SOCIAL MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF JOE BIDEN'S PUBLIC IMAGE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

The winner of the 2020 United States presidential election, Biden has inherited a United States that is deeply divided, more than in any recent period in the modern era. The Trump presidency, which preceded the Biden administration, has severely affected the world's public opinion on America and American leadership. One of the Biden administration's major challenges is the restoring of trust in the American government, both among the American people as well as in the international field. This paper employs a narrative review to explore the social media portrayal of Biden's public image in the post-Trump era. We found that Biden's images on social media involve a) building the presidential image of Joe Biden, b) corrective actions by the Biden's government, c) mortification as an act of accountability, d) reducing offensiveness, and e) real-world effects on Biden's image restoration.

1.0   Introduction

The forms that the public imagery of politicians are presented in are changing at a rapid pace today. It is not enough for politicians to promote themselves solely through traditional media outlets. A politician must be able to find ways to efficiently and effectively portray their message to all sectors of the public. One of the most prevalent areas where this effect can be seen is in the political portrayal of Joe Biden through media. The political landscape of the United States of America today is arguably more divided than ever. It is in this situation that Joseph Robinette Biden Jr (Joe Biden) has found himself elected to the position of the being the 46th President of the United States. The winner of the 2020 United States presidential election, Biden has inherited a United States that is deeply divided, more than in any recent period in the modern era [9]. The Trump presidency, which preceded the Biden administration, has also severely affected the world's public opinion on America and American leadership [15]. The various policies of the Trump administration, especially in regard to the breaking of trade agreements, and a rollback of environmental protection plans, have left a majority of the world with an unfavourable opinion of American policy. It is this reputation that the new Biden administration must contend with.

The damage done to America's standing in the world in the aftermath of Donald Trump's leadership cannot be overstated. He has, among other activities that have compromised American soft power, immensely lowered the US's standing with its traditional West European allies in showing scepticism of NATO, the continued support of Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the killing of Khashoggi, and the withdrawal of the US from the UN Human Rights Council left America's allies unsure of where they stand with the country [2]. Polling finds 64% of international citizens didn't trust then-president

Trump to "do the right thing", which speaks volumes of the general perception of his character. One of the Biden administration's major challenges is the restoring of trust in the American government, both among the American people as well as in the international field. It is why the undoing of the policies of the Trump administration has been one of the first steps of the Biden administration [19]. It is a priority of the Biden administration for the United States to regain the international credibility it has lost under the Trump administration's leadership.

2.0   Related Works

Public perception is among the most important qualities that a politician must manage. Managing how the wider society views a politician is vital to continuing political and public support. For political leaders, the stakes are even higher, as they are managing not just the perception of themselves, but also the nation they are representing. In the case of Joe Biden's public perception management, his challenges derive not just from how he is representing himself, but also the American government as well. American politics are, for better or for worse, not just a domestic issue, but an international concern as well. As one of the premier political superpower nations on Earth, the United States of America wields outsized influence on the lives of global citizens purely by sheer strength of diplomatic, military, and economic influence. As such, policy decisions decided upon and undertaken by the United States government will inevitably affect other countries both directly and indirectly. The previous administration of President Donald Trump severely weakened the United States' reputation in global politics and international support. The Trump administration's isolationist policies, prioritizing "America First", such as leaving the Paris Climate Agreement and leaving the World Health Organisation during the Coronavirus pandemic, have damaged the international credibility of America.

In today's globalized and internationally interconnected economy, such an isolationist viewpoint can only be detrimental to the continued development of a country. It is the reversal of these issues that has become a key sticking point of the Biden campaign. As Joe Biden attempts to restore the American government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, his public image must be curated so as to maximize the effectiveness towards achieving his goals. To this end, the Biden campaign has heavily pushed the narrative of depicting Joe Biden as having a "presidential" image as opposed to his predecessor, Trump. While there is almost no strict standard for what is considered a presidential image, it is a term that has been used in relation to how the President of the United States is perceived [5]. While a very loosely defined trait, the nebulous term "presidential" is known to be a consistently praised trait. The media, political commentators, and campaign consultants all espouse the desirability of a candidate through the usage of the term "presidential".

Another core component of this issue is Biden's presentation of himself as a "negotiator" or "restorer" of the status quo in America. A key issue that he must contend with is the much more divided nation that he inherited from the Trump administration [10]. With most Trump supporters questioning Biden's legitimacy as president, it was essential that his public image try to appeal beyond the scope of his typical demographics. In his inaugural address, Biden himself heavily focuses on the themes of unity. His speech pushed forward his beliefs in the American public's togetherness as a people and as a time of "healing". In service of this goal, Joe Biden has tried to put forth the image that he is a return to normalcy. The unique situation of having the presidency of Biden, an establishment politician, coming right after Trump, a political outsider, is that it allows a first-hand look at seeing the methods and tactics a political campaign uses after such a radical change in government policy and objectives. With the Trump administration being as polarizing as it was, the Biden administration is now working to re-secure and re-establish the American government's reputation in the world.

This paper will be a review of how Joe Biden's political portrayal through media is managed to win back the trust of both the American people and the world. It will show how his campaign and public relations activities can achieve the goal of presenting Joe Biden as a return to normalcy after the uncertainty of the previous administration. This paper will also be presenting how communication theories could be applied to the public image of the Biden administration. The scope of this paper will include a review of what the Biden campaign and administration's goals are in the sphere of the imagery they present to the public in their campaigns. It will also identify how Joe Biden and his political campaign attempt to present his brand of imagery to the public, both domestically and abroad. In relation to the previous point, this paper will also discuss how successful the attempts at managing the public's perception of Joe Biden are and their overall effects on Biden's reputation.

2.1   The Theories for Social Media Portrayal of Joe Biden's Public Image

The framework of this study is based on two major theories: Cultivation Theory and Image Restoration Theory. The following subchapters briefly explain the theories and framework of this study.

2.11   *Cultivation Theory.*

Cultivation Theory is a communication theory rooted in the idea that exposure to selected messages from the media could influence how the public perceives a particular issue. Cultivation Theory was originally developed in 1976 by Gerbner and Gross as a sociocultural theory for analyzing how television could shape the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values of its viewers [8]. It is just as applicable as a framework for any mass media platform including social media that can be used to push a message, however, which is within the scope of this paper. A related study on the use of social media as a political image propaganda platform is on Twitter manipulation by President Trump and he managed to triumph over mainstream media to disseminate his political campaign [24].
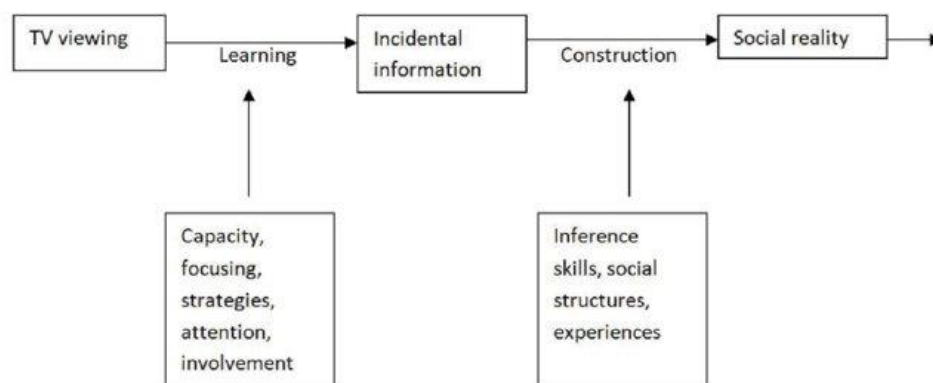

Figure. 1 Early Construction of Cultivation Theory [23]

2.1.2. Image Restoration Theory.

Image Restoration Theory or Image Repair Theory is a theory that outlines attempts to restore an image or reputation after a wrongdoing of some kind. Image Restoration Theory was first

proposed by William Benoit in 1995 [18]. It was created as an attempt to classify the basic forms of image repair, with specific sub-forms and tactics noted. Image Restoration Theory works by sorting these methods into a typology of strategies that work in specific ways. In a relevant study on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) massive propaganda, the same theory has been adopted to investigate the campaign to shape global narratives about the global health crisis during the heightened COVID-19 pandemic [22]. The study explores image repair propaganda of China's government on the COVID-19 pandemic handling among her citizens and international communities through political cartoons. There are five concepts listed under this theory:

a) Denial: The person or organization contests the veracity of the information provided or disavows accountability for the crisis-causing acts. They can assert that the incident never occurred or that it was not as serious as reported.

b) Evasion of responsibility: Accepting responsibility for the incident while downplaying personal guilt is the goal of this method. The person or organization may put the situation down to other causes like unforeseen circumstances or other people's activities.

c) Reduction of offensiveness: The goal of this technique is to reduce the perceived harm that the crisis has created. This may entail expressing regret, making an apology, or providing restitution to individuals who were harmed.

d) Corrective action: The person or organization takes decisive action to address the issue, stop such occurrences in the future, and show that they are committed to changing. This tactic seeks to demonstrate that lessons have been learned and that steps are being taken to avoid a crisis repetition.

e) Mortification: This tactic entails taking full responsibility for one's acts, feeling genuine remorse, and accepting the results of those actions. It is a stronger type of apology and is generally employed when more sensible or successful alternatives are unavailable.

2.2   The Conceptual Framework

In this paper, we apply Cultivation Theory to the build of Joe Biden's perception by the public. Cultivation Theory holds that the imagery and presentation of an idea can influence the opinions of the public. Cultivation Theory concerns itself with the public's exposure to a targeted message in a visual medium. Besides, the purpose of utilizing Image Restoration Theory is to take action that will help achieve an objective related to maintaining a positive reputation. Often, this takes the form of recompense to others in order to minimize negative consequences. This theory holds that after an action of discourse that offends others, the embarrassed actor is obliged to redress the reputations of others in order to diminish negative attributions. In regards to Joe Biden's public image, this mostly manifests in the form of rebuilding America's public image, with the goal of restoring the American government's credibility and regaining a positive reputation, both locally and abroad.
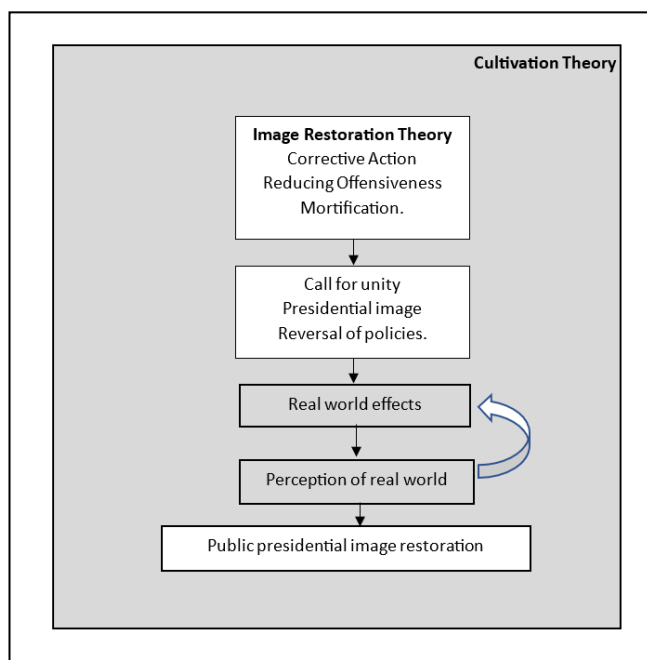
Figure. 2 The framework for social media portrayal of Joe Biden's public image.

3.0   Methods

We chose a narrative review for this study due to its ability to summarize earlier studies without focusing on significant statistics. The quality of a narrative review (NR) may be improved by borrowing from the systematic review methodologies that aim to reduce bias in selecting articles for review and employing an effective bibliographic research strategy [12]. NR is often presented using the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) format. The description and evaluation of published articles are the primary components of narrative reviews; however, the selection process for the articles may not always be disclosed. Instead, the application will typically assess earlier research, the current knowledge gap, and its justifications for subsequent research, as well as speculate on novel intervention types [13]. We used the keywords "Joe Biden Image Restoration", "Joe Biden Image Repair", "Biden Administration", and "President Joe Biden Campaign" as our search strings. Then, for inclusion criteria, we set it to English medium and it must be from Post-Trump administration as for exclusion criteria, we indicated that a non-relatable post to Post-Trump administration will be excluded. We adopted a narrative review process [25] to guide our research and Figure 3 illustrates the our process.
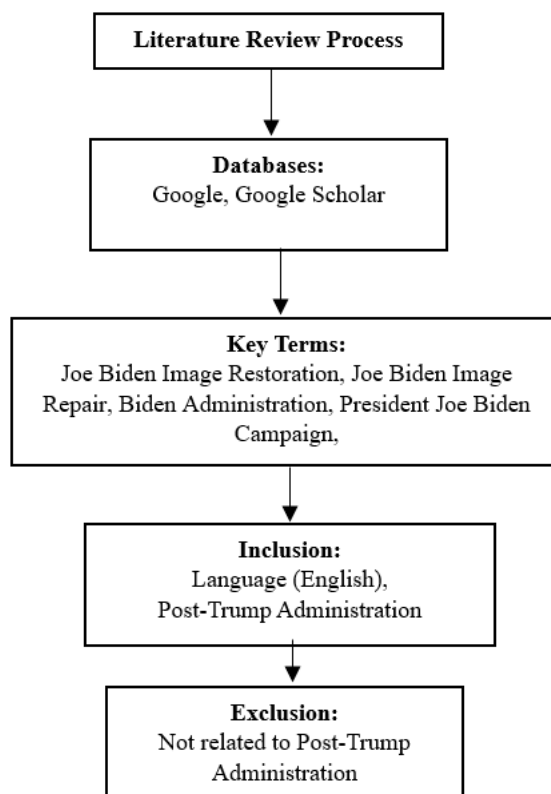
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Figure. 3 Narrative Review Process

4.0   Findings and Discussion

Several articles and papers have shown that the messaging conducted by Joe Biden and his political campaign can and does have a noticeable effect on how he is perceived. It is evident that throughout his political campaign and even beyond as President of the United States, how he is regarded is a matter of importance to him. Biden's public relations personnel are clearly shown to be consistently trying to find new avenues for the President's message and targeted public image to be disseminated. It is one of the aspects of Joe Biden that this paper will investigate.

4.1   Building the Presidential Image of Joe Biden

The Biden administration focuses its efforts on disseminating a positive image of Joe Biden's running of the country for the public. AP News [1] reported on how the Biden presidential campaign spent 280 million dollars on advertisement spending. Specifically, 220 million dollars for television advertisements and 60 million for digital advertisements. The amount of airtime for imagery pushed by the Biden campaign such an amount would get would be substantial. Cultivation Theory could also be used to focus on how Joe Biden's election campaign made the pivot to place a heavier emphasis on online publicity. The Biden campaign had notably used a "Biden Digital Coalition" in order to focus and expand its online presence. Of particular interest is how this technique has used different social media influencers and tweaked their message

depending on what particular demographic they are targeting and what social media platform they are using, including but not limited to Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Reddit.

Prior to Joe Biden's election, Donald Trump was president of the United States. Trump's inflammatory rhetoric, however, made him highly divisive. For a start, Trump's approval rating at the start of his tenure as president was under 50%, specifically at only 45% approval rating [6] In comparison, Biden's approval rating during his installation as president was found, in polls, to be at 57% [6]. The bigger than 10% approval in both individuals clearly shows that Biden's self-projected media image was more effective at garnering approval than Trump's.

4.2   Corrective Actions by the Biden's Government

Corrective Action, in the context of Image Restoration Theory, refers to when the accused party claims that they will correct the issues that have damaged their reputation. There are a few ways to achieve this, most commonly by reversing the offending action or by ensuring that it will not be repeated again. In the context of the American government, this refers to declarations it has made under Biden to fix the loss of face it endured under the leadership of Trump.

One of the first steps taken by the Biden administration upon being voted into power was to quickly undo or reverse the most controversial decisions of the Trump administration [19]. Among these was the implementation of anti-coronavirus measures, such as masks and social distancing, both of which were neglected by Trump. Other notable orders and actions taken by the Biden administration include re-establishing a cooperative relationship between the United States government and the World Health Organisation as well as moving the US back in line with the Paris Climate Agreement. More recently, this was capped off by a state dinner hosted by the White House, where President Biden was seen fostering closer ties with America's traditional allies which had been alienated during the Trump administration [4].

All these steps and more were announced both through a traditional press release and also via Twitter. The press release explicitly says that Biden intends to "reverse the gravest damages of the Trump administration". In releasing such a statement, the Biden administration makes it clear that they intend to take corrective action, here with the goal of demonstrating to the public and the international political scene that Biden will undo America's mistakes that were made under Trump and that they will correct those problems.

All of Joe Biden's corrective activities clearly show how he intends to differentiate himself from Donald Trump. All the various advertisements and press releases made by the Biden campaign and administration make it clear what sort of image Biden wishes to shape for himself. Part of the reason Biden has implicitly run his campaign is the restoration of America's standing and influence in the geopolitical world. This is shown in the various kinds of imagery that Biden tries to have the public associate with himself, notably messaging based on unity, normalcy, and a rejection of the values of Donald Trump. It is clear that Joe Biden's main objective in crafting the self-image he has is that he intends to show both America's citizens and the wider world that America is back to "business as usual" after the disorder and confusion of the Trump era.

4.3   Mortification – An Act of Accountability

Another tactic that falls under Image Restoration Theory is showing Mortification. Mortification can be defined in the context of Image Restoration Theory as the act of admitting to accountability and requesting forgiveness. The use of mortification can be seen when Biden expresses America's regret in undertaking certain actions under Trump.

Joe Biden has also shown the use of the technique of Mortification most directly in regard to America's leaving the Paris Climate Agreement [11]. He explicitly apologizes for the action, stating "I do apologize for the fact that the United States – the last administration pulled out of the Paris Accord". The statement clearly expresses regret for how the United States has acted and how the States, represented by Biden, wishes to have their transgressions against their geopolitical allies excused. This public statement was made during a climate summit. Here, Biden shows how he, as President of the United States and representative of its government, intends to show explicit disapproval of the actions that the United States government has taken in the past. The aim of such a statement is so that the international community will forgive the US's past wrongdoings during the Trump administration.

4.4　Reducing Offensiveness

Reducing Offensiveness is another method utilized by Biden that falls under the umbrella of Image Restoration Theory. There are various tactics that can be classified as Reducing Offensiveness. Among the relevant ones related to Biden's public image techniques are Bolstering, where negative connotations are minimized by increasing the audience's positive view of the accused, Transcendence, where the offending action is placed in a larger context, and Compensation, where the accused offer the victims of their actions a reimbursement for their actions.

Biden utilizes the subsets of Reducing Offensiveness in a variety of ways. He utilizes Bolstering in a campaign advertisement where he presented himself as the candidate for "Honour" and "Decency" [16]. He used Transcendence in another campaign ad, this time stating that he will "leave the dark, angry politics of the last four years behind us", a sign that he views America under Trump as an anomaly and not representative of its norms [17]. Another campaign ad sees Biden making use of Compensation, in which Brad Pitt narrates how Biden will "work just as hard for the people who voted for him as those who didn't"[21]. All these campaign advertisements show how Biden wishes to present himself as a different representative of America than Trump. Here, Biden presents himself as a chance to reunite the United States after Trump's divisiveness. To that end, the Biden campaign has run the above political advertisement on various influential visual platforms, such as both television and social media.

By releasing such a message, the Biden administration aims to show the world that America can be trusted again. Internationally, Biden's efforts appear to be paying off. Survey data collected [15] shows massive gains in global approval of the United States following Biden taking office. 62% of respondents view the US favourably, as compared to 34% during the Trump era. 77% of respondents believe that Biden is well qualified to be president, as opposed to 16% of Trump. The implications of the data are clear in the fact that, internationally, Biden's image of presidential leadership is winning people over, and by extension, the image of America.

4.5　Real-World Effects on Biden's Image Restoration

How Biden has spread his message is also something of notable interest to the scope of this paper. Biden's outreach attempts are also noteworthy. By the time the presidential election was just about a month out, the Biden campaign had spent more than half a billion dollars- $502 million dollars, specifically in its fight to get Joe Biden elected to the position of President Biden spread his campaign messaging through all the major mediums of mass media: television, internet, and radio.

His victory over Trump is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of his methods. The wide range of mediums that Biden chose to spread his message ensured that no voting demographic was neglected. It is true that Biden spent a lot of time and resources on his online publicity. Much has been made of how the Biden campaign fielded various methods for different social media platforms. Those efforts were vital to securing the support of younger voters and convincing them that Biden was more aligned with their interests. However, Biden's push into more traditional mass media should not be ignored. While his internet forays no doubt secured the youth and urban vote, Biden's release of his advertisements on both television and radio undoubtedly helped him gain support amongst older, less wealthy, or more rural demographics who are less likely to be online.

All in all, the fact that Joe Biden won over at-the-time sitting President Donald Trump, himself a shocking victory in the previous election, speaks for the effectiveness of Biden's campaign itself. Biden's election has had a massive effect on international approval ratings for the United States of America [15]. The numbers in that report practically speak for themselves: More than half of all individuals surveyed from various countries have a positive view of the United States, 74% have high confidence in Biden's leadership of America, and some of the damage done to perceptions of America by Trump has started to reverse, with favourability rebounding back to Obama era levels.

What all this data shows is that Joe Biden's effort to have the United States of America regain face in the aftermath of Donald Trump's leadership has achieved some level of success. Both domestically and abroad, Trump was a divisive figure, and by association, America became a more divisive country under his leadership as well. By simply projecting himself as a unifying counterpoint to Trump, Joe Biden was able to repair America's image once he was elected president. With Joe Biden now America's main public figurehead, Biden has helped the US regain at least part of its image credibility, though it will take more effort and time before trust in the American government goes back to pre-Trump levels.

5.0   Conclusions

Posturing and political theatre seem as if it will always remain part of the discourse regarding American politics. It is hoped that this paper will provide a less nebulous and more practical analysis of the importance of political image. Image Restoration Theory, in particular, makes for a fascinating lens through which to view things when an offense is caused by a public figure or institution. The actions listed under Image Restoration Theory can be seen being applied by Joe Biden in regard to the United States of America. While America is far from regaining its lost reputation, under Biden it is carefully making efforts to do so.

This paper aimed to determine, among other things, the effectiveness of Joe Biden's public image campaign. While the partial gains America has achieved under Biden cannot be squarely put to the application of Image Restoration Theory, it still clearly plays some part in maintaining its reputation to numerous observers. For now, the American government has to move forward with its reputation still on shaky ground, but as long as it takes action to keep progressing, perhaps in time it will regain the standing it once held. In conclusion, the observations of this paper should help clarify the importance of carefully managing the public's perception so as to not lose their trust. It is also hoped that the findings of this paper also help public institutions or figures understand the dynamics of international politics and relation better.

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