

An Examination of the British Council's Social Media Strategy in China: Insights and Implications

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Abstract: The rapid advancement of internet technology has ushered in the age of new media, significantly altering the means of language and cultural transmission. In this era, social media platforms demonstrate superior effectiveness, interactivity, timeliness, and convenience, outpacing traditional media outlets, and hence have amassed vast user populations. As a central player in the international promotion of English language and culture, the British Council keeps pace with these developments by employing social media for outreach. This paper scrutinizes the British Council's communication data on major Chinese social media platforms, analyzes its current practices and potential deficiencies based on the Lasswell's 5W communication model, and proposes potential strategies for improvement.

Keywords: Social media, British Council, Cultural communication.

1. Introduction

The ongoing evolution of social media has drastically changed the ways we communicate and disseminate information, bringing fresh opportunities for cultural transmission. The British Council, an international organization tasked with promoting cultural exchange and providing educational opportunities, has been collaborating with China since 1979, actively promoting English teaching and exams, art exchanges, education, and various social activities. In 2017, the Council established its first English language teaching center in Nanjing, China, followed by several transnational educational projects, which have achieved commendable results in terms of cultural and linguistic output. In recent years, to adapt to the rising trend of new media, the Council has increased its visibility on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Bilibili, steadily expanding its influence. An in-depth examination of the British Council's social media promotion strategies is instrumental in China's effort to maximize language and culture output through these platforms, provides valuable insights into warding off cultural infiltration, and has significant implications for building a shared community for humanity. Previous studies have examined the British Council's activities in China, highlighting its international language promotion strategies and providing quantitative analysis. However, these studies are relatively scarce, superficial, lack specificity, and seldom focus on the social media domain. Furthermore, no research has been conducted on the potential role of the British Council's language promotion strategies in preventing cultural infiltration in China. Therefore, this paper, grounded in existing research and Lasswell's 5W communication model, investigates the cultural communication practices of the British Council on domestic social media platforms. Given that Weibo, WeChat, Bilibili, Douyin and Kuaishou are the platforms most frequently used by the Council, we select high-engagement posts from these two platforms for study, examining aspects like update times, article sources, article categories, and formats, with the aim of understanding the current state of the Council's language and culture promotion through social media. Additionally, we will employ questionnaires and interviews and utilize data scraping to assess the effectiveness and shortcomings of its cultural communication, which will, in turn, offer valuable insights into cultural communication via social media in China. By learning from successful cases, discarding the chaff and preserving the wheat, we aim to unearth experiences and strategies worthy of emulation for China's language and culture promotion via social media platforms.

2. Literature Review

Presently, academic research concerning the cultural transmission of the British Council primarily falls into two categories: cultural diplomacy and the promotion of language policies. However, there is limited research that focuses on the role of social media.

He Xiuzhu (2009)[1] in "A Study of British Language Promotion Policies," asserts that the United Kingdom has intrinsically tied the promotion of English to its overall foreign policy. The British government has deemed language promotion as a key element of its soft power. This emphasis and investment manifest in the budget almost entirely allocated to the "British Cultural Committee," the body tasked with promoting English. According to the budget of the British Cultural Committee for the years 1989-1990, the annual expense was £321 million. The British Cultural Committee holds a prestigious standing, with Queen Elizabeth II serving as its patron and Prince Charles as its vice patron. The "Chevening Scholarship" established by the British Cultural Committee is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Department. This scholarship is primarily awarded to individuals who have already established a solid career foundation, with the aim of subsidizing potential future decision-makers and intellectual leaders to study in the UK. It also targets the younger generation by financially supporting postgraduate students studying in the UK.

Li Tongyu (2021)[2] in "A Comparative Study of the International Promotion Strategies of Chinese and British Languages," contends that successive British governments have always attached great importance to the promotion and popularization of English. They perceive it as a diplomatic activity outside the realms of politics, military, and economics. The British Council, a so-called international organization of charitable nature aimed at engaging in educational and cultural activities, established in 1934, is in fact a language promotion institution directly supported by the government. In the mid-1950s, the British government issued a series of reports, setting "supporting the country's foreign policy, maintaining and strengthening the Commonwealth and the Empire, promoting domestic trade, and protecting British overseas investments" as the objectives for promoting English. This initiative was accompanied by the provision of funds for implementation and the birth of essential academic bodies and official institutions. Thus, the British government used the British Cultural Committee as a bond to link the government, universities, and the business community together, mutually promoting each other.

Notable works such as Christine Jordan's (2003)[3] "Language, Culture, and Society", Sandra Mackay's (2008) "Teaching English as an International Language: Rethinking Goals and Approaches", Han Lide's "The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language," and White's "Language Policy and Language Planning: From Nationalism to Globalization" all offer research into policies concerning the international promotion of the English language.

3. Research Methodology:

3.1 Literature Review Methodology

To comprehensively understand the British Council's cultural output trend in China and explore the British Council's social media behavior in China, our method includes but is not limited to reviewing the British Council's recent annual reports, gaining a deep understanding of the Council's actions, scrutinizing its collaborations with countries such as China, and consulting literature related to the British Council's cultural diplomacy to gain an in-depth understanding of its cultural communication strategy.

3.2 Content Analysis Method

3.2.1 Data Acquisition:

Employing a blend of Python 3.8, PyCharm, and Fiddler packet capturing tools, we interacted with WeChat's public platform to extract session-based cookie and headers parameters post-login. Using

the browser's developer mode, we identified and sanitized the corresponding data interfaces, then applied packet capturing software to filter out essential parameters and integrated them into the code. Finally, we incorporated all parameters into the spider routine to streamline and manage all the data.

3.2.2 Content Analysis

We extracted top-performing posts (ranked by views, impressions, likes, shares, and comments) from WeChat and Weibo, the British Council's primary communication platforms in China. By scrutinizing the usage of discourse, posting schedule, copywriting, and promotional methods in these articles, we were able to identify commonalities in their communication strategies and highlights, thereby deriving universally applicable conclusions.

3.2.3 Questionnaire Survey Method

Targeting a broad demographic spread across different regions and occupations in China, we collected data on social media usage patterns and familiarity with the British Council via questionnaire surveys. This data aided us in benchmarking the British Council's social media outreach efforts in China. The survey comprised multiple-choice questions and a point-based selection system, spanning various areas such as personal information, awareness of British Council initiatives, frequency and timing of social media usage, interest in specific posts, and motivations behind social media use and learning.

4. Research Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Weibo's Status

As the 50th "China Internet Development Statistics Report" reveals, by June 2022, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.051 billion. Weibo, as an emerging self-media platform that enables immediate sharing and dissemination of information through various multimedia formats such as text, video, and images, has become the primary social platform for many netizens. It also serves as a vital channel for the British Council's cultural output via social media platforms. In this section, we study the operational situation of the British Council on Weibo and delve into the optimal strategies for high-quality social media operations through basic Weibo description and content analysis.

Upon retrieval, we found that the British Council has established six official Weibo accounts, including the British Embassy Cultural and Education Section, British Embassy Cultural and Education Section English Teaching, Official Weibo for British Education, Articulating Britain, LearnEnglish, and AlumniUK. Each account page displays detailed verification information, operational philosophy, number of followers, total posts, total interactions, and accumulated video views or reading numbers for select posts.

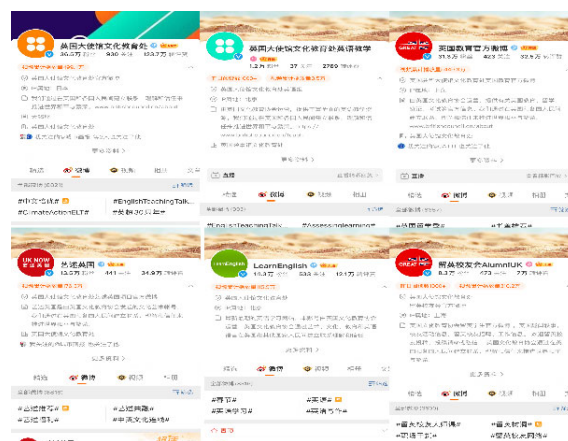


Figure 1. Basic Information of British Council Weibo Accounts:

The screenshot above captures the homepages of the various Weibo accounts set up by the British Council. Currently, the number of followers for each account varies greatly. For instance, the British Embassy Cultural and Education Section English Teaching has 12,000 followers, while Articulating Britain boasts 135,000 followers, and the British Embassy Cultural and Education Section even reaches 365,000 followers. Simultaneously, there is also a substantial gap in the total number of interactions across different accounts, with the highest reaching 1.237 million and the lowest at 2779. This discrepancy reflects the differential dissemination and influence of the various accounts. However, even with such a vast difference in followers and interactions, the number of posts published by some accounts is not significantly different, indirectly demonstrating the variable appeal of the content across media accounts. Only content that highly aligns with user demands and meets their needs can attract user attention and stimulate sharing desire, resulting in higher account visibility.

4.2 Analysis of Weibo Post Content

An in-depth examination of the Weibo post content allows us a granular understanding of the British Council's characteristics in terms of publishing schedules and stylistic preferences on social media platforms, enabling us to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Given the abundance of posts, we have chosen to analyze the 100 most engaging posts with the highest likes, shares, and comments to represent the most impactful content.

4.2.1 Post Categories

For this section, we categorized the 100 posts with the most likes, shares, and comments based on the focus of their content. These posts fell primarily into five main categories: educational services, English learning, examination information, arts and culture, and reader surveys. The majority of the posts across all three metrics belong to the arts and culture category, numbering 75, 86, and 91 posts, respectively. Given the typically shorter length of Weibo posts, it's essential to offer succinct yet attention-grabbing content to encourage readers to like, share, and comment. On further analysis, these popular arts and culture posts can be subdivided into four secondary categories: science popularization, trending topics, interactive exchange, and collaborative interviews. Incorporating such high-interest, interactive content when posting can enhance readers' enthusiasm for participation and increase the overall engagement of the posts.

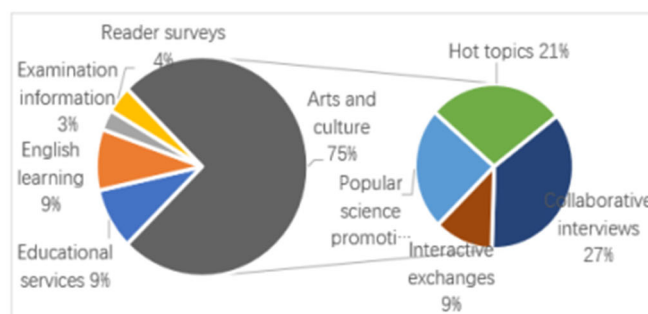


Figure 2: Top 100 Posts by Likes - Content Categories

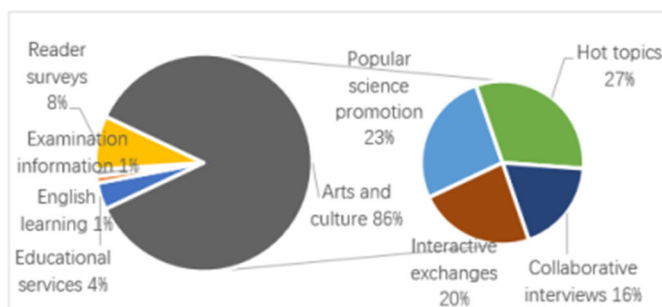


Figure 3: Top 100 Posts by Comments - Content Categories

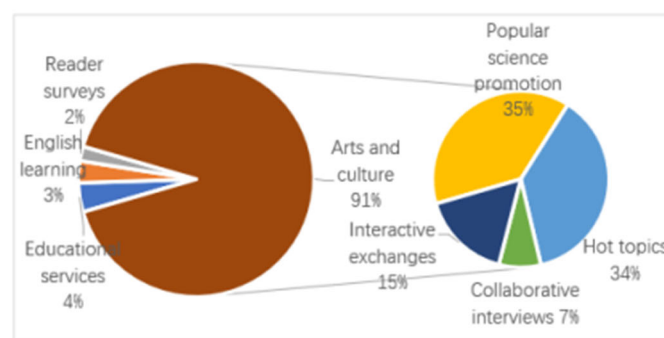


Figure 4: Top 100 Posts by Shares - Content Categories

4.2.2 Timing of Post Updates

The British Council's post update schedule on the Weibo platform has been collected from September 2009 to December 2022. The statistical data show the specific timing for the top 100 posts by likes as follows: 1 post updated between 0-2am, 13 posts between 8-10am, 8 posts between 10-12pm, 14 posts between 12-2pm, 16 posts between 2-4pm, 16 posts between 4-6pm, 15 posts between 6-8pm, 13 posts between 8-10pm, and 4 posts between 10-12am.

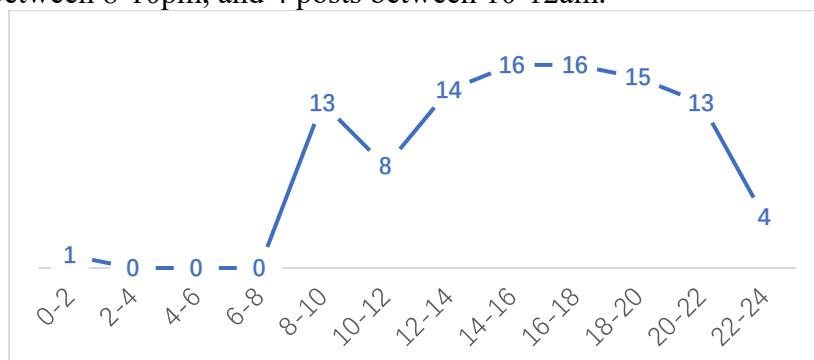


Figure 5: Top 100 Posts by Likes - Update Schedule

The specific timing for the top 100 posts by comments is: 12 posts updated between 8-10am, 15 posts between 10-12pm, 9 posts between 12-2pm, 12 posts between 2-4pm, 19 posts between 4-6pm, 18 posts between 6-8pm, 11 posts between 8-10pm, and 4 posts between 10-12am.

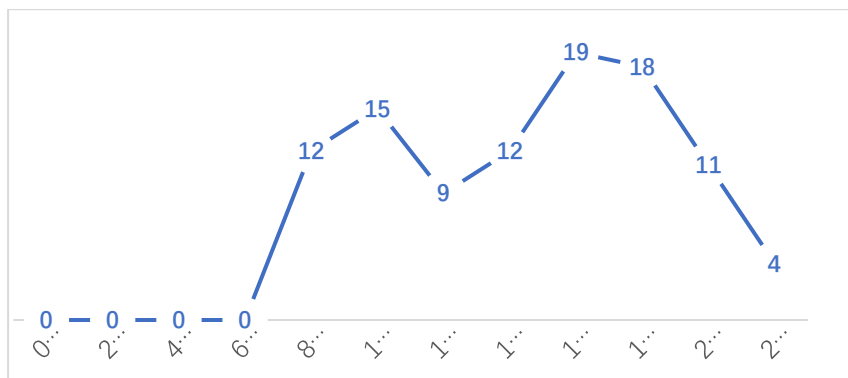


Figure 6: Top 100 Posts by Comments - Update Schedule

The specific timing for the top 100 posts by shares is: 1 post updated between 2-4am, 22 posts between 8-10am, 14 posts between 10-12pm, 1 post between 12-2pm, 13 posts between 2-4pm, 22 posts between 4-6pm, 15 posts between 6-8pm, 7 posts between 8-10pm, and 5 posts between 10-12am.

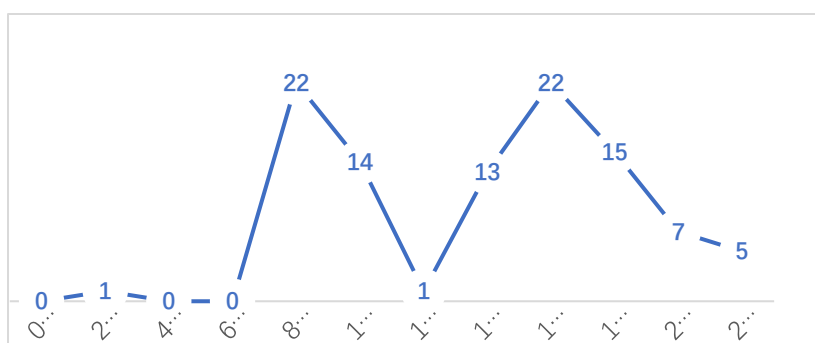
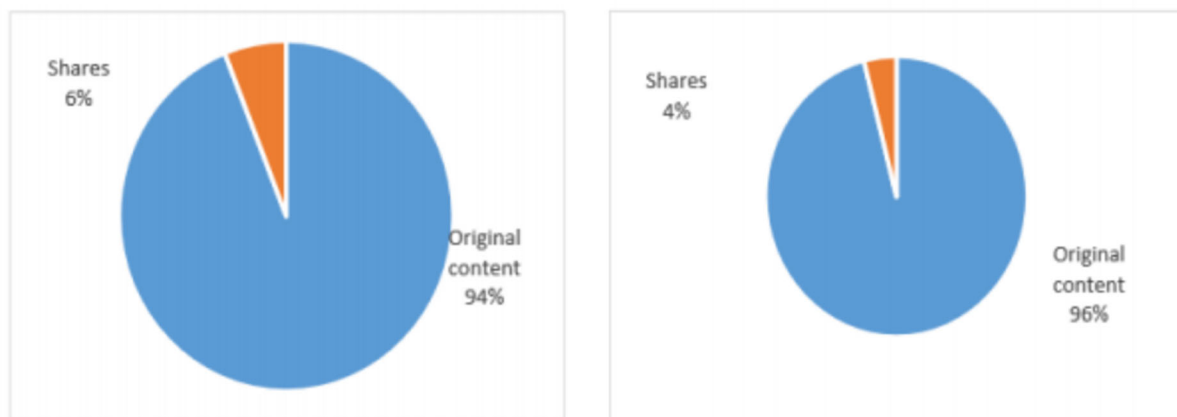


Figure 7: Top 100 Posts by Shares - Update Schedule

An in-depth comparative analysis reveals that the British Council's posts garnering a significant number of likes, comments, and shares are primarily released between 8 AM and 10 PM, with a lesser frequency in other time slots. Specifically, the morning updates are typically posted from 8 AM to 12 PM, and the afternoon to evening updates from 2 PM to 10 PM. There is a downward trend in the 10 AM-12 PM and 12 PM-2 PM slots. Posts uploaded between 2 PM and 10 PM constitute 63%, 60%, and 57% of all content that has amassed substantial likes, comments, and shares respectively. The time slot with the highest frequency of posts is from 4 PM to 6 PM, aligning with users' social media reading habits.



Figures 8 and 9 respectively show the origin of the top 100 posts in terms of likes and comments.

4.2.3 Post Sources

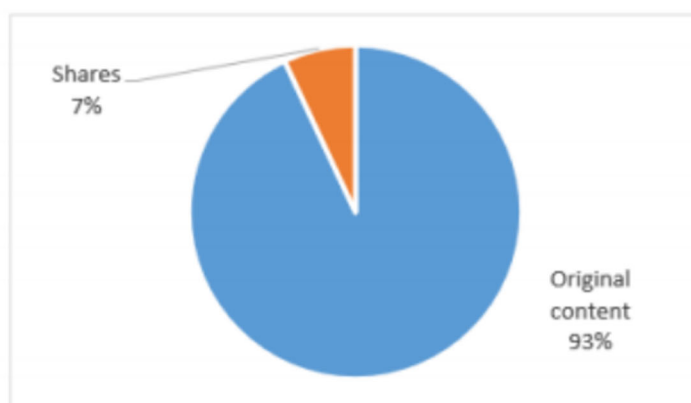


Figure 10 shows the sources of the top 100 posts in terms of shares.

Microblogging allows for the fast, wide-reaching dissemination of short, flexible content. The British Council operates six distinct accounts on the microblogging platform Weibo, each publishing different categories of content. Statistical data show that over 90% of the posts with a high number of likes, comments, and shares are original content, with a smaller portion being shared posts. A closer examination reveals that some shared posts are secondary accounts reposting main account content, particularly those emanating from the Cultural and Educational Section of the British Embassy. These reposts often add supplementary information or answers to user inquiries to the original post. Other shared posts originate from other official accounts, including those related to British and European culture. Users show a marked preference for original content over shared posts, likely because original content offers more unique resources and thus gains more user approval.

4.2.4 Post Formats

Microblogging allows for a diverse range of post formats, including text-only, image-included, and video-included posts. According to the data, posts with a high number of likes, comments, and shares mainly include images or videos. Approximately 80% of posts with numerous comments and shares contain images, with about 14% containing videos. For posts with numerous likes, 47% include images, and 39% include videos. A small portion of text-only posts primarily involve polling. These posts typically offer a piece of British cultural knowledge and pose questions about the meanings of

certain words, phrases, or sentences, allowing users to select the appropriate answers from provided options. As such, the British Council effectively utilizes Weibo's strengths in post formats, employing a mix of image-laden posts, video-included posts, and interactive polling posts to attract user attention.

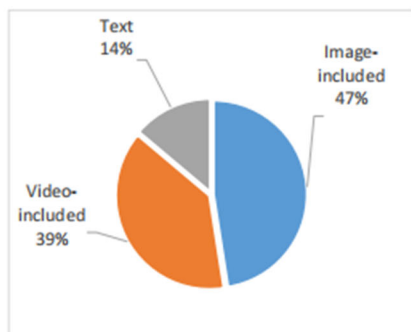


Figure 11: Top 100 posts by likes

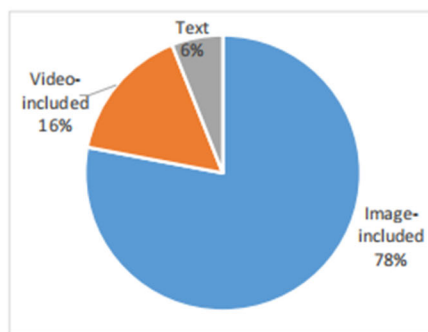


Figure 12: Top 100 posts by comments

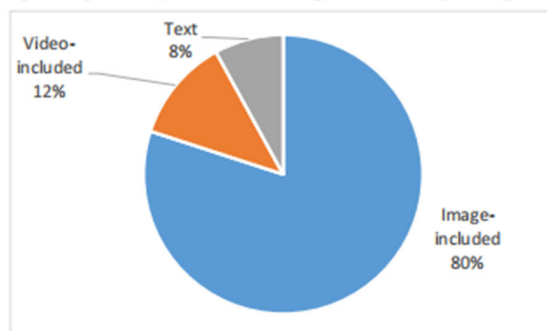


Figure 13: Top 100 posts by shares

4.2.5 Overview of Likes, Shares, and Comments

Table 1. Distribution of the top 100 posts by the number of likes, per year of update.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity	5	13	2	10	11	14	12	10	7	6

Table 2. Distribution of the top 100 posts by the number of comments, per year of update.

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
Quantity	13	9	12	24	13	2	5	1	7	3	7	4

Table 3. Distribution of the top 100 posts by the number of reposts, per year of update.

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2017	2021
Quantity	4	4	13	52	20	4	1	2

Data analysis reveals that highly engaged posts (top 100 in terms of likes, comments, and reposts) are evenly distributed between 2010-2022, with peaks in user engagement observed in 2013-2014. This coincides with a surge in Weibo's popularity and user base, with a high focus on British current events, popular science, and film and television. Despite the proliferation of various social media platforms in recent years, the British Council (BC) has seen a slight decrease in the number of highly engaged Weibo posts. However, each post performs well in terms of likes, comments, and reposts,

presenting a lean yet impactful presence. Recent posts mainly revolve around exam information and project collaboration. This year, many of BC's projects have involved celebrity interviews and promotions, which have proven effective in capturing the attention of exam candidates and celebrity fans alike, yielding considerable promotional success.

4.3 Overview of WeChat Official Accounts

In the realm of China's traditional social media platform, WeChat, key performance metrics include readings, likes, and views. After gathering data from four British Council's WeChat accounts spanning from 2013-2023 (totaling 3,091 articles in 10 years), we focus our analysis on the top 100 posts in terms of readings, likes, and views. Through examining these highly engaged articles, we can identify commonalities, unique features, and potential new insights. The top 100 articles have a reading range between 7,000 and 50,000, with the highest at 51,768 and the lowest at 7,324. The highest number of likes is 880, and the lowest is 35. The highest view count is 165, while the lowest is 12.

4.4 Content Analysis of WeChat Official Accounts

4.4.1 Update Timings

Table 4. Distribution of Timeslots for Top 100 Most-Read Updates

Readership for Top 100 Posts	0	3	2	4	17	9	57
Timeslots	0-6 AM	6-10 AM 10 PM-12 AM	10 AM-12 PM 2-4 PM	12-2 PM	4-6 PM	6-8 PM	8-10 PM

Table 5. Distribution of Timeslots for Top 100 Most-Liked Updates

Likes for Top 100 Posts	0	2	1	7	26	55	6
Timeslots	0-6 AM	6-8 AM 10 AM-12 PM 2-4 PM	8-10 AM 12-2 PM	4-6 PM	6-8 PM	8-10 PM	10 PM-12 AM

Table 6. Distribution of Timeslots for Top 100 Most-Viewings Updates

Viewings for Top 100 Posts	0	3	6	4	20	55
Timeslots	0-8 AM	8-10 AM 2-6 PM	10 AM-12 PM 10 PM-12 AM	12-2 PM	6-8 PM	8-10 PM

By collating the top 100 posts in terms of reading count, likes, and views, we can determine the distribution of these articles across various time slots. We observe that articles published between midnight and 6 or 8 a.m. are the least frequent, with almost none in our data set. This can be attributed to the fact that this time slot is typically when most people are either resting or preparing for work, leading to a reduced likelihood of social media usage. Posts released between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. are most frequent among the top 100 for readings, likes, and views, likely due to higher audience availability during these hours. Concurrently, the British Council also posts frequently between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. From 6 or 8 a.m., the number of posts gradually increases, peaking two hours after noon, followed by minor fluctuations.

4.4.2 Article Types

Similarly, audience engagement is closely tied to the format of the articles. In the top 100 articles with the highest readings, views, and likes, educational information articles account for 77%, 72%, and 63% respectively. This indicates that educational information is the primary content category that the British Council's audience engages with. Furthermore, art and culture content also have considerable appeal, averaging 25.5% across all metrics. In comparison, articles related to English language learning and exam information constitute the least percentage in the top 100, not exceeding 10%.

Table 7. Article Types in Top 100 for Reads, Viewings, and Likes

Article Categories	Top 100 Most-Read	Top 100 Most-Viewings	Top 100 Most-Liked
Art & Culture	14	8	29
Educational Information	77	72	63
English Learning	5	11	6
Examination Information	4	9	2

4.4.3 Overview of Views, Likes, and Reads

Table 8. Yearly Distribution of Top 100 Most-Read Articles

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Posts	2	27	15	6	4	2	19	9	10

Table 9. Yearly Distribution of Top 100 Most-Viewings Articles

Year	2017	2019	2020	2021
Posts	1	18	54	17

Table 10. Yearly Distribution of Top 100 Most-Liked Articles

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2020	2021	2022
Posts	2	44	26	9	4	5	7	3

Our data analysis indicates that the top 100 articles—based on reader engagement, including views, likes, and comments—span from 2015 to 2022. Although the British Council began publishing on WeChat in 2013, this initial stage garnered relatively modest engagement. The years that witnessed the highest engagement were 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2021. This suggests that the feature "view count" was not widely used in the earlier stages and was often overlooked, resulting in a generally lower view count. The year 2020 saw the most number of articles in the top 100 views, and a deep dive revealed that the content published by the British Council in 2020 and 2021 often pertained to international studies amid the pandemic. Further research suggested that the most engaging content in terms of views and likes was published in 2015. A closer look at the titles from that year revealed a prevalence of striking keywords enclosed in dark brackets, enhancing their visibility.

Typically, a positive correlation exists between the number of views and likes—an article with more views is likely to have more likes. Therefore, it becomes crucial to examine the effectiveness of the feedback, i.e., how many readers choose to like an article after reading it and agree with its content.

5. Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses of British Council's Communication on Chinese Social Media Platforms

5.1 Strengths

5.1.1 Paying Attention to Domestic Hotspots

(1) Focusing on domestic affairs and trending topics

The British Council utilizes platforms like WeChat and Weibo to disseminate British culture, English language usage, and event information. In addition, it assists Chinese users in understanding British contexts, bridging the gap between the UK and China. While conveying culture and language, the British Council stays attentive to domestic hotspots, delivering targeted messages based on user needs. For instance, studying in the UK has always been a popular topic among Chinese students. The British Council posts a multitude of content related to UK immigration policies, study tips, university rankings, and subject details on WeChat. On Weibo, it shares experiences about studying in the UK, helping users to get a holistic understanding of studying abroad. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the British Council posted a series of videos on Weibo expressing good wishes from the British education sector and university students to China and appreciating China's efforts in combating the pandemic. Prior to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, they collaborated with Chinese celebrities to share environmentally-friendly initiatives at the games, marrying the theme of their social activities with the trending topic. They also employ popular Chinese phrases in their English language teaching, satisfying the learning demands of the users.

(2) Paying Attention to Chinese Traditional Festivals

Serving as a medium to foster UK-China connections, the British Council celebrates Chinese traditional festivals alongside propagating British culture on platforms like Weibo and WeChat. For example, during the Spring Festival, they publish blogs related to New Year celebrations, and on the Dragon Boat Festival, they share posts related to the cultural significance of the festival along with relevant English expressions. By incorporating Chinese traditional culture into their language promotion, they achieve a cultural exchange effect.

5.1.2 Strong Interactive Approach

Within the British Council's high-traffic Weibo posts, a significant proportion leverages user surveys. This approach allows the British Council (BC) to gauge user opinions on its operations for the purpose of enhancing service quality. BC invites readers to share their first unforgettable encounters with Britain and conducts incentivized surveys to understand their followership, daily online social time, and the level of interest in BC's projects.

Similarly, an "About Us" tab exists on the official WeChat page of the British Council, leading to an article detailing BC's purpose. Upon clicking the "read more" option, users can access an eight-question survey aiming to understand user demographics, reasons for subscribing to BC, preferred content, evaluation of BC's work, and areas for feedback. These surveys enable BC to capture vital user data and tailor their operations to match user interests and demands.

Moreover, BC has instituted a comprehensive feedback mechanism. Its WeChat page's bottom menu has a "Contact Us" option, facilitating direct user interaction. These user-centric practices, which reflect an inherent requisite for success in personal media accounts, embody BC's commitment to placing users at the forefront.

Among BC's high-traffic posts, 81 incorporated reader engagement elements. These posts typically incorporate open-ended questions relevant to the post's main content, such as "the phrase 'wild-goose chase' literally means chasing a wild goose, but what does it symbolize?" Some posts incentivize engagement through giveaways like "Share and comment on your unforgettable first encounter with Britain, and stand a chance to win a limited-edition Moleskine Harry Potter notebook." Such interaction-invoking posts not only stimulate readers to think but also elicit tangible communicative behaviors like commenting and sharing, buoyed by encouraging words and incentives. This strategy

benefits both the users, who stand a chance to win rewards while gaining knowledge, and the disseminator, who gains desirable transmission rates and interactions.

5.1.3 Vibrant and Diverse Promotions

(1) Engaging Title Design

Titles serve as the gateway to capture readers' attention. In this fast-paced era where a finger swipe determines the information consumed, the first impression a title imparts is crucial for effective communication. If it fails to pique interest at first glance, subsequent engagement is highly improbable.

Analysis of the British Council's official Weibo and WeChat accounts reveals a pattern of eye-catching markers like "#", "[]", and "|", which distill information for reader's easy digestion. Motivational phrases such as "it's here," appearing 27 times, "benefits," appearing 52 times, "not to be missed," appearing eight times, and "need," appearing 20 times, not only make the content vibrant and intriguing but also subtly enhance the audience's likelihood of engaging with the content.

For instance, the series titled "Pre-Departure Meetings for UK-bound Students" consists of 19 articles, providing an extensive guide for studying in the UK amidst the pandemic, covering travel preparations, packing lists, documentation, entry guide, medical assistance, among others. This series has received ample feedback.

(2) Novel and Rich Content

Examining all the articles on the British Council's official WeChat account from 2013 to 2023, they can be broadly divided into four categories: Arts and Culture, Educational Information, English Learning, and Examination Information. As gleaned from the data, audiences favor articles pertaining to arts and culture. Such articles carry an inherent appeal, making them suitable as leisure reading for the general public. Cultural and artistic articles are notably diverse. For instance, the article "Understanding This Exhibition Unveils British Fashion" ranks fifth in reading volume and eleventh in likes. It stands as a classic case of high engagement. The article, through a series of fashion show photos ranging from vintage to trendy, from Alexander McQueen to Burberry, underscores traits such as creativity, individuality, and audacity. Not only did it draw traffic to the 2015 British Creative Works Exhibition, but it also subtly conveyed British fashion culture to its readers.

In the top 100 Weibo reposts, articles like "7 Fun Facts about 'Sherlock': A Treat for Fans Who've Watched Episode One of Season Three" and the top-rated comment, "A swan on Jersey Island, UK, has fallen in love with a helicopter and will have its feathers clipped again", fully utilize "interesting phenomena" to captivate a wide readership.

(3) Attraction Through Supplementary Methods

Among the top 100 articles published by the British Council's official account, such as "Wisdom Class Video from Grandpa Ian is Here! Real Fans, Come Claim Your Signed Moleskine!" and "[Summer Benefit] Appreciate the Charm of British Universities and Win Round-Trip Air Tickets between China and the UK!" and "[Benefits for British Culture Enthusiasts] Win British Language Training Scholarships and Kindle by Passing Through Levels!" used the method of drawing in readers with prize giveaways. Sampling from the official account, there are 52 articles related to "benefits", mainly divided into language skill benefits and tangible benefits. Of these, language skill benefits cover one fourth, and tangible benefits, including tablets, gift packages, flight tickets, etc., make up approximately one third. Other benefits include opportunities at prestigious universities and training opportunities.

The British Council periodically offers these benefits and seizes such opportunities to achieve goals such as completing surveys or signing up for alumni recruitment festivals.

5.2 Limitations

5.2.1 Inconsistent Outreach Across Platforms

While the British Council has made an entrance into various social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, Kuaishou, and Bilibili, the operation of their respective accounts differs significantly. Taking Weibo and Douyin as instances, the British Council maintains six self-media accounts on Weibo, pushing out over 35,000 pieces of diverse promotional content. Contrastingly, on Douyin, the only account traceable as affiliated with the British Council, named 'British Council English Learning', offers videos related to English learning, yet lacks any official certification and has been dormant since April 2021. As per the 50th report, by June 2022, the short-video user base in China had skyrocketed to 962 million[5]. Douyin, being China's most representative short-video platform since its launch in 2016, continues to garner significant traction, thanks to its precision in delivering user-demanded videos through big data algorithms[6]. If such a diverse and user-centric platform is optimally utilised, it undoubtedly has the potential to elevate the reach of British culture to new heights.

5.2.2 Modest Brand Influence

(1) Lackluster Promotional Efforts

Survey data indicates that 37% of the audience had never heard of the British Council, 46% have vague knowledge, and only 17% are somewhat familiar with the organization. This evidence suggests that the British Council's prominence in China is relatively underwhelming. Among those who are familiar with the British Council, 50% have participated in activities hosted by them. However, the majority of these activities have been examinations, with social, cultural, or educational activities falling short. Furthermore, some participants were not fully aware of the purpose and significance of these activities, underscoring the lack of robust promotional efforts.

(2) Insufficient Innovation

A comprehensive analysis of the content shared by the British Council on WeChat from 2013 to 2023 and Weibo from 2009 to 2022 reveals a limitation in the range of content. The majority of their posts center around studying, working in the UK, language knowledge, and event introductions. The format and content of these posts often remain the same, with headlines that lack allure and a noticeable deficiency in innovation. For instance, in promoting the 2022 Women Director's Short Film Support Program, the post casually glosses over the event specifics with a single sentence, mentioning only the time, location, and schedule. This lack of detail and flair in promotions may be a significant reason why their events fail to stir up substantial enthusiasm.

6. Cultural Communication Enhancement Strategies Applicable to China

6.1 Audience Identification and Catering to User Demands

In this era of Internet ubiquity, individuals are exposed to a diverse array of information, updated frequently and varying widely, which often surpasses their capacity to assimilate. For an efficient cultural dissemination on social media platforms, it's vital to pinpoint the audience demographics, comprehend their needs, and deliver content of high relevance and interest. This not only saves time for users in sifting through content but also maximizes the effectiveness of communication.

To better understand the British Council's (BC's) outreach on social media, we've conducted an extensive survey with 516 valid responses. Notably, 52% of the participants indicated they are highly likely to be spurred into action by information shared on social media, while 73% expressed considerable interest in cultures differing from their own. China, too, should adeptly utilize big data tools in its cultural outreach, accurately targeting those showing interest in the Chinese language and culture, and piquing the curiosity of other users. The judicious use of social media can subtly yet effectively disseminate the richness of Chinese culture.

When BC promotes on social media, they pay significant attention to user demands and experiences. Our data reveals that BC's highly-engaged posts are typically published between 6 pm and 10 pm, coinciding with the peak hours for user activity and thereby garnering high visibility and engagement. However, the modern young generation's media consumption habits are evolving due to various factors such as work, study, etc. Their active hours often center around post-meal periods and late-night. Therefore, during promotion on social media platforms, it would be beneficial to release posts during 12-2 pm and 4-12 pm. The content should be considerate of user states, for example, lighter, fun content for post-meal lethargic moments, and deeper, thought-provoking material during the emotionally fluctuating late-night hours to stimulate user interaction.

Likewise, the success of BC's posts aligns with the audience preferences. Our content categorization of highly-engaged posts reveals that articles blending current affairs exceed 20% of the total. Our survey also shows that 63.75% of the respondents find real-time information posts most appealing, while 33.75% indicate a strong attraction towards knowledge-based posts. Therefore, when leveraging social media platforms for cultural promotion, China can proactively integrate current affairs to draw user interest, supplementing it with relevant knowledge dissemination. This way, users can grasp current news while simultaneously absorbing related cultural knowledge.

6.2 Ingenious Content Crafting

6.2.1 Maximizing Visual Impact

The British Council's communication strategy across Chinese social platforms encompasses a myriad of themes, including art, culture, education, learning, and examinations, each meticulously crafted in design. According to survey feedback, 56.25% of respondents show a preference for content that pairs striking visuals with text, while 40% opt for text coupled with video content, leaving a mere 3.75% favoring plain text. In essence, audiences are naturally drawn to engaging visual elements, albeit in moderation. The potential time consumption posed by videos may deter readers to some extent.

Furthermore, an eye-catching headline is crucial. The use of bold punctuation, catchy phrases, and emotional cues serves as an initial step in attracting readers' attention and sparking their interest.

6.2.2 Ensuring Content Relevance

Based on questionnaire feedback, 63.75% of respondents find content regarding current affairs to be the most compelling, reflecting a general inclination towards staying informed and following trends. Looking at the articles the British Council distributes across China, those garnering the most feedback fall under the art and culture category, which encapsulates topics intimately linked with everyday life, such as British fashion and cuisine. When asked "Are you interested in understanding cultures different from your own?", 41.25% of respondents rated this question a 5 out of 5, with 4 and 5 being the most popular choices. Triggering reader engagement starts from relatable contexts, which in turn induces greater resonance.

6.2.3 Fostering Engaging Connections

The British Council often employs tactics such as sweepstakes and celebrity collaborations to boost reader participation, illustrating the importance of interaction in garnering high response rates. Survey results indicate that 37.5% of respondents rated the likelihood of them taking action due to information shared on social media as 3-4 out of 5. This suggests that to a certain extent, media sharing can convert informational resources into tangible benefits. Therefore, maintaining a certain frequency of interaction with audiences, enhancing opportunities for engagement, is crucial for effective information monetization.

From the perspective of promoting Chinese culture abroad, we could take a leaf out of the British Council's book in cultural communication. On the one hand, according to the strategic objectives of national cultural communication, we should smartly design propaganda content to highlight our

unique cultural brand. To enhance communication effectiveness, it is necessary to align with the local audience's daily life and current hot topics, and comprehensively analyze their needs. On the other hand, starting from our own culture, we should seek common ground between the two cultures to create more connections.

6.3 Enhancing Media Diversity in Dissemination

Our study has revealed that while the British Council has made certain strides in its promotional efforts on platforms like Weibo and WeChat Official Accounts, the results have been less than satisfactory. Survey data shows that 97.5% of respondents frequently use QQ and WeChat, with 60% using Weibo and 55% frequenting Bilibili. This suggests that users lean towards QQ, WeChat, Weibo, and Bilibili as their primary social media platforms. Furthermore, among those already familiar with the British Council, 58.33% came to know it through news apps, while 41.67% discovered it through video platforms such as Bilibili and Douyin (TikTok). Hence, the British Council ought to bolster its promotional and outreach efforts on WeChat, Weibo, and Bilibili. This could be achieved by embracing the diversity of media channels, extending its reach, capitalizing on the strengths and distinct features of each platform, establishing connections across different social media accounts, tapping into potential user bases, and implementing targeted, high-quality promotion.

Similarly, the dissemination of Chinese culture and language should be anchored on the principle of media diversity. This can be combined with official media, popular media, and individual self-media, utilizing the most popular video and news social media platforms abroad, such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Official and popular media, having a certain audience base, popularity, and operational stability, possess a degree of authority and influence. Their credibility favors the dissemination of Chinese culture and language. Individual self-media platforms offer a certain individuality, either incorporating local characteristics or showcasing personal traits in content dissemination, which, in turn, can attract audiences. In addition, diversification in event formats and content is essential.

From the user experience perspective, establishing a comprehensive feedback mechanism on different social media platforms is crucial. Pre-event promotions and announcements using visuals, text, and videos can enhance the user experience. In the process of conducting online and offline events, increasing user interaction whilst promoting culture and language, inviting users to partake in other activities, and enhancing user engagement, can create and amplify user stickiness.

7. Conclusion

In the age of the internet, social media platforms have substantially facilitated the propagation of culture and language by the British Council. This paper has sought to understand the operating strategies of the British Council on Chinese social media platforms and its implications for cultural dissemination. To achieve this, we have delved into relevant literature and reports, employed data collection tools, and conducted surveys to acquire the necessary information and data.

However, given the limited utilization of Chinese social media by the British Council, our investigation and analysis mainly focused on its WeChat Public Account and Weibo, the two major platforms in use. The study did not extend to other social media platforms like Bilibili and Kuaishou.

Moreover, due to technical constraints, our research could not conduct a thorough survey of followers of the British Council's WeChat Public Account and Weibo, nor could it scrutinize the characteristics of the existing audience and carry out an in-depth investigation into potential audiences. Consequently, the study's examination of the British Council's social media strategies in China is not exhaustive, highlighting some areas for improvement and maturity.

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