through a range of discursive strategies, the most prominent of which include military threats and intimidation, economic pressure via crippling sanctions, delegitimization of prior agreements and U.S. administrations, discrediting the Iranian regime, and the extreme personaliza-

tion of foreign policy. This discourse constructs a binary, zero-sum worldview in which the power of one side necessarily entails the weakness of the other. Through Twitter, Trump sought to establish his narrative of U.S.-Iran relations as the dominant one—simultaneously functioning as a tool of public diplomacy and coercive pressure. This analysis demonstrates how social media can become an arena for the complex and at times contradictory performance of power at the level of global leadership.

Key words: Social media, X (Twitter), Political power, Iran, Donald Trump, Thematic network analysis.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.