CultureCase

Using Shakespeare to exert soft power and online cultural diplomacy

This research was conducted by **Billur Aslan Ozgul** and **three others** at **Brunel University London** and **three other institutions**

Summary

This paper is based on a study of the global Twitter campaign to promote the British Council's Shakespeare Lives programme. It analysed a corpus of 4,722 tweets in five languages to reveal 'the key Twitter actors, topics and types of engagement generated by the campaign'. It found that audiences engaged with activities 'that reflect their knowledge of Shakespeare, allowing them to compare his works with their own national/local literary figures and to share ideas about universal themes'. The campaign was less successful in promoting "Brand Britain" since 'merely promoting a cultural asset, particularly one marketed as 'global', does not necessarily transfer or translate into appreciation of certain value as attributed to a nation'.

Shakespeare Lives was a global programme of events celebrating the work of William Shakespeare on the 400th anniversary of his death in 2016

More than 140 countries took part in the 3,500 events alongside a programme of online collaborations. A social media campaign by the British Council multilingual teams generated a potential audience for the #ShakespeareLives hashtag of '2,725,435,930, including 1,957,400,000 via Twitter, 421,183,800 via Facebook and 300,754,200 via Instagram and other social media platforms'. The research is based on a sample of more than 10,000 posts which used the hashtag around the peak days of activity (22–25 April).

Audiences engaged with activities that invited their participation

Twitter users tended to share information about Shakespeare's life and work but did not engage in larger, in-depth discussions on topics related to Shakespeare or the campaign. The top three activities were watching and commenting on streamed live events, using transnational technological innovations such as Google's Shakespeare doodle, and commenting on celebrities' visits and performances. Despite the campaign's global dimension, Shakespeare's universal qualities were appropriated and compared with equivalent national literary figures like Cervantes, Pushkin, or Tang Xianzu.

Keywords

evaluation **social media** **diplomacy** **UK**

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