

Performing Legitimacy Online: A Comparative Analysis of Contested States'

Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract

This thesis explores how contested states utilise digital diplomacy to gradually construct legitimacy in state-to-state relationships. By comparing detailed extreme case studies of Palestine and Taiwan, it examines the online content produced by their Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), including political statements and social media posts (X) from January 2022 up to and including December 2023. Through discourse analysis, the research finds that both contested states employ distinct strategies to establish legitimacy tailored to their unique circumstances. Taiwan emphasises its democratic values and operational capabilities, often adopting a confident and even humorous tone. In contrast, Palestine appeals to legal standards and moral arguments, stressing the injustice of its situation despite gaining significant international recognition. While differing in tone and focus, both extreme cases converge on leveraging digital diplomacy to assert legitimacy through various discursive strategies such as isomorphic mimicry, humour, moral framing, and normative stratification. These techniques enable them to highlight conventional markers of statehood, strategically align themselves with Western liberal values established by the Liberal International Order (LIO), and condemn their counterpart nations as violators of those same principles. This thesis challenges traditional theories (declaratory and constitutive) of recognition by demonstrating that legitimacy is not only something granted by others or based on fixed criteria; it can be actively shaped through strategic online communication. This underlines the increasingly complex and relational character of legitimacy in today's international political landscape.

Keywords: contested states, digital diplomacy, normative legitimacy, Montevideo Convention, Liberal International Order (LIO), international legitimacy.

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I. Introduction

What counts as a state?

"Depending on who you ask, the total number of countries on Earth ranges anywhere between 193 to 237. This is ultimately because there are a lot of disputed zones and nations that hold either full or partial sovereignty around the world" -Toby Saunders, 2024.

These “disputed zones” are often regarded as contested territories, and this ambiguity highlights the elusive nature of their legitimacy. Traditional theories on contested statehood offer conflicting frameworks for determining complete legitimacy in such cases. The declaratory theory holds internal state functionality (e.g., a defined territory, government, and population) as a determinant for complete legitimacy, whilst constitutive theories emphasise recognition by other states as decisive. This conflict exposes a grey area in explaining functionality and legitimacy. Some contested states are completely functional but are not granted full legitimacy status, whilst, in contrast, there are also contested states with limited functionality that are recognised as entirely legitimate (Finck, 2016). This paradoxical nature warrants a closer examination of how contested states deliberately seek legitimacy in a system that does not formally recognise them.

Recent research has begun to explore alternative explanations of contested statehood legitimacy through a dynamic process, particularly in light of recent digital advancements. Tools such as websites and social media can complement the participation of contested states in diplomatic activities, compensating for their limited access to traditional diplomacy. It enables them to actively construct and project legitimacy in real time to both foreign governments and populations. This further raises questions about strategic choices that contested states make to build legitimacy and how these choices may vary depending on different conditions of functionality and recognition. This thesis, therefore, examines how contested states strategically employ digital diplomacy to construct legitimacy in different conditions. Consequently, this thesis proposes the following research question:

"How do contested states utilise digital diplomacy to construct legitimacy in state-to-state relationships, and how can we explain the strategies they employ?"

Traditional literature tends to focus solely on the binary aspects of contested statehood legitimacy, as expressed through the granting or denial of recognition, thereby overlooking how legitimacy can be gradually constructed. It constitutes a gap in the literature in which legitimacy is not accounted for as a discursive and strategic process. This is particularly the case for digital diplomacy, which has been underrepresented in research due to its recent technological advancements. While traditional frameworks of statehood characteristics have been extensively researched, there has been less emphasis on how contested states specifically utilise digital outputs to establish legitimacy. From an academic perspective,

this thesis contributes to filling this gap by examining how contested states use digital diplomacy not merely as a tool of communication but as a strategic site for constructing legitimacy.

It does so by conducting a qualitative comparative analysis that focuses on the digital outputs of Taiwan and Palestine, selecting a timeframe from January 2022 to December 2023. These are considered extreme cases among contested states, representing the two extremes of the functionality-recognition spectrum. Taiwan demonstrates high functionality (effective government, territory, capacity for other state relationships) despite its limited formal recognition by 12 recognised states. Conversely, Palestine holds broad recognition from over 130 countries yet lacks functionality, for example, expressed in its inconsistent territorial regime. To examine how each position may influence digital diplomatic strategies, this thesis analyses online political statements and X content published by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), employing both deductive and inductive coding to consider content, context, and tone.

The main argument streamlines how, despite their opposite position, Taiwan and Palestine strategically converge in utilising digital outputs to emphasise their state functional characteristics as well as their alignment with (Western) recognised states. This convergence is rooted in three strategies that collectively depict the overall picture of their efforts to achieve legitimacy. Firstly, both contested states utilise digital outputs to highlight and emphasise traditional factual characteristics of statehood as a foundation for their legitimacy claims. Secondly, they also strategically converge on selectively aligning with norms and values associated with the Liberal International Order (e.g. democracy and human rights), expressing conformity with norms of typically Western recognised actors to strengthen their claims. Finally, both entities further build their claims of legitimacy by framing counter-recognised states that violate these same international norms.

The societal relevance of this thesis is grounded in the growing influence of digital diplomacy on public and international perceptions. As diplomacy has been increasingly digitalised, contested states, as well as citizens, have direct access to diplomatic procedures that they had formerly been restricted to (Bjola & Homes, 2015). Understanding how this space is used to construct legitimacy helps explain how power and visibility are negotiated in the digital age. Besides its relevance for citizens attempting to understand state interactions, this also regards policymakers and diplomats engaged in recognition policy or digital governance. Overall, emphasising contested statehood strategies in achieving legitimacy offers insights into the broader transformation of diplomacy regarding the utility of digitalism.

The remainder of this thesis will first be followed with a literature review outlining key debates on contested statehood and legitimacy, including the role of digital diplomacy. Then, the conceptualisation clarifies core concepts and hypotheses, which in turn inform methodological choices, including case selection, data sources, and coding approaches. This is followed by an analysis that presents key findings

from the digital discourse of Taiwan and Palestine and a concluding chapter that reflects on the research question, discusses theoretical and practical implications, and offers suggestions for future research.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Literature review

This literature review examines various factors that influence the legitimacy of contested states. First, traditional theories are discussed (declaratory and constitutive), followed by their main critiques. After that, cultural- and digital diplomacy are discussed, as these theories have been suggested to be more comprehensive in explaining (contested) states' push for legitimacy. Although the focus is on legitimacy, it is often treated interchangeably with recognition in the literature, where recognition is viewed as both a signal and an ultimate outcome of complete legitimacy (Crawford & Beatens, 2023).

2.1.1. Formal requirements; declaratory theories

Extensive literature has noted that seeking formal requirements is one of the prominent factors in achieving full state recognition for contested states, often tied to the specific concept of 'normative legitimacy' (Schmelzle, 2011; Pickel & Pickel, 2024). The recognition of a state can be traced back to the Montevideo Convention in 1933, where the foundation of statehood and its criteria were established to provide a legal framework. The criteria state that an entity subjected to international law should adhere to the qualifications of:

- a permanent population,
- a defined territory,
- a government and;
- the capacity to enter into relations with other states (Finck, 2016).

These criteria also form the basis of the declaratory theory, which states that state establishment is tied to these factual standards. One of the core elements of this convention was that "the political existence of the state is independent of recognition by the other states" (Worster, 2010). Many scholars have used this as a foundation to review whether contested states can utilise these requirements in order to evaluate their legitimacy. For instance, Ker-Lindsay (2015), who draws on secondary sources, mainly analysed Kosovo's capability of statehood functioning and found that territory was essential to signal statehood in practice. It allowed for the establishment of functioning institutions and practices that all could be tied back to its well-established territory.

Similarly, Coppieters (2022) conducted a comparative case study analysis of Abkhazia, Northern

Cyprus, and Taiwan, finding that all contested nations attempt to convert their domestic sovereignty into legitimacy by demonstrating statehood through their de facto territorial control. Other criteria, such as the establishment of a government, have also been deemed essential in obtaining legitimacy. Caspersen (2015), who analysed legitimisation strategies of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, and Transnistria, concluded that a defined government is essential for both internal and external legitimacy and contested states utilise it to demonstrate their compatibility for recognised status.

Furthermore, several scholars have evaluated the overall effectiveness of the Montevideo criteria in explaining the legitimacy of contested statehood. Through document analysis, Stracquadanio (2022) found that at least partial compliance with these criteria is a necessity for contemporary international recognition, although she simultaneously problematises their adequacy as a standalone framework for conceptualising legitimacy. Pegg (1998) and Kosiuk (2022) further compared the criteria to multiple contested states and supported that it provides an essential foundation for legal recognition and legitimacy. However, Kumar (2023) conducted a legal analysis of Kosovo, Palestine, and Taiwan to assess the relevance of traditional criteria and mainly emphasised how they have become outdated because they fail to reflect the political realities and complexities of modern statehood, such as value conformity and international political alignment.

The extent of the explanatory power has thus been a point of discussion within the literature. Where Pegg (1998) and Kosiuk (2022) continue to support the usefulness of the criteria in legal examination, Kumar (2023) and Stracquadanio (2022) are more convinced that it is outdated or needs reform to be adequate. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that declaratory theories, as defined through the Montevideo Convention, do not guarantee recognition or legitimacy, and statehood today cannot be fully understood through legal criteria alone. The Montevideo Convention, in itself, is thus limited in explanatory power, but it becomes relevant when viewed through broader political lenses. If one were to rely solely on the declaratory theory, recognition would become legally irrelevant, thereby contradicting cases where entities meet the Montevideo criteria but still lack complete legitimacy (through recognition).

2.1.2. Power politics; constitutive theories

To complement the missing element of power in declaratory theory, many scholars also appeal to the other traditional theory that introduces 'recognition by other states' as the core of achieving legitimacy. Constitutive perspectives hold that recognition is a prerequisite for statehood and that, in the international system, an entity cannot be regarded as a state without it (Worster, 2010). Only when a state is acknowledged as such does it become a legal entity, and other governments have a significant degree of autonomy over whether or not to do so. The theory thus holds that recognition by other states is the main

driver in contested states achieving full legitimacy.

Siroky et al. (2021) utilised a cross-national dataset and regression analysis to examine how earlier recognitions by major powers increased the likelihood of contested states becoming recognised. The results demonstrated that this likelihood increases significantly when other states recognise the contested entity. They saw that Kosovo gained a broader range of international legitimacy because it was recognised by major powers such as the US, making it a relative success case as compared to other contested states. This conclusion that recognition is used as a tool for legitimacy aligns closely with Berlin's (2009) arguments, which suggest that, in practice, states implicitly use recognition to reward or punish one another. Newman, Doyle and Visoka (2020) qualitatively analysed Kosovo and also noted how it utilises agency to strategically prioritise (partial) recognition in its efforts to gain legitimacy. Together with others, such as Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) and Finck (2016), these scholars contribute to a wider consensus that recognition within constitutive theory can limit the extent to which contested states can claim legitimacy.

This alignment in strategic ideals of recognition can be further explained through a remarkable finding in the literature, namely the dominance of Western hegemony in state recognition. This idea of Western recognition is theoretically rooted in the Liberal International Order (LIO), which defines acceptable state behaviour through liberal norms such as sovereignty, non-discrimination, and democracy (Ikenberry, 2018). LIO is not merely a set of values but is also embedded in institutional structures, such as legal regimes or supranational organisations, that enforce these values. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol (2021) even illustrate that the LIO functions as a global recognition order that embeds Western-centric hierarchies, often denying full symbolic or political acceptance to non-Western contested states. In his chapter on the Routledge Handbook of State Recognition, O Beachain (2023) exemplified this through analysis of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He concluded that legitimacy is not earned but granted by powerful actors. Western states became more important than the parent state (Georgia) and held the power to limit their access to complete legitimacy.

Besides Siroky et al., other scholars emphasise Western dominance in legitimising contested states. Sarabatnam (2018) and Tourme-Jouannet (2013) highlight colonial legacies in recognition processes, noting that Western powers historically form a barrier in granting legal status only to states deemed "civilised." A case review of Mozambique illustrates how colonialism continues to perpetuate discriminatory structures, pressuring non-Western nations to adopt Western political models for sovereignty (Sarabatnam, 2018).

However, there is also nuance to this Western domination. Kursani (2020) studied how 30 contested states evolved from 1945 to 2017, noting that support also relies on regional powers (e.g., Russia for Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh), influential neighbours and other non-Western actors. Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) further challenge the Western bias by demonstrating, through case studies and

interviews, that contested states can strategically engage with Western institutions to selectively pursue recognition, showing that these structures can also facilitate legitimacy over being a barrier.

2.1.3. Criticising traditional theories

Aside from the Western nuance, there is an overall consensus that both declaratory and constitutive frameworks fail to capture the reality of contested states' efforts to gain legitimacy. They attempt to explain this through the binary process of granting recognition, accordingly translating to either complete legitimacy or no legitimacy at all. However, this dichotomy is not sufficient, as legitimacy is better understood as a continuous process involving multiple levels, degrees, and intermediate steps.

According to Finck (2016), the theoretical division has revealed a contradiction between recognition in theory and recognition in reality rather than providing much insight into the legitimate status of unrecognised entities. Orakhelashvili (2008) and Ker-Lindsay (2015) both draw attention to the shortcomings of existing theories, pointing out that many disputed states are in a grey area where their status does not fit the legal standards set by either model. Vidmar (2012) contributes to this critique by arguing that the legal effects of recognition are often shaped by political and contextual factors, undermining assumptions of uniform legal consequences. Visoka (2021), Bouris and Fernández-Molina (2018) and Kumar (2023) further expand on this criticism by suggesting that granting complete legitimacy (recognition) should be seen as a dynamic and performative process rather than as a one-time legal act, suggesting the traditional theories cannot account for the dynamics of legitimacy.

This further translates to critical stances of methodologies. Finck (2016), Orakhelashvili (2008), Vidmar (2012), and Kumar (2023) agree that legal positivist approaches overlook the political and contextual aspects of recognition in favour of an overly rigid focus on criteria. Ker-Lindsay (2015) and Visoka (2021) advocate for more relational, discourse-based approaches, drawing attention to the undervaluation of routine diplomatic behaviours in case study research. Visoka (2021) further criticises the Eurocentric bias in prevailing frameworks, which should also be accounted for in future research. Collectively, these academics advocate for eschewing the traditional dichotomous frameworks and embracing more complex strategies that take into account the multifaceted character of (efforts to gain) legitimacy and how this can be gradually acclaimed in the global scene.

2.1.4. Beyond Recognition: Cultural and Digital Diplomacy as Performative Legitimacy

Visoka (2021) introduces the concept of 'recognitoriality' to steer away from this binary understanding that legitimacy is ultimately either granted or denied based solely on formal recognition. 'Recognitoriality' frames legitimacy as a dynamic and performative process shaped by varying degrees of diplomatic- and

strategic engagement, rather than a fixed outcome determined by formal recognition. It shifts the focus from whether legitimacy is granted to 'how' and 'why' it is actively constructed or strategically pursued over time.

Building on this performative understanding, several scholars have explored the idea of cultural diplomacy in relation to state legitimacy. This encompasses two forms: cultural exchange for fostering understanding and national projection for advancing political and economic interests through a positive national image (Ang et al., 2015; Manasserian, 2024). According to Ang et al., Manasserian, and Grincheva (2020), cultural diplomacy serves as an essential soft power tool that helps governments maintain their identity, establish legitimacy, and shape foreign perceptions. This is particularly evident in contested states. For instance, Wille (2024), through a case study, examined Kosovo's foreign policy from 2008 to 2012 post-independence and found that such states emphasize culturally embedded diplomacy, using symbolism to assert political identity and legitimacy.

However, as global communication becomes more digitised, traditional cultural diplomacy faces new challenges. With contested states often lacking access to formal diplomatic channels, digital diplomacy has emerged as a vital evolution, providing alternative methods for projecting identity and engaging with the public (McConnell et al., 2012). Scholars like Grincheva (2020) and Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue that digital environments even expanded soft power potential and transformed legitimacy negotiation. Zinovieva and Bulva (2021), Pamment (2012) and Gumenyuk et al. (2021) built upon this through practice-oriented and cross-cultural approaches, explaining how digital diplomacy can enhance cultural diplomacy, exemplified by Russia's use of "Web 2.0" tools for foreign policy explanation. Duncombe (2017) further supported this through a diplomatic engagement analysis of Twitter, stating that such digital tools can "shape the struggle for recognition, and thereby legitimise political possibilities for change" (p.562).

Ultimately, digital diplomacy presents a novel and strong platform for exploring the legitimacy of contested states, challenging traditional theories and viewing it as a dynamic process. However, there is also a belief that the empirical understanding of the impact of digital diplomacy on formal state legitimacy is limited, as stated by Gumenyuk et al. (2021). This is supported by other scholars, specifically for partially recognised states (Axelsson, 2022; Grincheva, 2020). McConnell et al. (2012) also emphasise the need for further research to explore how legitimacy is negotiated through unofficial practices, particularly in online or non-traditional diplomatic settings.

These authors generally recommend that future research, specifically qualitative case studies, focus on the relationship between digital diplomacy and its influence on the legitimacy of contested states. They also call for honest reflection on potential Western biases rooted in existing frameworks. Beyond the calls for future research, such studies are important to conduct due to their time-sensitive nature. Gumenyuk et al. (2021) specifically outline that digital technologies are rapidly transforming the nature and dynamics of diplomacy. Because of this vastly accelerating pace of technological advancement, academic and policy

frameworks risk falling behind the pace of technological and geopolitical change when this research is ignored. This urgency is even more accentuated through the analysis of contested states, as it is proposed that they are specifically much more reliant on unofficial diplomatic practices, such as digital tools, than non-contested states (McConnell et al., 2012).

2.2. Conceptualisation

Theoretical assumptions propose that contested states actively seek to gradually achieve legitimacy, thereby improving their position in the international community. While recognition is an evident marker of complete legitimacy, it may overlook the complexity in which legitimacy is pursued to varying degrees. Therefore, ‘efforts to achieve legitimacy’ by contested states is this thesis’ focus, and recognition is considered as a possible outcome and ultimate endpoint in pursuing legitimacy. The term ‘contested states’ (also called quasi-states or ‘de facto states’) in this context is understood as political entities that have obtained internal governance and assert sovereignty but fail to meet complete recognition (Caspersen, 2012).

Digital diplomacy (independent variable) is defined as the strategic use of digital tools (e.g. social media and websites) by state actors to conduct diplomatic engagement activity (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Freeman, 2024). It expands on conventional diplomacy, which is the traditional government-to-government communication through formal channels such as written documents and diplomatic visits (Hicks, 2021). When access to official diplomatic channels is limited, digital diplomacy offers contested governments a low-barrier, straightforward means of pursuing diplomacy (McConnel et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the dependent variable “legitimacy” can be defined as the generalised perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). To formally break this down following the literature and aim of the research question, this study will offer a more detailed application of legitimacy, explained through both ‘normative legitimacy and ‘international legitimacy’.

‘Normative legitimacy’ considers whether an actor or institution deserves the authority to govern based on shared normative principles or values (Pickel & Pickel, 2024). It includes both internal norms established by the Montevideo criteria (factual) and broader political norms such as democracy or human rights. It underscores how contested states construct their objective right to claim legitimacy based on appealing to shared international norms. ‘International legitimacy’ specifically regards state-to-state social acceptance and reflects how much-contested states are treated as legitimate actors within the international community (Buchanan, 2003). Although formal recognition may signify an outcome of this acceptance, many contested states build their international legitimacy through various forms of diplomatic engagement, such as digital diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy (independent variable) is highly relevant in enhancing the visibility of contested states. It enables them to present themselves in line with globally recognised standards of statehood, thereby strengthening their claims to normative. This directly establishes the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Through curated narratives and strategic discourse, contested states can utilise digital diplomacy, signalling alignment with broad international norms to claim normative legitimacy. The in-facto statehood criteria (Montevideo criteria) form a key component in this, and it is argued that when made visible by contested states, they support the process of performing sovereignty positively. This contributes to the construction of normative legitimacy by signalling that widely assumed statehood criteria are met (Caspersen, 2015). Consequently, the first hypothesis derived for normative legitimacy is:

H1a: Contested states utilise digital diplomacy to emphasise alignment with the in facto statehood criteria (defined territory, functioning government, permanent population, and relation with other states), which positively influences the construction of normative legitimacy.

Beyond factual statehood, contested states further build normative legitimacy claims by aligning with Western values specifically. Global frameworks, such as the LIO, a post-World War II framework dominated by powerful Western states, tend to emphasise the importance of values like democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (Ikenberry, 2018). Such Western actors are particularly beneficial for contested states, as they often have more control over access to international legitimacy, overshadowing that of neighbouring states (O Beachain, 2023). Thus, the alignment with the Western states specifically further contributes to the construction of normative legitimacy. Taking this bias into account, the other hypothesis for normative legitimacy is constructed:

H1b: Contested states use digital diplomacy to align with dominant Western norms (such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law), which positively influences the construction of normative legitimacy by demonstrating value conformity within the liberal international order (LIO).

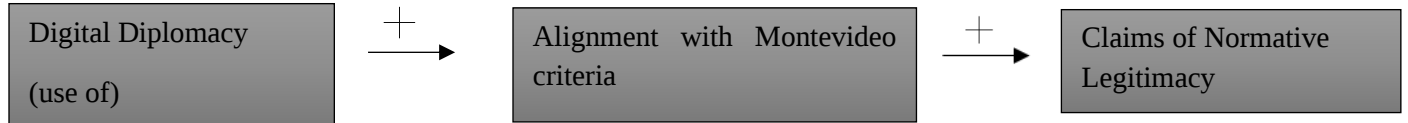
Moving to international legitimacy, digital diplomacy also facilitates international interaction. Such online forms of interaction represent partnerships, legal appeals, or symbolic engagement that enable contested states to credibly present themselves as members of the international community, gradually reinforcing their claims to international legitimacy. This interaction positively enhances legitimacy by demonstrating international visibility, responsiveness, and a willingness to engage with globally recognised norms, which collectively strengthen perceptions of state-like authority and credibility. The relationship between the independent variable (digital diplomacy) and the dependent variable (international legitimacy) is established as increased online engagement is utilised to foster external acceptance. It is again expected that

contested states utilise digital diplomacy to increase diplomatic engagement with Western actors specifically to positively influence their international legitimacy. The second hypothesis is presented as:

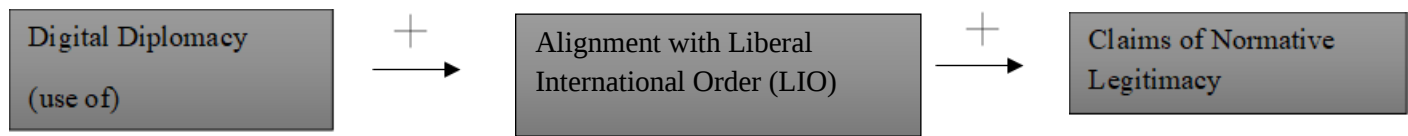
H2: Contested states utilise digital diplomacy to signal interaction or engagement with (Western) international actors, such as through partnerships, institutional engagement, or legal appeals, which positively influences the efforts of claiming international legitimacy.

2.3. Conceptual models

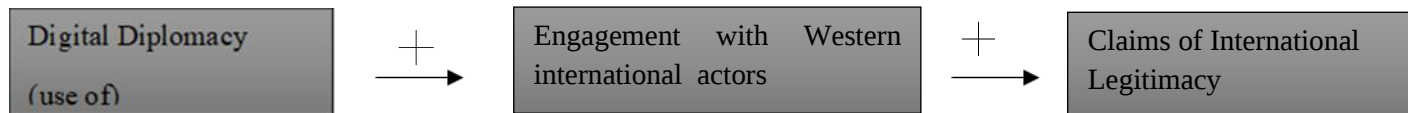
Hypothesis 1a:



Hypothesis 1b:



Hypothesis 2:



III. Methodology

3.1. Research strategy

This thesis will employ a qualitative comparative case study approach, as outlined by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), which effectively connects how independent variables result in outcomes, supporting the descriptive nature of the research question. The dual logic of the comparative case study enables the exploration of both differences and similarities, enriching analytical depth. Creswell and Poth (2016) argue that qualitative research offers depth and flexibility in examining the meanings necessary to explore context-dependent topics, such as legitimacy construction, making it particularly suitable for this study.

3.2. Case Selection

This thesis employs an extreme case study design, selecting Taiwan and Palestine as outliers among the contested states. According to Seawright and Gerring (2008), extreme case selections are justifiably proper because they magnify the dynamics of underlying phenomena, allowing for a clearer exploration of the hypotheses outlined. Aligning with the hypotheses constructed, both cases strongly diverge in their actual statehood criteria (functionality) and established relationships with Western states.

Typically, it is assumed that the recognition and practical advantages of legitimacy reinforce each other, implying that more recognition is usually associated with possessing more practical legitimate benefits, such as functioning governments, defined territories, and the ability to enter into relations with other states (Geldenhuis, 2009). Conversely, less recognised states are assumed to lack these benefits. When compared to other contested states, such as Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara, and Abkhazia, it is Palestine and Taiwan that are particularly extreme because they invert the conventional relationship between recognition and practical legitimacy. These extremely opposite positions concerning functionality and recognition make them ideal for examining how digital diplomacy can operate under different conditions that have been previously conceptualised.

Palestine represents an extreme case of high recognition yet low factual statehood. It has been recognised by 147 UN members (76.2% of the UN), and it has therefore been granted the title of a ‘non-member observer state’ since 2012. However, military occupations by Israel occupying East Jerusalem and 60% of the West Bank impact its ability to exercise effective territorial control and governance, causing a fragmentation in achieving full statehood criteria. The ‘extreme’ notion can be observed in Palestine’s broad recognition yet its inability to utilise the practical benefits that come with it. In contrast, Taiwan has limited

formal recognition from only 12 states and the Vatican¹, but it performs high functionality. Although China attempts to obstruct Taiwan through its “One China policy”, it manages to maintain stable territorial control, a functioning democratic government, and stable state relations (Fabry, 2024). Taiwan’s case thus represents the opposite extreme: low formal recognition count paired with high practical legitimate capacities.

Palestine’s ties with Western powers have remained limited and are often only symbolic. Although Palestine benefits from high recognition, this often lacks economic or institutional engagement. Western support is often conditioned and marginalised by powerful Western states, particularly the United States, which vetoes Palestinian membership in international institutions and constrains its access to Western diplomatic networks (Al Jazeera, 2024). This weakens the possibilities of aligning with the LIO, offering digital diplomacy new ways to compensate for this marginalisation. Taiwan, on the other hand, maintains strong ties with Western Powers. In 2023, it received 58.1 billion in European investment and gained political support from the European Parliament in rejecting China’s sovereignty claims (Asia Society Policy Institute, 2025). The U.S. supports Taiwan explicitly through trade and diplomatic visits, generally allowing it to better align with LIO norms and project itself as a legitimate actor despite lacking formal recognition (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2024).

In summary, Palestine and Taiwan represent extreme and opposing cases in the context of contested statehood. Both cases diverge significantly in their recognition and the components of factual statehood elements, as well as their alignment with Western norms and structures. This makes Taiwan and Palestine especially relevant for testing hypotheses regarding how digital diplomacy is used to construct legitimacy claims under different conditions and geopolitical contexts. When studied together, the comparative logic is specifically relevant to reveal how these extreme cases potentially converge on similar discursive strategies that can explain the quest for achieving legitimacy, allowing for (contextual) generalisability to other contested states.

3.3. Operationalisation

Following the sequence of the hypotheses, all relevant concepts must also be operationalised. In analysing contested states, Taiwan and Palestine are selected for their extreme characteristics as well as their well-structured digital outputs in the English language. Other contested states have been excluded because they lack extreme case justification or do not publish consistently in English for analysis. As briefly mentioned in the case selection, both contested states also have opposing states that form one of the main barriers to

¹ In 2025, the countries formally recognising Taiwan are Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Eswatini, and Vatican City.

achieving full legitimacy status, which will be referred to as their "counter-recognised states". For Palestine, this is Israel, and for Taiwan, it is China, and both are expected to have an active presence in analysis.

Digital diplomacy is operationalised specifically through official publications from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which is further justified in Table 1, found in the data collection section. Rather than metrics, the operational focus is on discursive content: what is said (themes), how it is said (tone) and what strategies are involved. Specific indicators of this include value signalling, appeals, referrals, and joint statements, which are used to explore attempts at constructing legitimacy.

The hypotheses build on how the selected contested states utilise digital outlets to represent, in fact, statehood criteria as well as Western political values embedded in the LIO. The in-facto statehood criteria will be operationalised solely through the Montevideo Convention criteria. As the literature suggests, these criteria alone fall short of explaining state legitimacy but remain relevant when discussed through a more comprehensive lens. The presence of these markers in digital materials indicates an effort to signal functional performance. Alignment with the LIO framework is operationalised through its political values, and its operational focus lies on both explicit references (e.g. democracy) and contextual framing (e.g. promoting peace). A deductive codebook is constructed to identify these values, which are subdivided into categories of socio-political, economic, and institutional aspects (see Appendix 1, p. 43).

The Western international actors that are often referred to are mainly expressed through recognised states that are typically associated with the West, such as the United States, Canada and European Union member states. In addition to this, institutions in which these member states are actively involved diplomatically are also taken into account (e.g., NATO and the United Nations) when analysing diplomatic engagement or specific references to normative and international legitimacy.

Normative legitimacy involves the right of statehood based on norms and values, primarily conveyed through self-presentation and value signalling in digital diplomacy. To operationalise the efforts of claiming normative legitimacy, this thesis will analyse the frequency and contextual emphasis of norm-based discourse, focusing on liberal international values and 'de facto' criteria, as outlined above. A higher frequency of these references in digital outputs, particularly when they reflect Western values, will indicate a positive influence on efforts to construct normative legitimacy.

International legitimacy focuses on recognition and social acceptance among states, expressed through digital engagement. This includes not only formal recognition but also symbolic acts, such as joint statements. To operationalise international legitimacy, the study will assess claims of engagement, such as welcoming reports, legal appeals, and acknowledgements from other states (outlined in Appendix 2, p. 45). Evidence of these indicators is regarded as empirical support for enhanced efforts in claiming international legitimacy gained through digital diplomacy and interpreted as a positive influence.

3.4. Data collection

This thesis will utilise the official documents justified in Table 1 as the data collection method to conduct analysis:

<i>Digital diplomacy tool</i>	<i>Justification</i>
Official quasi-governmental websites (e.g., Ministries of Foreign Affairs)	Accurately indicates online formal positioning of quasi-states (Bjola & Jiang, 2015)
Verified social media accounts on X Palestine: N=100 Taiwan: N=100	Direct political communication government agencies are relevant (Blassnig, 2022; Bjola & Jiang, 2015). X is preferred for its use by diplomats and direct engagement profiling (Khan et al., 2022).
Online political statements (released via governmental websites) Palestine: N=40 Taiwan: N=43	Signifies messages aimed at managing international image and political position (Blassnig, 2022).
Records of participation in online referenced multilateral forums/decision-making (joint statements)	Joint statements indicate third-party assessment as well as visible attempts to for legitimacy (Pamment, 2012).

Table 1. Different Tools of Digital Diplomacy.

Data collection methods are instrumental when research is centred around discourse and symbolic action, which can be harder to analyse through direct observation or numerical research (Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, the study follows a constructivist qualitative approach, where variables are understood as conceptual constructs that guide analysis.

Digital policy content analysis has been previously methodologically justified as highly associated with political communication and self-presentation, making it a valuable tool for assessing legitimacy construction through digital content (Blassnig, 2022). The timeframe for analysis will be set from January 2022 to December 2023. This timeframe is selected because the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a new wave of digital diplomacy, with Ministries of Foreign Affairs almost entirely transitioning to virtual platforms (Bjola & Manor, 2022). The timeframe starts in January 2022 because this marks the period when these changes became routinised as part of foreign ministries' digital strategies rather than being a short-term crisis response. It concludes in 2023 to avoid distortions from major crises and events such as the aftermath of the October 7th Israeli attacks and the Taiwanese elections of January 2024. These events are excluded from focusing on standard strategic discourse over crisis response, allowing a broader analysis of standard legitimacy efforts.

Both systematic and purposive sampling techniques will guide the selection of data. This hybrid strategy ensures a broad yet targeted corpus of data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As presented in Table 1, the number of the Palestinian MOFA's is 40. It is important to note that the Palestinian MOFA is controlled by Fatah, a secular Palestinian political party and the leading faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), governing the West Bank and recognised as the official representative of the Palestinian people. There is no direct involvement from Hamas, which controls its robust networks distinct from those of the Palestinian Authority, resulting in their exclusion from analysis (Robinson, 2024). Hamas is excluded because it operates outside the internationally recognised state apparatus, and this study focuses solely on official sources of foreign policy communication.

Taiwan has published a significantly higher number ($N = 200+$) of political statements. The significant difference in budget could be the cause of the substantial difference in the number of digital outputs. For example, Taiwan's total government expenditure budget for 2023 was approximately \$90 billion, of which \$ 993 million was directed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taipei Times, 2023). Palestine's total expenditure was set at \$3.5 billion (WAFA agency, n.d.). Although the exact amount allocated to the MOFA is not listed, it can be inferred that, in comparison, the Taiwanese MOFA has more resources for content publishing.

To account for the difference in publications, the strategy of systematic (interval) sampling is adhered to, in which the first two Taiwanese political statements of each month (when available) are selected (Krippendorff, 2004). The potential bias from the difference in analysed publications is a possible overrepresentation of Palestine and a lack of thematic variation in Taiwan. This strategy, however, ensures comparability despite the volume difference and also prevents overemphasis by selecting data selectively. Neutrality is ensured through the time-based interval strategy while simultaneously selecting a balanced dataset.

Aside from formal positioning, a significant number of tweets featured informal speech directed at the audience, offering additional strategies for analysis. To create a feasible dataset, X's advanced search tool filtered by timeframe, tweet language, and engagement (likes and replies) until only the 100 most engaged tweets remained. This approach aligns with the "Public Engagement Model to Analyse Digital Diplomacy on Twitter" introduced by Khan et al. (2021), which shows that focusing on engaged tweets captures the most relevant diplomatic communication strategies for analysis. The specific filters applied were:

- *from: MOFA_Taiwan) min_faves:250 lang: en until:2023-12-31 since:2022-01-01*
- *from:pmofa) min_faves:55 lang:en until:2023-12-31 since:2022-01-01*

For analysis, this study will employ a combined coding approach (Elliot, 2018). Deductive codes demonstrate norm conformity to the existing theoretical foundations. However, due to the strong emphasis on context and discourse, inductive coding will also be performed to leave room for unexpected themes or context-specific expressions of legitimacy.

3.5. Reliability & Validity

Various strategies will be employed to enhance the reliability and validity of this study. Reliability, linked to consistency, will be ensured through deductive coding using established codebooks, with each code defined by established frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The coding software ATLAS.ti will facilitate consistent coding across documents and maintain an audit trail of decision-making, enhancing the transparency of thematic analysis. To ensure validity, source triangulation will be utilised across various document formats and verified platforms (e.g., government websites and X accounts). Cross-referencing themes from different sources will prevent reliance on a single data source, increasing the probability of aligning the findings with research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Document selection will further focus on consistent English publications for accurate analysis without translation distortion.

IV. Data Analysis

This analysis presents a comparative study of how Palestine and Taiwan attempt to achieve legitimacy, emphasising the factual aspects of statehood, value alignment with Western liberal principles and condemnations of their counter-recognised states. Their suggested strategies are further explained in the discussion section. Political statements typically show frequency counts ranging from 5 to 70, with some outliers approaching or exceeding 100. In X content, frequencies typically tend to be lower, often ranging between 5 and 35. These ranges provide a general framework for interpreting relative frequencies that are contextualised and refer to either political statements, X content, or both, as noted throughout.

4.1.1. In fact statehood: claiming legitimacy through factual components

First of all, both Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) not only seek legitimacy through the desire for statehood but also demonstrate their factual statehood characteristics. Reviewing the Montevideo criteria in this context of digital political statements is specifically relevant, as it presents a broader political lens for analysis. Most criteria are often claimed and established as a foundation for claiming legitimacy rather than relying solely on moral appeals or political rhetoric. Discourse strategies can be drawn to craft legitimacy through what they already do as functional political entities. These appeals are substantiated not only by frequency but also by contextuality.

Throughout their political statements, the MOFA of Taiwan particularly reflects its extreme case through its high functionality. The code “functioning government” reached a moderately high total of 39 times in frequency and was accentuated through Western appeals of democratic functioning or aligning it with statements of sovereignty. One quote that specifically outlines this through their discourse is:

"Only the freely elected Taiwan government can represent the people of Taiwan in the international community, and no distortion of the truth by the PRC will ever change this fact." – 5 February 2022

This quote not only accentuates that Taiwan upholds a functioning government but also stresses that the government is freely elected, appealing to democratic values that align with those that are particularly prevalent in Western liberal frameworks. Similarly, the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) also calls upon its defined territory and self-determination, rooted in spatial sovereignty. The territory is not only emphasised in statements alone but is also often strategically aligned with similar claims of sovereignty, appealing to the totality of the Montevideo criteria. 12 out of the 13 times “territory” was explicitly documented, it was combined with the other appeals, such as to “sovereignty”. A proper quote that demonstrates this coherent appeal is:

"Taiping Island is indisputably the territory of the Republic of China (Taiwan), and the government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) has the authority to exercise all the rights of a sovereign state over Taiping Island and its relevant waters." – December 2022

This quote particularly outlines the strategic use of factual statehood characteristics. Not only is territory directly linked to sovereignty, but the deliberate repetition of the state's full name also serves to emphasise the legitimacy of its government and its sovereign capacities. In the same political statement (published in December 2022), they also expressed their willingness to *"participate in related negotiation mechanisms and work with the relevant countries to jointly advance peace and stability in the South China Sea"*, which aligns with their capability to enter into relations with other states.

Palestine's political statements during this timeframe, although being under constraints of military Israeli occupation and lacking complete territorial control, still appeal to the Montevideo Convention criteria through strategic discourse. Although not as frequent, It strongly emphasises its claim on defined territory (seven times) in contexts that assert East Jerusalem and the 1967 borders as the territorial core of the State of Palestine. A precise quote that exemplifies this is:

As an occupying power, Israel is restricted by international law to acting only as the temporary administrator of the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem and has no rightful claim or sovereignty over any part of occupied East Jerusalem, its Old City, its Quarters, its Holy Sites, and its walls, as recognised by the international community in relevant United Nations resolutions. – 29 May, 2023

This quote presents a spatial definition of statehood, positioning Palestine as a legitimate actor within defined borders. There is a noticeable pattern of combining territorial claims with sovereignty, using digital diplomacy to express aspirations while reinforcing traditional statehood components. The Palestinian MOFA also frequently appeals to a *"permanent population,"* with *"Palestinian people"* coded 141 times in 40 selected political statements. This repetition affirms that Palestine is not just a geographic idea but a state-in-waiting tied to a specific, enduring population. Additionally, appeals to the *"rights, suffering, and determination"* of *"Palestinian people"* reflect a moral dimension alongside the political issue. The Palestinian government's capacity is less emphasised due to Israel's domination in content. However, through strategic repetition, *"State of Palestine"* appears 99 times in the documents, often paired with verbs like *"calls," "welcomes,"* and *"reiterates,"* demonstrating the functions of a recognised and active government in diplomacy.

Both contested states further enhance this trend through their performative discursive styles via X. Through direct speech with audiences, it is particularly noticeable that the Taiwanese MOFA does not even consider a mismatch with its recognition, as it frequently speaks in terms of *"our country"* and *"our nation"*

to underscore further what criteria they already live up to. A clear example of this was a tweet during U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in 2022. The Taiwanese MOFA tweeted:

"Minister Wu is crystal clear in his BBC News interview. Speaker Pelosi's much-welcomed visit is 'extremely significant,' doesn't change the status quo & spotlights Taiwan's democracy on the global stage. Our country & its 23.5 million people will endure!" – 6 August 2022

Not only does the MOFA explicitly refer to its population and defined country, but it also uses the tweet to reassure. It does so by explicitly mentioning *"doesn't change the status quo"*. The 'status quo' in this context reflects Taiwan's current position: a self-governed and democratic entity, although not being recognised to the full extent. The tweet serves as a diplomatic reassurance to the international community that Taiwan seeks peace and stability, not provocation or drastic measures to force itself upon others.

In the case of the Palestinian MOFA, X outputs generally employ the same discursive strategies as those found in official documents related to de facto statehood. In 31 different tweets, they address the *"Palestinian people"*, and there is a noticeable change in writing perspective. Digital outputs via X are more often written from a collective voice perspective, such as *"The Palestinian people will not relent in their rightful quest"*. This not only states the informative fact of the people's quest but also underscores the Palestinian people as active agents, highlighting their capability as a permanent population.

4.1.2. Invoking the 'international' community and its benchmarks

One of the most coded (inductive) finding analysed in both statements is the referral to the 'international community', mentioned explicitly 69 times in Palestinian outputs and 30 times in Taiwanese outputs. Being extreme cases among contested states, Taiwan and Palestine strategise these referrals in seeking both validation and assistance from external actors and international benchmarks throughout their discourses.

Instead of discursively outlining how each state is unique from recognised states, both choose to portray themselves through conformity with expectations set by the Liberal International Order (LIO), which is heavily shaped by Western powers. Taiwan utilises this particularly by aligning itself discursively with relevant international players, continuously referring to itself as being compatible. Throughout the political statements analysed, they referred to themselves as being *"like-minded"* 34 times, particularly concerning Western democratic states and values such as the US and universal human rights. A quote that particularly outlines this is the following:

"Faced with the current situation, the government of Taiwan will proactively enhance Taiwan's self-defense capabilities. It will also continue to maintain close communication and coordination with the United States and other like-minded nations to jointly protect the rules-based international order, prevent an escalation

in regional developments, and ensure security across the Taiwan Strait as well as peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific." - 10 March, 2022

Additionally, another documented quote even outlines them being like-minded in a "democratic community", further accentuating the appeal to liberal frameworks:

"Meanwhile, the government of Taiwan will continue to strengthen cooperation with the democratic community to gain the support of like-minded nations. Taiwan upholds the values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law and contributes to global economic development and regional stability."
- 2 August 2022

This quote not only demonstrates that the MOFA is publishing in line with typical Western values, but it also explicitly strategises the appeal of "support" in terms of a "democratic community", framing itself as an ally within the international system and opposing those who do not uphold these values (such as China). The same "like-minded" discursive pattern is further supported by the performance analysed through the MOFA's X content but in a more informal and direct language. Not only does the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continuously thank its Western allies and align them as friends (N=15), but it also deliberately utilises X to point to the democratic values associated with the accepted international community. Such a telling tweet is the shoutout to Kevin McCarthy by Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu, former speaker of the US House of Representatives:

"The firmness in standing with #Taiwan is much appreciated, Mr. Speaker. #China won't stop us from welcoming friends, either. Freedom & democracy are our values & way of life; won't be changed by coercions. Joseph WU" – 9 April, 2023

In addition, Taiwan enhances its alignment strategy on X by specifically referencing and tagging international benchmarks that reinforce this evidence. One specific example was the ranking by CIVICUS Monitor (2023):

"#Taiwan is rated the only OPEN country in #Asia by @CIVICUSMonitor 5 years in a row. It's a recognition that we are very proud of. Still have to watch out as #China, rated CLOSED, is trying hard to erode our achievement. My belief, though, is freedom will prevail . Joseph WU" – 6 December 2023

CIVICUS Monitor is a global alliance of civic organisations. The term "open" in this context refers to a ranking system in which people can freely operate, demonstrate, or criticise the government. Out of 37 ranked "open countries", 22 spots were given to Western countries, with many others getting the second ranking of "narrowed" (Civics monitor, n.d). Underscoring this ranking, Taiwan is appealing to evidence that aligns with benchmarks recognised by Western states.

Although Palestine does not generally uphold the same “like-minded” discourse, they do specifically call out and outline its expectations for the international system. Palestine confrontationally appeals to the international community as a normative audience by emphasising its commitment and narrative around international law. Such as that, Israeli policies are routinely described as violations of specific legal tenets, including “*criminal act under international law*” or “*grave breach of the Geneva Conventions*”. As such, the combination of international law and the international community appears 18 times throughout the political statements. One quote that specifically outlines this expectation of the international community is the following:

"The international community can no longer afford to tolerate or excuse Israel's ongoing crimes and violations of international law. The United Nations Security Council has an obligation to uphold its Charter, implement its resolutions, and exact consequences on Israel for its crimes" – 13 April 2022

This quote refers explicitly to specific institutional obligations that the “international community” must uphold. Referencing the UN Charter and the UN Security Council, the Palestinian MOFA positions itself within the internationally agreed-upon frameworks (benchmarks), portraying these as the rules that “apply to all of us”.

Additionally, Palestine further calls upon various universal values throughout its discourse. Rather than specifically outlining democracy in context and speech, the MOFA calls upon universal values by explicitly mentioning them throughout its political statements. Repetitively referencing “*human rights*” (N=34) and “*freedom*” (N=20) as a moral duty, it claims membership by placing itself within the group of actors in the international community that uphold these universal values. One specific quote that strategically outlines this is:

"Israel's discrimination and racism against the Palestinian people violate the basic tenets of international law and humanity as a whole. The fight against racism and discrimination must be universal."- 22 February, 2022

Not only are universal values accentuated, but this quote strategically attempts to include Palestine within the international community. Instead of emphasising its functionality, it relies on its granted recognition and moral frameworks to compensate for its lack of capacity. The use of “*must be universal*” implies a shared responsibility and, consequently, shared membership in a moral-political community. This is further accentuated through performative language on X, where the Palestinian MOFA continuously welcomes recognised states by the international order. Such a tweet is the following:

The State of Palestine welcomes the adoption of the important #UNGA resolution requesting an ICJ ruling on the legal nature of Israel's occupation & thanks Member States that stood firm on principle & voted yes. This is a victory for justice and the rules-based international order. – December 31st, 2022

By mentioning and welcoming other member states to a "victory" of the legal international order, the MOFA not only aligns itself with recognised member states but also elevates its status by invoking the most authoritative legal forum in the world. Explicitly mentioning the International Court of Justice's process frames the advisory opinion as a critical legal benchmark that presents authoritative evidence.

4.1.3. Discursive utilisation in condemning the counter-recognised state

As earlier stated, both contested states analysed have their own main recognised sovereign counterparts that form the primary barrier to their complete international legitimacy. Both Taiwan and Palestine strategise in condemning these counterparts in reflection of their extreme positions and interaction with the international community, as outlined in the previous part. Taiwan must prove it is more legitimate than China, whilst Palestine condemns Israel's unjust actions to claim its legitimacy.

One of the main strategies in the discourse is condemning counterparts based on elements deemed inconsistent or illegitimate within the LIO. A notable strategy is criticizing the other state for its authoritarianism. Taiwan's political statements use the term "*authoritarianism*" or "*authoritarian*" 29 times, primarily targeting China. This repetition casts China as qualitatively different from other legitimate states, which are as democratic as Taiwan strives to be. A specific quote that highlights this dichotomy is as follows.

"Taiwan upholds the values of democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law and contributes to global economic development and regional stability. These serve to parry the expansion of China's authoritarianism." – 3 August, 2022

This quote not only demonstrates the specific word choice of authoritarianism but also serves as an attempt to signify a discursive dichotomy. Taiwan manages to uphold all these widely accepted Western values, which China does not. Taiwan becomes a norm-compliant actor (*like-minded*), while China becomes a norm-deviant one. On top of this, Taiwan is not only a compliant actor, but by choosing the verb "*parry*", they also suggest that Taiwan is a protector or defender of liberal norms, a role typically reserved for legitimate, recognised states. On platform X, the informal language discourse alters the tone of this condemnation but upholds the same strategy. Apart from formally calling China out, the MOFA also adheres to a more colloquial language:

"Too funny to be true! #China ranks the world's worst in press freedom but lectures the press in #Thailand on how to be free. Let's toast over milk tea & tell the #PRC to kiss my feet & get out of town! JW #MilkTeaAlliance #พันธมิตรชาวม" – 23 November, 2023

This quote blends Taiwan's strategy of condemnation with humour to undermine China's legitimacy and foster alliances using hashtags. The *"ranking"* refers to the World Press Freedom Index, where China ranks 179th out of 180 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). This low ranking contradicts Western values, further reinforcing Taiwan's condemnation and highlighting its alignment with like-minded nations.

The Palestinian MOFA, although not mentioning the term *"authoritarian"*, mandates the same discursive strategy in condemning Israel. Throughout the 40 political statements analysed, 27 were instances in which Israel was called to or referred to as an *"apartheid regime"*. Just as Taiwan's repetition of *"authoritarianism"* to distinguish itself from China, the Palestinian MOFA's use of *"apartheid"* serves not only to delegitimise Israel for its actions but primarily for its alleged systemic moral and normative divergence from the LIO. This further reflects an attempt to use Western vocabulary to prompt international action against Israel's invasion and reflects their former interaction with the community in mobilisation efforts:

"This coalition of avowed racists and rejectionists have openly and unapologetically adopted an agenda of colonial expansion, racial discrimination, and apartheid thus demonstrating their complete disdain towards the international community, international law, United Nations resolutions, and the international consensus for peace." – 29 December, 2022

"Apartheid" is strategically used as a historically loaded term, as previous apartheid regimes faced global condemnation through international pressure, including UN resolutions and boycotts. By combining this term with colonialism, the MOFA constructs an image of Israel as a pariah state, not just in its conflict with Palestine but also for violating deeply rooted norms associated with the LIO.

This dichotomy not only aims to divert counter states from the LIO, but also has the MOFA's pathologising their behaviour as extremist, which implies political illegitimacy and ideological danger. The Palestinian government consistently labels the opposition as *"fascist," "extremist,"* or *"supremacist,"* particularly concerning high-ranking leaders. This discourse suggests that Israeli governance is not only unjust but also irrational and hateful towards the international community. The performative language on platform X further emphasises this, with messages personally addressing individuals in such terms. For instance, Israeli minister Itamar Ben Gvir was called out for fascism in three instances among the analysed X tweets. One relevant tweet is:

"The State of Palestine condemns in the strongest terms the racist and heinous remarks made by Israel's #fascist_Minister_Itamar_Ben_Gvir, which only confirms Israel's apartheid regime of Jewish supremacy and racial terror against the #Palestinian_people." – 24 August, 2023

Taiwan similarly uses this pathologising strategy but to a lesser extent. While it does not use inflammatory vocabulary as “supremacist”, it chooses to portray China as an active bully, repetitively calling upon its intimidation or coercion in the political statements (N=32). A quote that accurately illustrates this bullying nature is the following:

"The democratic camp has also expressed grave concern over China's relentless bullying and military threats against neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, disregarding the rules-based international order, the CCP government has continued to disseminate false and malicious claims insisting that Taiwan is a part of the People's Republic of China" – 2 March 2023

This rhetoric goes hand in hand with the discursive language used on X, in which China is not necessarily always portrayed only as “authoritarian” but also more informally as “a bad guy” that enforces “authoritarian nonsense”.

4.2. Discussion: Strategic Logic in Contested Statehood

Although frequencies in discourse demonstrate strategic choice words, it is further academically relevant to analyse the strategies driving those frequencies. Why do both contested states continuously highlight their de facto components? One specific strategy that this practice demonstrates is isomorphic mimicry, which in this context refers to the practice of mimicking the institutional forms of recognised, legitimate entities (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2017). The components of factual statehood are not only introduced to reflect their capabilities, but they are also efforts that refer to ‘looking like’ a legitimate, recognised state, although they cannot be fully copied.

For contested states like Palestine and Taiwan, this practice aims at creating a diplomatic presence that belies their partial recognition. Not only do they assert their statehood, but they also strategically select their most visible opponents, who invoke their most adaptable forms of statehood. This is specifically relevant in terms of isomorphic mimicry, in which both states prove their 'eligibility' to be fully legitimate. With Taiwan continuously referencing democracy and Palestine choosing to highlight human rights and international law, it is observable that both contested states construct isomorphism through different appeals. This is also not coincidental and is merely a reflection of their extreme case positioning. The first shared logic becomes evident; although new digital platforms can offer new strategies, both cases pick and highlight traditional elements of statehood as part of a broader performance of legitimacy.

Taiwan's low formal recognition, yet high functionality, allows it to focus on benefiting from more economic ties and the position to portray democratic development, which can be directed towards its territorial peace. This is accordingly rooted in the territorial peace theory, which posits that stable and uncontested borders are a prerequisite for the development and expression of democracy (Gibler, 2012). For Palestine, this comes down to a more constrained environment in which Western support is limited. It becomes strategically more beneficial to frame legitimacy through claims that resonate with global civil society, holding the West accountable to its norms. Taiwan's position is thus strategically relevant to reinforce compatibility, whilst Palestine utilises its position to demand inclusion. Both are variations of isomorphic mimicry, in which each signals legitimacy through its position to mimic the appearance of legitimate states.

The isomorphic strategy can further be substituted in both countries' referrals to the international community. However, in these referrals, it was specifically noticeable that both Taiwan and Palestine seemed to align and mention this "*international community*" with specific regard to the Western LIO. The second shared logic becomes that their discursive appeals to the LIO are not uniform but selective and strategically shaped by each contested state's structural position. Instead of truly addressing a universal audience, it seems more like they direct their speech in alignment with the West. This specific selective invocation is also not accidental but is rooted in a strategy that reflects a broad normative stratification within the international system (Rumelili & Towns, 2022).

This normative stratification reflects the hierarchy of states in the international system through the use of norms and development indicators. It is, therefore, not accidental that Palestine combines its "*international community*" advocacy with an emphasis on human rights as outlined in the LIO, and Taiwan explicitly mentions the rankings of the Civic Monitor within its discourse outputs. Taiwan exemplifies its extreme case by leveraging its high functionality, which helps compensate for its limited recognition. In contrast, Palestine reflects its extreme case by mobilising its broad recognition to compensate for its limited functionality under territorial occupation. By continuously invoking and aligning values that align with these indexes and values, they both attempt to position themselves within the stratified order by selectively picking LIO values. Discursive alignment becomes not only aspirational but also calculated to reflect their extreme cases. They not only strategically seek legitimacy but also align it with legitimacy that counts and is most highly valued within the international (primarily Western) system.

For the third and final shared strategic logic, both Taiwan and Palestine construct legitimacy by framing their recognised counterparts (China and Israel) as norm violators within the LIO, utilising their foundation of overall interactions with the community. These results show deliberate attempts by both Palestine and Taiwan to condemn their recognised counterpart, with high frequencies of specific word choices that vastly diverge from typical Western values. These choices of words are rooted in the same

strategies of condemning a counterpart in a manner that aligns with the narrative of the international liberal order. However, the way they practice this discourse differs and again reflects their case selection.

For Taiwan, there is a noticeable shift in language between its formal political outputs and X. The Taiwanese MOFA specifically adopts humorous tones through X messaging when condemning its counterpart. The strategic use of humour is often theorised to allow states to shape a narrative that is not necessarily factual, adhering to a 'post-truth' diplomacy (Chernobrov, 2023). The premise of using humour is simple; it spreads faster but is less often questioned. Humour is strategically chosen as the line between political messaging and entertainment is blurred, and there is more accessibility for bolder claims. Rather than solely relying on formal messaging, Taiwan strategically ridicules China's freedom rankings and further uses informal remarks such as "*kiss my feet*". This not only conveys a less questioned message but also broadens the audience with a higher chance of media coverage, allowing for visible alignment with recognised states. The discursive playfulness underscores Taiwan's confidence in being highly functional. Although this contrasts with its recognition status as an extreme case, it allows for expression through discursive tactics that stray from formality.

On the contrary, Palestine does not utilise the same humorous discourse strategy, which is likely connected to its position of military constraint. Palestine's descriptive results remain more serious through both platforms, depicting Israel as an opponent. For Palestine, the goal is not to bypass its opponent through humour. However, the severity underlines a clear goal of building legitimacy by mobilising the international community under its established morals. Continuously appealing to terms such as "*apartheid*" is represented through strategies of diagnostic and motivational framing (Mendelsohn et al., 2024). By applying diagnostic framing strategies, a clear narrative is sketched of why a situation is unjust and who is accountable, in this case, the Israeli government. Motivational framing allows for more calls to action; phrases like "*rightful quest*" or "*victory of justice*" exemplify this. By repetitively emphasising suffering and injustice whilst also invoking the opponent, the Palestinian MOFA communicates not only what is wrong and who is to blame but also why their cause deserves recognition and support. The choice of words does not appeal to truth-policy but serves more as evidence of the intensity and the strict call to help. The strategy not only serves to condemn the opposing state but also underscores their existential urgency. It is recognised but cannot act as a state, and this paradox is what drives the imperative to appeal to the international community as a "*victim*".

Ultimately, although Taiwan and Palestine adopt different tones and sometimes adhere to different discourses, both uphold the same motivations in discursively positioning themselves within the international system. Both extreme cases sharpen their strategies to serve their own needs, but this has also exposed their similar goals and conditions. Their communicative approaches are shaped by context, yet they both seek to transform legitimacy from a legal status into a performative achievement, often by

aligning their strategies with Western frameworks. Taiwan leverages humour and liberal credentials to align with Western norms, while Palestine similarly aligns itself with the West through moral urgencies and holding states accountable. In doing so, they demonstrate that even in the absence of full sovereignty, legitimacy can be constructed and tailored through strategic discourse aimed at alignment with dominant hierarchies in the international community.

V. Conclusion & Discussion

This thesis explored the research question; “*how do contested states utilise digital diplomacy to construct and project legitimacy in state-to-state relationships, and how can we explain the strategies they employ?*”. Through an extreme case comparative qualitative analysis of Taiwan and Palestine, it was examined how contested states navigate their legitimacy through digital diplomacy outlets. The findings demonstrate how digital diplomacy serves as a strategic tool utilised for constructing normative and international legitimacy. The “how” was addressed by identifying the discursive strategies used to claim state-like status; the analytical part was explained through the structural extreme case positioning within the international system.

Three main arguments are streamlined from the analysis. Firstly, through both frequencies and context, it became evident that both Palestine and Taiwan strategically highlight traditional characteristics of statehood (territory, population, government, and capacity for state relations) that are most visible in their extreme case positions. This supports the acceptance of **H1a**, as the in-facto criteria have been utilised to support the construction of normative legitimacy. Isomorphic mimicry strategies demonstrate that, despite adopting modern tools of diplomacy, the contested states often revert to traditional elements to support their claims of legitimacy as a state.

Secondly, both cases further strategically select alignment with the LIO to support their construction of normative legitimacy. The “*international community*” became a way to engage with LIO norms based on a strategy of normative stratification (Rumelili & Towns, 2022). Norms, such as democracy for Taiwan and human rights for Palestine, were selectively picked to utilise each case position in international hierarchies. Both cases strategically invoke LIO norms that serve their strategic interests, signalling not only legitimacy but also the legitimacy most rewarded by Western powers. This further accepts **H1b** as claims for normative legitimacy are further supported by value conformity with the LIO.

The final argumentation further underscores the legitimacy claims of both cases as they strategically interact to condemn their counter-recognised states (China and Israel). By adapting to strategies of humour and moral framing and using the LIO as a moral foundation, they interact with Western-recognised actors to reproach the states as violators of these norms. These condemnations are not isolated acts but part of a broader strategy that builds upon their interaction via appeals to legal institutions, Western allies, and shared democratic values. Taiwan becomes a “*like-minded*” nation, while Palestine mobilises legal appeals to assert its inclusion. Through this visible interaction with international actors, both cases further seek to demonstrate engagement within the liberal order. These arguments taken together ultimately confirm **H2**, as digital diplomacy is used to interact with Western actors in a sequence of positively influencing international legitimacy claims.

Considering all the arguments given, this thesis demonstrates how both Taiwan and Palestine utilise digital outputs through discursive strategies such as moral framing, humour, isomorphic mimicry, and

normative stratification. In answering the research question, this explains how contested states utilise digital diplomacy. The explanation for these strategies ultimately lies in the fact that both cases come together on a common goal. They strategically converge on supporting their claims of legitimacy by highlighting their *de facto* characteristic, aligning themselves with Western actors through the LIO, and condemning the counter-state to substantiate this further.

The methodological choice of comparative case study proved to be effective in exploring discursive strategies of legitimacy construction. The combination of inductive and deductive coding allowed for specific testing of established frameworks and context-specific empirical results, such as the use of humour. Choosing English official outputs ensured consistency while triangulating with social media enhanced the robustness of the findings. However, these methodological choices have also produced substantial limitations that should be taken into account in future research.

One key methodological limitation lies in the choice of timeframe for this thesis. The data collection timeframe for this thesis was specifically set from January 2022 to December 2023. Although the selection of these two years was justified, it may withhold relevant findings following geopolitical escalation, which is often argued to be specifically relevant in digital diplomacy analysis. Scholars such as Duncombe (2017) substantiated how digital diplomacy is highly responsive to conflict and crises. This thesis's limited timeframe may, therefore, cause the findings to overlook the real-time responsiveness of digital diplomacy and the effectiveness that hinges on it. Consequently, this may also limit generalisability in terms of geopolitical tensions, especially in rapidly evolving or crisis-driven contexts where discursive strategies may significantly shift.

The second limitation lies in the exclusive focus on external legitimacy. Although this choice was consistent with the literature review and research question, it completely sidelines the role that internal legitimacy (how the domestic population perceive governmental rule) can have regarding state-to-state claims on legitimacy. Scholars like Gilly (2006) argue that internal and external legitimacy are deeply intertwined and that a state with stronger domestic support also has a higher chance of becoming internationally recognised, thus strongly enhancing its legitimacy. By sidelining international legitimacy, this thesis may overlook domestic tensions that could have affected the coherence and results of the digital outputs analysed, given that the two types of legitimacy may be too intertwined to be separated in data collection.

The final limitation discussed concerns that this thesis is shaped by an inherent Western bias, particularly through its analytical framework and data collection. Although the theoretical framework specifically identifies the Western bias in state recognition and also takes this into account through analysis, it nonetheless relies on Western-centric understandings of legitimacy, particularly those rooted in the LIO. Alternative legitimacy frameworks, grounded in non-Western or regional values, may be equally relevant

yet remain underexplored. This bias is further reinforced by taking English as the single language within the discourse of social media and political statements, which may overlook how legitimacy is interpreted differently through other (native) languages.

5.1. Recommendations

Building on the limitations of this thesis, several recommendations for future research to improve the overall understanding of legitimacy within contested statehood practices. Firstly, scholars should adopt longitudinal approaches that extend further than the two-year timeframe selected in this thesis. As noted, digital diplomacy is highly responsive to crises; incorporating broader timeframes would help in analysing how discursive strategies may be adapted to allow for different interpretations of digital diplomacy's effectiveness. Strategies can include longitudinal cross-sectional studies, allowing for a broader dataset of multiple contested states over a long period, which enables researchers to identify more patterns, shifts, and divergences in discursive legitimisation construction strategies in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Secondly, future research should more explicitly focus on internal legitimacy and underpin to what extent it is intertwined with external legitimacy in analysis. Researchers, such as Caspersen (2015), argue that internal legitimacy is often neglected in studies of contested statehood despite its ability to signal long-term stability. Future research should examine how domestic sentiment shapes the tone and content of digital diplomacy and whether legitimacy claims reflect public support or are solely driven by government strategy. Researchers could operationalise this by further triangulating digital diplomatic discourse with data on public opinions, interviews with domestic political actors or civil society groups, as well as content analysis of domestic media coverage. Considering this thesis' content specifically, such analysis could reveal whether digital diplomacy is perceived as authentic by domestic populations. Overreliance on alignment with Western liberal norms could also possibly undermine legitimacy in the domestic population's perspectives due to internal disconnection or dissatisfaction, which has yet to be considered.

The final recommendation specifically addresses to move beyond Western-centric assumptions of legitimacy. Future research should explore how contested states engage with alternative frameworks of legitimacy, which may but should not be limited to religious, cultural, and regional contexts. This could, for example, be approached through a comparative discourse analysis of native-language digital outputs, supplemented with regional institutional statements and references to religious or cultural frameworks embedded in state messaging. This recommendation would also be further supported by including other native languages, in which there is no further possible limitation on distortion of translation or interpretation. This would not only disregard the Western bias but also contribute to a more inclusive understanding of legitimacy, further enhancing generalisability.

VI. References

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VII. Appendix 1

Overview of deductive codes for analysis of normative legitimacy, expressed through the Montevideo state criteria and Western norms/ values expressed in Liberal International Order (LIO). All codes are consistent with Literature on the Liberal International Order.

Category	Code	Description
Montevideo Criteria	Permanent Population	State claims a stable, resident population. (<i>Worster, 2010</i>)
	Defined Territory	A (contested) state defines specific geographic borders or specific disputed boundaries. (<i>Worster, 2010</i>)
	Government	State references a functioning established governing entity (<i>Worster, 2010</i>)
	Capacity for Foreign Relations	State claims ability to engage diplomatically with others. (<i>Worster, 2010</i>)
LIO- Socio - Political Norms	Rule of Law	Reference to constitutionalism, legal order, anti-corruption. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Democracy	Mentions of elections, political pluralism, participatory governance. (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Human Rights	Emphasis on civil liberties, humanitarian law, UNHR frameworks. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Sovereign Equality	Appeals to equal sovereign status under international law. (<i>Ikenberry, 2018; Worster, 2010</i>)
	Universal Values	Core values or beliefs across a range of countries/ cultures. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Open government	Freedom of speech to openly critique the government (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
LIO - Economic Norms	Open markets	Promotion of free trade or economic liberalization, (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>)
	Global Integration	Engagement with global markets of supply chains. (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>)
	Development Partnership	Framing of development via aid, tech, or cooperation. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021; Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Innovation Economy	References to tech-driven growth, startups, or modernization. (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
	Private Sector Inclusion	Highlighting public-private partnerships or entrepreneurship similarly to other Western states . (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
LIO - Institutional Norms	Cooperative Security	Participation in collective security or conflict resolution. (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>)
	Transparency	Expectation that states and institutions provide open access to information about their actions and decision-making, enabling monitoring, accountability, and trust within a rules-based system (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>).
	Multilateral Diplomacy	Coordination of policies across multiple states (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>)

	UN-Centeredness	Positioning within UN principles and processes. (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)
LIO - Digital Identity Norms	Digital Sovereignty	Claims about protecting national autonomy in cyberspace. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021</i>)
	Normative Framing	Use of liberal/progressive framing language. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021</i>)
	Reputation Management	Efforts to appear responsible, rational, modern. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021</i>)
LIO - Strategic Communication	Peace Promotion	Framing self as peace-supporting or anti-violence. , thus promoting democratic peace (<i>Lake et al, 2021</i>)
	Humanitarian Narrative	Use of aid, care, or suffering to support legitimacy. (<i>Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021</i>)
	Soft Power Projection	Framing influence through attractiveness, not coercion. (<i>Ikenberry, 2018</i>)

VIII. Appendix 2

Overview of deductive coding for analysis of international legitimacy, expressed through the cases claiming different forms of digital diplomatic engagement.. All of these categories are derived from Pamment (2012) or chapters from 'Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice' (Bjola & Holmes, 2015)

Digital engagement Form (Code)	Description
Claim or welcoming overarching media outlets	Contested states' communication/ mentions through international or digital media channels. (Pamment, 2012)
Referencing participation in conferences and events	Participation or inclusion in international or regional forums, both offline and online. (Pamment, 2012)
Collaborative projects	Co-created initiatives or joint campaigns with other states, IGOs, or NGOs. (Pamment, 2012; Bjola & Holmes, 2015)
Exchanges (cultural, diplomats personnel)	Educational, cultural, or professional state exchange programs across borders on state initiative, signaling mutual recognition (Pamment, 2012)
Dialogue and debate via social media	Two-way communication between contested state and recognized state via platforms like Twitter, (Pamment, 2012; Bjola & Jiang)
Joint statements or declarations	Public political alignment between (contested) states shared via online published declarations (Pamment, 2012)
Claiming/ welcoming multilateral platforms or reports or legal appeals	Participation or mention in multilateral reports or institutional publications, signaling partial recognition (Pamment, 2012).
Digital endorsements	Public praise or support from international actors via digital means such as retweets or tags (Bjola & Jiang, 2015)