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# Persuasive Britain: The Generation of Soft Power in the Facebook Pages of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt

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## Abstract

This study explores the soft power that is currently generated on and through the Facebook pages of the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Egypt and British Council in Egypt. In his classic text, 'Soft power: The Means to Success in World Politics', Joseph Nye argues that successful international institutions and policies should be based on both hard power (coercion, military power, and payment) and soft power (consent, attraction, and seduction). This paper claims that the social media pages of the British Embassy and British Council generate and disseminate soft power in order to pursue the interests of national institutions based in Britain such as the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and British universities and schools. This research is based on a nuanced critical multimodal discourse analysis of posts published on their Facebook pages between June the 1st, 2023 and May the 1st, 2024. These social media platforms highlight mutual spheres of public interaction between the UK and Egypt, synergising large-scale public and private interests in building British prosperity, 'safeguarding' British national security, and supporting British nationals, in that order of priorities (FCDO 2024). This nuanced analysis of soft media power concludes that these social media pages represent the doctrine of 'Foreign Aid in the national interest' (USAID 2002) in which large-scale private British interests prevail. Official Facebook posts tend to be static and monolithic rather than dynamic and interactive, presenting and promoting rather than personalising or debating large-scale national policies and initiatives.

**Keywords:** Soft Power, British Embassy, British Council, Facebook Pages

## 1. Introduction

In May 2024, the Facebook platform of the British Embassy in Egypt, the diplomatic arm of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) uploaded a video of the current British ambassador, Gareth Bayley embarking on a three-day tour of the cities of Qena, Luxor and Aswan in upper Egypt to commemorate a 'long-term relationship based on development and investment' (UK in Egypt 2024).

In the same month, British Council in Egypt, the educational arm of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office announced a meeting between the UK Minister for Schools, three UK Ministers in the Department for Education and their Egyptian counterparts, the Egyptian Minister of Education and Technical Education and the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific research in order to share their commitment to educational innovation and excellence and to enhance the International Public Schools (IPS) program in Egypt (British Council Egypt 2024).

The aim of this paper is to explore the strategic online discourse of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), this being the main institution of British interests and policies abroad, thereby providing insight into the current nature of British soft power, and into the current use of social media as an instrument of public digital diplomacy abroad (Cull 2013). The main issues are, how does the FCDO construct and communicate soft power in Egypt? How dynamic and engaging is the relationship between British diplomatic, cultural and educational institutions and their publics in Egypt? How, to what extent, and to what end do the social media pages of the British Embassy and British Council engage their audiences in Egypt?

## **2. Theoretical insights**

### *2.1. Soft power*

The main goal of this paper is to investigate the claim that the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) uses social media to generate and promote soft power in Egypt. The notion of soft power can be traced back to Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, and his influential publication, 'Soft power: The Means to Success in World Politics' (2004). Professor Nye served as Assistant Secretary of Defence, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and Deputy Under Secretary of State in the United States, implying that he has the interests of the US at heart and would 'be the last person to deny the importance of maintaining [our] military strength' (Nye 2004, p. 3). Nye therefore suggests that power has two components or sides. These two components are hard power (military strength) and soft power, 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (ibid). Professor Nye connects soft power to legitimisation, arguing that soft power 'arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies' (ibid), and reminiscing on Liberal or neo-Liberal representation of Freedom, of young people behind the Iron Curtain listening to American music and news on Radio Free Europe; of Chinese students symbolizing their protests in Tiananmen Square by creating a replica of the Statue of Liberty; of newly liberated Afghans in 2001 asking for a copy of the Bill of Rights; of young Iranians today surreptitiously watching banned American videos and satellite television broadcasts in the privacy of their homes' (ibid).

Professor Nye highlights the advantage of using social media to exercise soft power, because 'information is power, and modern information technology is spreading information more widely than ever before in history' (p. 25) and the advantage that the United States has over less democratic regimes, because '[our] values [such as] democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive' (p. 24). Nye correlates Liberal rights to Liberal and Neoliberal development institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. He divides soft power into three categories, culture (high and low), politics, and legitimate foreign policies (p. 44). Then he suggests that US and European cultures are superior to other cultures, that 'the closest competitor to the United States in soft power resources is Europe' because 'European art, literature, music, design, fashion, and food have long served as global cultural magnets' (p. 169).

The University of Southern California (USC) Centre on Public Diplomacy (2024) is dedicated to the measurement and exercise of soft power in line with these self-serving principles, arguing that, 'More than ever, the success of foreign policy depends on the ability to attract, build, and mobilise networks of actors to work collaboratively [and] the ability to achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion.'

The USC Centre has therefore identified and measured six categories of soft power (government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power), polling 11,000 people in 25 countries in each region

of the globe, thereby providing a subjective account of the key soft power assets of countries. Soft power in government measures ‘commitment to freedom, human rights, and democracy.’ Culture identifies ‘the global reach and appeal of a nation’s cultural outputs, both pop-culture and high-culture.’ Soft power in education prioritises ‘the level of human capital, the contribution to scholarship, and attractiveness to international students.’ Global engagement measures ‘the strength of a country’s diplomatic networks and its contribution to global engagement and development’. Soft power in enterprise prioritises ‘the attractiveness of a country’s economic model, business friendliness, and capacity for innovation.’ Digital soft power measures ‘digital infrastructure and capabilities in digital diplomacy.’

Professor Nye characterises soft power as a method of persuasion that permits nation states in general and the United States in particular to pursue their interests and achieve success in world politics through both coercion and consent (2004, p. 3). Nye’s understanding of soft power is therefore institutionalist (Barnett 2021). Institutional notions of international relations ‘acknowledge a mixture of coercion and consent’ (ibid, p. 4), arguing that states can ‘build institutions that can induce an equilibrium’ in international relations through contracts and social arrangements (consent) and mechanisms that ensure compliance (coercion).

Institutionalist notions of international relations are therefore based on a combination of coercion and consent in contrast to realist and constructivist insights into international relations. Realist insights into international relations are based on coercion and balance of power rather than consent (Barnett 2021). Constructivist insights into coercion and consent on the other hand suggest that there is little consent in international relations, because institutional structures constitute or dictate ‘the subjectivities, identities, interests, social capacities, and practices of actors’ (ibid).

Nye’s practical goal seems to be to promote the interests of the US at the expense of the rest of the world (2004, p. 24) through a combination of coercion (military power) and consent (political attraction and seduction). Nye is supporting the capitalist interests of the US. Capitalism in turn is based on coercion and violence that is ‘experienced as physical, symbolic, ritualistic or psychological ... depending on one’s location in the distributed global network of production and consumption’ (Zwick 2018, p. 914). Nye is also pursuing legitimacy, but it is a legitimacy that the US is imposing on the rest of the world (Barnett 2021).

The main institutions of soft power (government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power institutions) might seem to be benign. But political violence has always exercised itself obscurely through the workings of ‘institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent’ (Chomsky and Foucault 2006, p. 41). Modern institutions are based on disciplinary power (1977, p. 176), on bio-power (1978, p. 140) and on regimes of so-called truth,

‘The regime or politics of truth, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true’ (Foucault 1980, p. 131).

To sum up, Nye’s goal (2004) is to maximise the power and promote the business interests of the United States by maintaining coercion (US military power, investments, and business opportunities) and by exploiting consent (US ideological power, investments, and business opportunities).

## *2.2. Nationalism and national interests*

The second goal of this paper is to investigate the claim that the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) uses soft power and social media discourse to promote British nationalism and national interests in Egypt. This paper suggests that the Facebook pages of the British Embassy and British Council play a crucial role in conducting the official mission of the modern British nation abroad. Such institutions construct, develop and disseminate nationalism abroad, embedding the international public relations of the modern nation state (L’Etang 2009: 614). International diplomatic and educational institutions such as these are therefore dedicated to public (digital) diplomacy (Cull 2013).

Llobera (1999) discusses a broad range of theoretical insights into nationalism, primordial theories that suggest that the modern state is superimposed on ethnic identities and ties to the land (Smith 1991), instrumentalist theories that suggest that nationalism is an ideological tool of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism (Anderson 2016). Primordial theorists such as Smith (1991) suggest that nationalism is based on collective cultural and ethnic identities: to a sense of continuity on the part of successive generations of a given cultural unit of population to shared memories of earlier events and periods in the history of that unit to notions entertained by each generation about the collective destiny of that unit and its culture' (p. 25). Instrumentalist theorists such as Anderson (2016) connect nationalism to the bourgeoisie, to nationalised languages, media, and marketplaces, and to the construction of imagined national communities.

Žižek (2008) in contrast provides a philosophical and psychological understanding of nationalism, by arguing that nationalism is 'a sublime object of ideology' and 'an ideological fantasy' (p. 30). He claims that ideology is 'an (unconscious) fantasy' that structures social reality rather than 'an illusion masking the real state of things' (p. 30).

To sum up, the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) uses soft power to promote British nationalism and national interests in Egypt. The objectives of the FCDO are instrumentalist, pragmatic and profit-centred, rather than primordial, philosophical or psychological (Llobera 1999).

### *2.3. Public (digital) diplomacy, online activism, counter-public sphere*

The third goal of this paper is to explore the claim that the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) is engaged in public (digital) diplomacy in Egypt. Public diplomacy is defined as 'a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies' (Tuch 1990, p. 3).

Cull (2013) provides historical insight into the role and nature of public (digital) diplomacy in the United States, beginning with the Cold War Internet practices of the United States Information Agency (USIA). In the early 1990s, the USIA used the Internet to present information. But in the 2000s, the Internet became a vehicle of blogs, crowd-sourced knowledge, and social media platforms such as Facebook (2004) and YouTube (2005) in which individuals and groups could engage in social interaction and construct online identities (Singh 2013). This communication revolution increased the importance of public opinion and diplomacy based on online exchange, dialogue and mutuality (Melissen 2006).

The main instruments of online diplomacy are social networks and online communities, user-generated comments and content, and horizontal networks of exchange (Cull 2013). The use of these instruments has been termed Public Diplomacy 2.0 (ibid). Cull explores important elements in successful online diplomacy, namely listening (engaging a foreign public by listening to it and channelling this information into policies), advocacy (engaging a foreign public by explaining policies), cultural diplomacy (engaging a foreign public by exporting culture), exchange diplomacy (engaging a foreign public through direct contact) and international broadcasting (engaging a foreign public through mainstream news broadcasts). Cull (2013) sadly admits that US officials simply do not listen, rarely incorporating foreign public opinion into public policy, and that advocacy (explaining policies to the foreign public) predominates in US public diplomacy.

Dodd and Collins (2017) concur, having investigated the use of social media in 41 European embassies, concluding that these embassies primarily engaged in information sharing, that Western European embassies (like their US counterparts) generally engage in advocacy, and that Central and Eastern European embassies primarily engaged in cultural diplomacy (exporting national culture).

Curtin and Gaither (2005) argue that digital diplomacy and public relations are intertwined. Both diplomats and public relations practitioners are responsible for official institutional communications and relations with broader publics and both have an interest in media coverage and public opinion. Both are also engaged in surveillance, secrecy, crisis management, information wars, psychological operations and propaganda.

Entman (2008) therefore argues that diplomats and public relations practitioners should cultivate 'active engagement and empathy with audiences, rather than simply making pronouncements to them' and that the relationship between diplomats and publics should be based on 'mutual understanding' rather than 'unconditional support' (p. 100). Tomblason and Wolf (2017) conclude that public relations professionals need to become cultural curators, engaging audiences, and sharing rather than imposing cultural opinions and content.

Researchers into digital activism suggest that online communication technologies and platforms are bridging the digital and cultural divide between professional communicators and audiences, thereby addressing and equalising power inequalities between government institutions, business corporations, non-governmental organisations, and activist groups (Xiong et al. 2019). Grassroots organisations such as #bringourgirlsback, #equalityforall and #blacklivesmatter are leveraging global campaigns to support their causes (ibid).

Other theorists have been even more optimistic, notably Castells (2012), who provided a very different vision of the role of social media in generating consent and voicing dissent, by envisaging networked societies based on democratic discourse, thereby bypassing the private interests embedded in and implemented through governments and big business. Castells declared the Internet to be a counter-public sphere, 'born from their disgust with their governments and the political class, be it dictatorial or, in their view, pseudo-democratic [and] prompted by their outrage towards the perceived complicity between the financial elite and the political elite' (2012, p. 21).

In the Brave New World of the Internet, political and social justice is finally served, 'Financial magicians went from being the objects of public envy to the targets of universal contempt. Politicians became exposed as corrupt and as liars. Governments were denounced' (ibid, p. 1).

This paper suggests, on the other hand, that Castells exaggerates the role of the Internet in the powerful social movements that occurred in 2011, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. His arguments are drowned in techno-euphoria and techno-determinism (Fuchs 2012, p. 1).

To sum up, the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) is engaged in public (digital) diplomacy in Egypt (Cull 2013), but its objectives are to promote rather than negotiate pre-determined Neo-Liberal development policies. The Facebook pages of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt are not designed to promote online activism or to provide a counter public sphere for local dissidents as Castells suggests (2012).

#### *2..4. Levels of engagement*

The fourth and final goal of this paper is to explore how, to what extent, and to what end the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) engages its audiences on the Facebook pages of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt.

Strauß et al. (2015) argue that embassies and consulates should, 'interact with host governments, local businesses and nongovernmental organizations, the media, educational institutions, and private citizens [in order to] promote and represent the home country in the host country (e.g., to stimulate export)' (p. 370).

Strauß et al. (ibid) therefore suggest that diplomatic and educational institutions such as the British Embassy and British Council should build interactive networks and relationships between stakeholders, using social media to engage 'the general public and specific audiences across national borders' (ibid). Graham et al. (2013) argue that this interaction between diplomatic organisations and their audiences should be direct, continuous and unrestricted. Claiming that effective online communication should be 'interactive, personalized, positive, relevant, and transparent,' Strauß et al. (2015, p. 370) argue that, in the main, embassies do use 'positive sentiment' but do not 'engage in direct interactive and personal communication' or reach out to broad audiences.

Bjola (2015) concurs, arguing that diplomatic social media has not fulfilled its promise, by transcending 'hierarchical chains of diplomatic communication', by 'bringing ordinary people into the spotlight of political life

and making their voice heard' and by permitting 'diplomats to directly engage foreign publics in a sustained dialogue' (p. 2). Diplomatic social media platforms have attracted public engagement in South Korea and Japan (Park and Lim 2014) but the Turkish government Twitter platform indulges in monolithic image cultivation (Uysal et al. 2012). Bjola (2015, p. 27) concludes that 'digital diplomacy is being primarily used as an instrument of information dissemination and much less for engaging the audience in a two-way dialogue.'

To sum up, diplomatic social media provide limited engagement with their publics, generally promoting hierarchical chains of diplomatic command and rarely giving people a voice in their policies. The next part of this paper provides nuanced insight into the Facebook pages of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt in order to measure the nature and extent of their engagement with their audience.

### 3. Case studies

This paper has selected two case studies to investigate the use of social media and the generation of soft power on the part of the FCDO, the British Commonwealth and Development Office. The two case studies are the Facebook pages of the British Embassy (59 posts on British Embassy Facebook page, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 to May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024) and British Council (28 posts on British Council Facebook page, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024 to May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024). This part of the paper will explore 1) the method used to measure the use of social media and the generation of soft power (multimodal discourse analysis), 2) the social media platform that has been used to perform digital diplomacy (Facebook), 3) the evolving nature and goals of the FCDO, the British Embassy and British Council, 4) the use of social media and the generation of soft power in the British Embassy Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ukinegypt>), and 5) the use of social media and the generation of soft power in British Council Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/BritishCouncilEgypt>).

#### 3.1. Method

The current research uses critical multimodal discourse analysis to explore the Facebook page communications of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt in order to understand their evolving interactive discourse practices inside the current constraints of self-censorship.

Critical discourse analysis is a useful tool in this research into the generation of soft power in the Facebook pages of the FCDO because of its rigorous insights into the practice and re-production and possible resistance to 'social-power, dominance and inequality' (van Dijk 2015). Critical discourse analysis, according to van Dijk (ibid) represents 'a critical attitude towards the use of discourse practices to maintain the status quo in power relationships,' this being the central aim of this paper: to investigate the method, extent, and end of the social media pages of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt.

This article uses multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the interconnection or intermingling between language, sound and image (Kress 2011). Multimodal discourse analysis is based on three insights into meaning (Halliday 1978): ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. Ideational meaning provides insight into people and objects. Interpersonal meaning provides insights into social interaction. Textual meaning provides insight into context and structure. Multimodal discourse analysis therefore provides useful insight into the ideational, interpersonal and textual significance of diplomatic discourse, and into the interplay between language, sound and image in online public diplomacy.

Multimodal discourse analysis also highlights the importance of polysemy, the interweaving of semiotic resources such as music, captions, voices, background sounds, tone, still images and footage that capture the interest, minds and heart of the public (Phillips and Ghalwash 2019). This insight into polysemy, into 'how different kinds of meaning making are combined or orchestrated as an integrated, multimodal whole' (Kress and Leeuwen 2006) is crucial in this research into the generation of soft power on multimodal Internet platforms such as Facebook.

#### 3.2. Platform



Embassies and government institutions such as the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt have their own official social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Of the multitude of social media platforms, Facebook remains globally one of the largest and the most popular (Silver et al. 2019). Radcliffe and Abuhmaid (2023) provide a rigorous interpretation of social media use in Egypt, claiming that 42 million social media users in Egypt prefer to use Facebook, compared to TikTok (23.7 million), Instagram (15.4 million), and Twitter (5.8 million). Because Egypt is an important strategic partner of the United Kingdom, these case studies contextualize the current global nature and role of such social media platforms in managing international diplomatic relationships and generating soft power, by interpreting the nuanced interplay of language, sound, and image on the main Facebook platforms that the FCDO operates in Egypt, the British Embassy Facebook platform (<https://www.facebook.com/ukinegypt>) and British Council Facebook platform (<https://www.facebook.com/BritishCouncilEgypt>).

### 3.3. *The FCDO, the British Embassy, and British Council*

The main goal of these case studies is to investigate the claim that the FCDO (the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), the British Embassy, and British Council use social media discourse to generate and promote soft power in Egypt. This part of the paper explores the current political and economic nature and role and interaction between these three central British institutions.

#### 3.3.1. The FCDO

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2024) developed out of the Foreign Office that used correspondents of the Times newspaper to provide insights into foreign affairs. During the First World War, the Foreign Office set up the Arab Bureau in Cairo in order to collect intelligence from around the Middle East (ibid). During the Cold War, the Information Research Department (IRD) disseminated propaganda against socialist and anti-colonial movements. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) emerged in 1968, merging the British Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office. The FCO supported and promoted international British business interests (through UK Trade & Investment), secured the rights of British nationals abroad (through consular teams in Britain and overseas, and through UK Visas and Immigration) and managed immigration from abroad. Its four central foreign policy goals were, 1) to counter terrorism, 2) to prevent and resolve conflict, 3) to promote low-carbon, high-growth global economies, and 4) to develop effective international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union.

On 16 June 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson created the current FCDO (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) by combining the FCO and the Department for International Development (ibid). The FCDO employs and deploys around 17,000 employees in their diplomatic and development offices, that include 281 embassies and high commissions abroad.

The current policy goals of the FCDO are, 1) to safeguard British national security by countering terrorism, by controlling the arms trade, and by reducing conflict, 2) to build British prosperity ‘by increasing exports and investment, opening markets, ensuring access to resources, and promoting sustainable global growth,’ and 3) to support British nationals abroad ‘through modern and efficient consular services’ (ibid).

Lazell (2023) provides crucial political insights into current British development policies, arguing that since the 2010s, donors have insisted that international aid must be used in the national interest of the donor, thereby reflecting the United States policies enshrined in a document entitled ‘Foreign Aid in the National Interest’ (USAID 2002). Perceived risks to UK national interest have accordingly been categorised as conflict and instability, terrorism, organised crime and migration (DFID 2018b).

Lazell (2023) is critical of this Neo-Liberal turn in British development policies, claiming that such policies are designed to secure and benefit British interests through dispossession, global capital accumulation, and employment opportunities in the global marketplace, thereby addressing terrorism both home and abroad and reducing migration to Europe. She argues that the underlying goal behind FCDO development policies is to reduce



migration to the UK and to ‘ensure that ... UK businesses are a partner of choice for Africa in terms of trade and investment’ (DFID 2018a), these being two important goals of the British Embassy and British Council in Egypt.

The policy goals of the FCDO UK-Egypt Development Partnership (UK–Egypt Development Partnership Summary 2024) reflect the policy goals of the FCDO International Development White Paper, by highlighting the need to accelerate progress on ‘eliminating extreme poverty, tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, and [meeting] United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030’ (ibid).

The current UK–Egypt Development Partnership Summary (2024) provides no historical context or insight into the injustice and atrocities that characterised UK-Egypt relations during the period of British occupation, 1882-1992 (Morton 2019), but instead highlights the economic potential of Egypt, its hydrocarbons, manufacturing, tourism and agriculture, its improvements in macroeconomic performance, and its drive ‘to promote sustainable private sector-led growth and job creation, to create a level playing field between public and private businesses, and to reform the business climate in order to unleash Egypt’s huge economic potential.’ The stated goals of this partnership are, 1) ‘to build a strong UK/Egypt long-term Climate Partnership, providing technical assistance and prioritising green trade and investment opportunities,’ 2) ‘to pursue economic reform, social rights’ and investment opportunities, 3) ‘to protect vulnerable groups including women’ and ‘to strengthen the bilateral relationship between the UK and Egypt in terms of people-to-people, institution to institution and government to government links through development programmes’ (UK–Egypt Development Partnership Summary 2024).

### 3.3.2. British Embassy in Egypt

Embassies and diplomats are intermediaries who communicate, negotiate, and persuade (L’Etang 2009), shaping and operationalising national identity and interests abroad. The official Internet site of the British Embassy in Egypt promises support in consular affairs, economic affairs, political affairs, congress, public diplomacy, cultural affairs, education, national defence and security (<https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-embassy-cairo>). The British Embassy in Egypt is located at 7 Ahmed Ragheb, Qasr Ad Dobarah, Qasr El Nil, Cairo. The bilateral relationship between Britain and Egypt is primarily represented by Gareth Bayley, the British Ambassador in Egypt (as of May 2021) and Mohamed Abulkheir, the Egyptian Consul General in London (as of October 2022). This research investigates current British Embassy posts to its Facebook platform, providing insight into the dynamics of UK-Egypt relations, contributing to research at the intersection of online diplomatic and strategic communication (Strauß et al. 2015), and providing insight into the use and level of engagement in its Facebook platform.

The official platform of the British Embassy in Egypt presents its official role in Egypt, maintaining and developing relations between the two nations in areas of development such as ‘trade and investment, education, culture, development, energy and climate security and defence’ that reflect current international development policy (White Paper on International Development 2024). It also promises to provide consular services to British nationals living in and visiting Egypt. These services include Egypt travel advice, urgent help, emergency travel documents, and notarial services.

### 3.3.3. British Council in Egypt

Set up in 1934 in the UK, the British Council opened its first overseas offices in Cairo and in Bucharest (Streeter 2024). In 1940, King George VI granted the British Council a Royal Charter for promoting ‘a wider knowledge of [the United Kingdom] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries’ (British Council 2023). In 1942, the British Council began to promote British culture and generate soft power abroad. In 1948, the British Council sponsored a tour of high British culture to Australia and New Zealand: Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh performed three classic British plays, Richard III, The School for Scandal, and Skin of Our Teeth, to audiences of over 300,000 people, and made a profit of around £40,000 (\$50,000).

Jeff Streeter, Director of British Council in Egypt (2024) refers to a common thread running through British Council policies and practices since its inception, 'English language teaching & learning; teacher training & development; testing; academic/university exchange; science; and within the arts, film, exhibitions, drama, music and dance'. The main change, according to Streeter is the scale, 'In the 1940s and 1950s, each of our Institutes [in Egypt] taught hundreds of people a year. Now we measure the number of English students in the tens of thousands across our six branches. And whereas we used to teach only adults, now half of our students are under 18' (ibid).

Other sectors in Egypt have also boomed, exams ('many of them with our partner schools network for International GCSE exams, which has over 120 schools attached to it'), teacher training ('a large scale nationwide project with the Ministry of Education'), the £50 million (\$65 million) Newton Mosharafa Fund ('a large bilateral fund to support scientific research and capacity development of researchers'), the Premier Skills programme ('using sport to develop life skills across Egypt and especially for women and girls' through partnership with the Egyptian Ministry of Youth and Sports in Egypt). This expansion is connected to technological development, the digital component and the Facebook platform (investigated in this paper).

The British Council annual report (2023) similarly lauds its own progress and achievement, in creating 'thousands of opportunities to bring people, institutions and governments internationally together with the UK's arts and culture, education and English language sectors,' thereby supporting 'peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between the people of the UK and countries worldwide'. This report makes a strong connection between the policies and practices of British Council, British development policies, and the generation of soft power or 'British influence' (ibid). The report addresses and supports the UK's International Development Strategy, citing its English and Digital for Girls' Education (EDGE) programme that 'has benefitted over 18,000 girls in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, building English language, digital and life skills'. British Council has also partnered with 40 governments 'to strengthen English in their education systems,' to support 'employability and positive pathways for young people,' to 'address the challenges of climate change,' and to generate £113 million in exam exports. This report supports the claim that overseas development should primarily reflect and benefit national or nationalistic British interests (source?), arguing that 'the annual intake of international students contributes £41.9 billion to the UK economy' and that 'the British Council influences 23% of those students to study in the UK' (ibid).

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021, British Council submitted an oral report to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the British Parliament, outlining its contribution to soft power, by 'increasing positive perceptions of Global Britain,' and by 'proactively engaging with key cultural stakeholder groups such as national arts councils and major UK cultural institutions, linking to major domestic events and global anniversaries, sporting events and geopolitical priorities such as Tokyo 2020 Olympics' and referring to their soft power survey that 'showed that trust in the UK government increased among those who had participated in a UK cultural initiative, making our clients twice as likely to engage economically with us, through trade, travel, study or investment' (ibid).

The policies and practices of British Council at the same time have been criticised because of their allegiance to notions of British soft power and profits. Phillipson (1992; 2009; 2011) argues that institutions such as British Council use English language education as a tool of British linguistic imperialism, privileging 'those able to use the dominant language' and perpetuating 'exploitation, injustice, inequality, and hierarchy' (2011, p. 442). He claims that global English language dominance since 1945 is based on 'gate-keeping, hegemonic paradigms, and monolingual control' and is designed to 'consolidate Anglophonic power in the information society and the knowledge economy' (ibid). Zeng et al. (2023) provide a nuanced interpretation of linguistic neo-imperialism, arguing that current English language education is 'locally-driven' (because 'the local people themselves have initiated and maintained the status and use of the colonial/imperial language because of the economic value that goes with it') and normalised.

#### 3.3.4. The British Embassy in Egypt: using Facebook to generate soft power

The official Facebook platform of the British Embassy in Egypt is UK in Egypt (<https://www.facebook.com/ukinegypt>). The page had 398,000 followers at the time of this research. The initial image on the page is an advertisement for the Embassy's pet project, the Chevening scholarship. The advertisement has a modern font type that uses block capitals to promote the UK in general, the UK education system and the scholarship, in turn, and to invite Egyptian students to 'STUDY IN THE UK WITH CHEVENING.' The British flag, Big Ben and the crown are included in the ad, in addition to three people that could be Egyptian and are silhouetted against Tower Bridge in London, suggesting that their dreams have come true.

This research is based on 59 posts that were inserted on the official British Embassy Facebook platform between June 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 and May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. The posts have been divided into nine central topics, namely the British Ambassador and his team (Topic 1, 8 posts), Embassy jobs, the British royal family, religious celebrations (Topic 2, 7 posts), educational partnerships between Britain and Egypt in general and the British Chevening scholarship in particular (Topic 3, 10 posts), development and business partnerships (Topic 4, 10 posts), popular sport in general and soccer in particular (Topic 5, 7 posts) and climate change and the environment (Topic 6, 6 posts), Gaza (Topic 7, 5 posts), gender abuse (Topic 8, 4 posts) and health (Topic 9, 2 posts).

These posts reflect the general sources of soft power that Nye (2004) has explored (culture, politics, legitimate foreign policies) and the specific sources that the USC (2024) has advocated: government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power. The posts promote British interests and nationalism, reflecting the general notion of development in the national interest and the specific instrumentalist, pragmatic and profit-centred objectives of the FCDO. These posts in turn promote the current UK–Egypt Development Partnership (2024). This partnership is based on reforming the business climate in order to unleash Egypt's huge economic potential,' and on 'building a strong UK/Egypt long-term Climate Partnership' that prioritises green trade and investment opportunities' (ibid). There is no reference to, and therefore no critique of the exercise of hard power. Importantly, in the context of this research, interaction has been reduced to British Embassy statements and a very limited number of likes to indicate agreement. There is little, if any, democratic discussion or debate in the comments section of each post.

Topic 1 (The British Ambassador and his team) is represented visually through photographs of smiling British dignitaries posing in suits beside their Egyptian counterparts. Post 1 (1<sup>st</sup> May, 2024) depicts the British ambassador on a tour of the cities of Qena, Luxor and Aswan, exploring grassroots local development and investment opportunities. Post 2 (20<sup>th</sup> September, 2023) presents Matthew, his British colleague exploring unique facets (stereotypes) of Egyptian culture, cementing the gap between diplomats and visitors and the Orient. Post 3 (30<sup>th</sup> August, 2023) treats their Egyptian colleagues to a similar test of fun facts about Britain. Post 4 (24<sup>th</sup> August, 2023) takes British Deputy Ambassador Qudsi Rashid to the beautiful city of Ismailia. In Post 5 (15<sup>th</sup> July, 2023) the British Ambassador Gareth Bailey celebrates Egyptian Airlines launching its newest route to Manchester, supposedly creating cultural exchange, job opportunities, and tourism-business relations. Post 6 (11<sup>th</sup> July, 2023) promotes an Egyptian soccer academy. Post 7 (18<sup>th</sup> June, 2023) brings on the Egyptian Ministers of Petroleum and Post 8 (1<sup>st</sup> June, 2023) lauds the Climate Finance Accelerator Egypt #CFAEgypt programme. Topic 1 thereby conflates development (sustainable and otherwise) and business, aligning itself impeccably to 'development in the [British] national interest' [?]

Topic 2 (Embassy jobs, royals, and religious tolerance) uses a modern blue capitalised font to advertise job opportunities inside the Embassy, a Residence Manager (Post 9, 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2023), a Senior Trade Adviser, Healthcare and Education (Post 10, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2023), and a Political and Communications Officer (Post 11, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2023). There is a photograph of King Charles (Post 12) in a blue and white suit and tie (representing the British flag), telling of his struggles with cancer and his positivity. The messages of religious tolerance and celebration wish their partners well during Ramadan and Eid with tasteful images of mosques in the background (Posts 13-15).

Topic 3 (British education in general and the British Chevening Scholarship in particular) vigorously promotes private British educational partnerships. Posts 16-22 (June 2023 to February 2024) advertise the Chevening Scholarship that the British Embassy provides to students that would like to pursue graduate studies in UK

universities. Images of proud smiling multicultural students with their certificates of achievement promote the Chevening scholarship in addition to benign smiling images of the British Ambassador silhouetted against the #IAMCHEVENING sign. These advertisements promote the British education system, its discourse, goals and skills. The process begins at the UK Education Fair where prospective students have the opportunity to visit the Chevening Programme Manager at their booth at the Global Study UK - Education Fair in Hilton Cairo Hotel (7<sup>th</sup> June, 2023). Post 16 (21<sup>st</sup> August, 2023) gives prospective students the chance to meet the 2023-2024 #ChosenForChevening scholars from Egypt. Post 17 (28<sup>th</sup> August, 2023) sets the date for applications, and the countdown begins. Posters help students complete their applications, advising them on 'key points to cover in your Chevening application.' There are numerous personal testimonials of successful candidates, such as the winner of the Chlor Leadership Fellowship who describes the Fellowship in liminal terms as 'being a very big part of the person I am now' (18<sup>th</sup> February, 2024). Like this, postgraduate Egyptian students are integrated into the transnational British education system.

Educational posts are designed to strengthen ties between Britain and Egypt through 'the successful visit of the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education delegation to the UK' to participate in the 'UK-funded Higher Education for Career Guidance and Employability' (23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2023), to career hubs that 'help you write your CV correctly and prepare you for an interview' (20<sup>th</sup> August 2023) and celebrations of successful alumni (5<sup>th</sup> February, 2024).

Topic 4 (development and business) discusses partnerships in the field of banking, mining, agriculture, food security, environmentally friendly fertiliser, sustainable cities and infrastructure (Posts 26-35). Here development and business are conflated, in a synergy of public and private national interests. The Central Bank of Egypt and The London Institute of Banking & Finance sign a memorandum of understanding (16<sup>th</sup> July, 2023) and Britain celebrates 'a significant milestone for Egypt's mining industry' that will simultaneously 'enable a stable and rewarding environment for investors, unlocking Egypt's geological potential' and promote 'sustainable growth and development' (6<sup>th</sup> August, 2023).

Topic 5 (popular sports) and Topic 6 (climate change) have a similar number of posts in spite of soaring global warming and impending environmental doom. Climate change is causing 'substantial damages, and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater, cryospheric [icy], and coastal and open ocean ecosystems' (IPCC 2023). The British Embassy Facebook page on the other hand has assigned equal space to both popular sports and impending environmental catastrophe, suggesting that the tone of this platform is designed to be positive and upbeat in promoting British national interests above global concerns about climate change and natural disasters. Images of national flags and team colours and smiling soccer players, both men and women celebrate national achievements and success both in Britain and in Egypt (Posts 36-42). Climate posts (Posts 43-48) advertise designated solutions to the global environmental crisis, using images of officials, a wind turbine, and King Charles making a speech (5<sup>th</sup> December, 2023). Facebook users are invited to join the Climate Finance Accelerator (CFA) program, and to acknowledge 'Egypt's impactful role as president of COP27 in 2022' (13<sup>th</sup> November, 2023).

Finally, there is Gaza (Topic 6), gender abuse (Topic 7) and health (Topic 8). The tragic case of Gaza (Topic 6) is represented visually through images of random men with British flags and the words 'UK aid' printed on the back of their yellow plastic protective jackets and aid trucks and ships in the background. On 1st April, 2024 British Lord Ahmed visits Egyptian Foreign Minister Samih Shukri to discuss humanitarian aid and Egypt is thanked for her contribution (Post 53). On 24<sup>th</sup> November, Lord Cameron announced that Britain had provided £30 million 'in additional humanitarian aid that supports trusted partners, including UN agencies working on the ground, to deliver life-saving aid to the people of Gaza,' simultaneously hoping that the killing will end and excusing the killing until the hostages are released. On 14<sup>th</sup> December, Lord David Cameron makes a statement on the killing of Palestinian civilians in Palestine (Post 55).

Gender abuse (Topic 7) is tackled diplomatically by Baroness Hodgson and her Egyptian counterpart, Dr. Maya Morsi, President of the National Council of Women in Egypt (5<sup>th</sup> June 2023), and the Pearson Edxel Award-winning Outstanding Learner thanks her mother for bringing her up (23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2024), suggesting that 'successful' motherhood is the solution to generations of systemic institutional abuse. Finally, the two posts on

health (Topic 8) tackle public health and advertise, the renowned Islam Abdelkhalek, ‘the best obesity surgeon in Egypt.’ This includes a testimonial uncharitably titled ‘the Fat lady sings!’ (10<sup>th</sup> April 2024).

### 3.3.5. British Council in Egypt: using Facebook to generate soft power

The official Facebook platform of the British Council in Egypt is British Council Egypt (<https://www.facebook.com/BritishCouncilEgypt>). The platform had 2.1 million followers at the time of this research. The initial information and images on this platform advertise British Council Partner Schools, promise to support ‘peace and prosperity,’ and monetise the IELTS exam (the International English Language Testing System) in particular, and the British education system in general. The images include learners, absorbed in the learning process, and simple modern texts. One advertises a Science competition (black text on yellow background), and the other, an IELTS writing test about a graph.

This research is based on 28 posts that were inserted on the official British Council Facebook platform between May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2024 and May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The posts have been divided into seven central topics, namely British Council English language classes (Topic 1, 2 posts), specific English language skills (Topic 2, 3 posts) the transnational English language exam industry (Topic 3, 4 posts), educational sponsorships and partnerships (Topic 4, 3 posts), British universities and schools (Topic 5, 4 posts), popular British sports (Topic 6, 5 posts), high culture (Topic 7, 4 posts), and English language and business (Topic 8, 3 posts).

These posts run parallel to official British Embassy Facebook posts (June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 to May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024), reflecting general insights into soft power such as culture, politics, and legitimate foreign policies (Nye 2004) and the goals of the USC (2024), in government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power. The posts promote pragmatic profit-centred British interests and nationalism, implementing FCDO policy regarding development in the national interest, but not alluding to specific grassroots development projects. These posts in turn promote the current UK–Egypt Development Partnership (2024), unleashing ‘Egypt’s huge economic potential’ and ignoring political and social inequalities and injustice. British Council is wholeheartedly and unashamedly tuned into linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992, 2009; 2011).

Importantly, in the context of this research, interaction has been reduced to British Council statements and a very limited number of likes to indicate agreement. There is very little, if any, discussion in the comments section of each post, and even less democratic debate. Popular initiatives such as the football matches at the British School Ismailia generated the most likes (115) and discussion, but limited to congratulating themselves on their own achievements, ‘effort and organisation’ (Post 15).

Topic 1 (Post 1 and 2) advertise British Council English language classes, connecting them to senior students at the private British schools in Egypt and advising other English language students to book their package at current prices. Topic 2 (Posts 3-5) provides young English language learners opportunities to improve English language skills, by clicking on icons, and downloading apps. Topic 3 (Posts 6-9) promotes the transnational English language exam industry, by targeting IELTS students. Post 6 builds up skills in ‘getting inside your IELTS examiner’s head,’ by providing 40 practice tests. Post 7 celebrates an IELTS conference on standards and technologies. Post 8 teaches students to ‘use the right quantifiers with countable and uncountable nouns.’

Topic 4 (Posts 10-12) presents British conferences, partnerships and educational initiatives, beginning with a meeting between Egypt’s Minister of Education and Technical Education, Egypt’s Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the UK’s Minister for Schools, in order to strengthen ‘the educational partnership between the two countries’ and enhance ‘the International Public Schools (IPS) program in Egypt.’ Post 11 refers to British Council Action Research, ‘an enlightening educational journey with educators from countries such as Peru, Colombia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan’ that is presented as an online discussion forum. The British Council also attended ‘insightful discussions on the side-lines of the Education World Forum,’ discussing ‘ways to strengthen academic ties between Egypt and the UK,’ with both sides emphasizing ‘the importance of aligning education with industry needs, in support of Egypt’s Vision 2030 development goals’ (Post 12).

Topic 5 (Posts 13-16) promotes British universities and schools operating inside Egypt, using portraits of dignitaries in suits and children in sports strips, and enthusiastic videos of students and alumni, posing around the British campuses. The British University in Egypt that promotes itself through the achievements of the Faculties and its alumni, the quality of the student experience, and even ‘eye-catching spots where students create unforgettable memories.’ Topic 6 (Posts 17-21) uses sports to promote the interests of British Council in generating soft power and profits in Egypt. The British International School-Ismailia invited the Director of British Council and ‘top international schools’ from Egypt to its campus for ‘an exciting football tournament’. In this post, the Director rebrands Ismailia as a ‘very open, very wide, very clean, very green place’ in which he had the opportunity to observe ‘houses from when the British were here, I saw some of that, and so, really, really lovely’ (Post 17). Other posts used successful soccer players such as Mohamed Saleh to promote their initiatives and interests in sport.

Topic 7 (Posts 22-25) promotes high culture such as opera. The iconic Alexandria Library uses the British Council platform to advertise its production of Orpheus and Eurydice, displaying its star performers, and generating 106 likes and 26 positive comments. Topic 8 (Posts 26-28) makes a direct connection between English language education, business, and job opportunities, inviting students to tailor their English language skills to writing job emails (Post 26), and to ‘join us for an exclusive HR & L&D panel discussion on the power of internal mobility and workforce flexibility’ (Post 27). This is designed to give pharma its competitive edge (Post 28).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has developed insights into the nature of soft power in general and of the current nature of British soft power in particular, into the policies and pragmatic interests of the FCDO (Foreign Commonwealth Development Office), British Embassy and British Council, into their use of social media, and into their level of engagement with their audiences. It traces the notion of soft power to the insights of Harvard Professor Joseph Nye (2004, p. 3), who divides political power into hard power (based on coercion) and soft power (based on consent and seduction). Professor Nye subdivides soft power into culture, politics, and legitimate foreign policies (p. 44), and recommends the use of social media to exercise soft power, and to promote democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities (p. 24). The USC Centre on National Diplomacy (2019) provides a more comprehensive list of sources of soft power, embracing government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power. This is aligned with U.S. interests in maintaining coercion (based on military power, investments, and business opportunities) and in exploiting consent (U.S. ideological power).

The paper then suggests that the interests of the three main British diplomatic institutions, the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), British Embassy and Foreign Office, in turn, reflect these same principles of soft power. The current goals of the FCDO are to safeguard British security, to build British prosperity, and to support British nationals abroad, reflecting a neo-Liberal turn in British development policies (Lazell 2023) based on the notion of ‘Foreign Aid in the National Interest’ (USAID 2002). The online platform of the British Embassy reflects the goals of the FCDO, by proclaiming that its role in Egypt is to promote (British) trade and investment, education, culture, development, and security, and to provide consular services to British nationals living in and visiting Egypt. British Council in Egypt is singing from the same song sheet, providing English language teaching, learning, training and testing, promoting British education and educational institutions, and cultural and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson (1992; 2009; 2011) or at least linguistic neo-imperialism (Zeng et al. 2023).

This article investigates the Facebook platforms of the British Embassy and British Council in turn, concluding that these platforms are dedicated to the generation of soft power and to promoting a public-private synergy of British interests in business and education. The topics discussed in the Facebook posts of the British Embassy (traditional British institutions, educational partnerships and scholarships, development and business partnerships, popular sport in general and soccer in particular, climate change and the environment, Gaza, gender abuse and health) and British Council (English language classes, specific English language skills, exams, educational sponsorships and partnerships, British universities and schools, popular British sports, high culture and English



language and business) reflect the soft power goals of Nye (2004) and of the USC Centre on Public Diplomacy (2024), in the sectors of government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital power.

These posts promote British universities and schools, English language classes and exams, the most refined culture (opera) and the most popular and lucrative sport (soccer). Burning ethical issues such as the global environmental crisis are reduced to images of officials, turbines, King Charles and his speech, the Climate Finance Accelerator Program and the COP27 Summit. The unspeakable horrors of Gaza are reduced to images of random men with British flags and the words 'UK aid' printed on the back of their plastic protective jackets.

Reflecting on the claim that embassies and consulates should use social media to interact with and engage governments, local businesses, non-government organisations, the media, educational institutions, and the general public (Strauß et al. 2015), this paper suggests that the Facebook platforms of the FCDO, the British Embassy, and British Council provide limited levels of engagement. These diplomatic institutions use social media as an 'instrument of information dissemination' rather than engage the audience in dialogue (Bjola 2015, p. 27). This low level of engagement is reflected in the low number of clips, and the preponderance of labels that use modern, minimalist, standardised text in order to promote British interests in business and private education, the main focus being Return on British Investment (ROI).

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