

Maria Zakharova, Digital Capital, and Media Fragmented Diplomacy: Gendered Affective Reception of Russia's National Image among Chinese Generation Z Women

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Maria Zakharova, the prominent spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has gained visibility not only through official press briefings but also via short video clips circulating on digital platforms. On Chinese Douyin (TikTok), condensed segments of her speeches—typically under thirty seconds—are widely shared by media accounts and individual content creators. These clips detach selected moments from their institutional context and repackage them into platform-optimized formats. This study investigates how such re-mediated circulation contributes to digital capital accumulation and shapes perceptions of Russia's national image among Chinese Generation Z women.

The analysis draws on the concept of digital capital as developed by Massimo Ragnedda and Anna Gladkova. Extending Bourdieu's theory of capital to digital environments, digital capital encompasses resources generated through online access, skill, visibility, and engagement[2, 3]. Within platform societies, algorithmic amplification, symbolic recognition, and sustained online presence operate as convertible assets. Accordingly, national image can be interpreted not only as representation but also as a form of platform-based capital that accrues value through circulation and interaction.

This study further engages scholarship on affective publics, emphasizing that digital political communication prioritizes emotional resonance over purely rational evaluation. Short-form video intensifies this dynamic through rhythm, tone, visual proximity, and immediacy, allowing political authority to be experienced through embodied performance before being interpreted as policy content. [1].

Importantly, the Zakharova clips examined are predominantly circulated by Chinese media and individual editors, rather than official Russian accounts. Selective subtitling, remixing, and rhetorical emphasis in these clips transform diplomatic communication from direct state messaging into a platform-based co-production. Meaning is shaped by editorial choices, algorithmic visibility, and audience interaction.

Methodologically, the study employed stimulus-based semi-structured interviews with 24 Chinese Generation Z women aged 19–27. Participants viewed widely circulated edited clips featuring close-up framing, subtitles, background music, and assertive statements. Interviews explored emotional reactions, perceptions of diplomatic style, awareness of editing practices, and broader impressions of Russia's international image. Thematic analysis identified patterns of affective alignment, gendered interpretation, and symbolic association.

Findings indicate that most participants recognized the clips as edited by Chinese accounts rather than directly posted by Russian officials. Nevertheless, this awareness did not reduce perceived authenticity; many participants perceived editing as enhancing clarity and focus. The short format was considered efficient and emotionally engaging.

The majority expressed positive evaluations of Zakharova's diplomatic style, describing her as confident, composed, articulate, and intellectually competent. Participants framed her as a symbol of female independence in international politics, associating assertiveness with

professional skill and national self-assurance. Two participants noted that her rhetoric could appear sharp, yet this did not negatively influence their perception of Russia, which was interpreted as strategic firmness. Overall, exposure to these clips was linked to more favorable impressions of Russia as decisive, stable, and confident internationally.

From a digital capital perspective, fragmented diplomatic performance generates convertible symbolic resources. Despite limited state control over production or circulation, algorithmic amplification enhances Russia's symbolic visibility in the Chinese platform field. Emotional endorsement through likes, shares, and comments contributes to the accumulation of platform-based capital attached to national image. Digital capital, in this context, is co-produced by media editors, platform infrastructures, and audience participation.

Fragmented diplomacy offers distinct advantages for digital capital formation. Short-form formats align with Generation Z media habits, reduce cognitive load, and accelerate emotional identification. Close-up framing humanizes political actors, strengthening symbolic attachment, while algorithmic repetition reinforces associative links between persona and nation.

Nevertheless, fragmentation introduces risks. Detachment from full diplomatic context may oversimplify complex geopolitical issues, editorial reframing can shift emphasis, platform dependence limits narrative control, and personality may overshadow policy substance.

Despite these structural constraints, findings suggest that re-mediated short-video circulation enhances Russia's symbolic presence among Chinese Generation Z women. National image emerges not through detailed policy comprehension but through affective engagement and gendered identification. Digital capital provides a valuable lens to understand how state representation accrues value within algorithmically structured environments.

This study argues that contemporary strategic communication must account for digital capital accumulation in platform-mediated contexts. In fragmented digital publics, national image operates as a resource generated, circulated, and amplified through gendered affect and algorithmic visibility, rather than through institutional messaging alone.

Источники и литература

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