

The Perceptions of Nuclear War: The Imbalanced Co-Orientation Between Russian and American Youth

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Abstract

On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked its neighboring country of Ukraine. From the early days of what Russian President Putin called a special military operation, fears mounted that the conflict may grow into World War III, effectively ending the world in nuclear Armageddon. This study compares the current views of American and Russian youths on the issues of global nuclear war and nuclear weapons, as well as explores their inclinations toward supporting a first nuclear strike, nuclear retaliation, and their willingness to make personal sacrifices in the event of a nuclear conflict. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of co-orientation theory, the study methodically assesses the levels of agreement, congruency, and accuracy for the populations of both countries on the issues related to the nuclear conflict. The results show that American and Russian youths are currently in a state of imbalanced co-orientation—a newly defined state in the co-orientation theory—when it comes to their opinions on nuclear war and nuclear weapons. In conclusion, the study underscores the urgent need to address this lack of alignment between the two countries, given the potentially catastrophic consequences of nuclear warfare. Therefore, the study draws upon the co-orientation theory's insights and formulates strategic public diplomacy recommendations, designed to cultivate mutual understanding, and promote constructive dialogue between the people of the United States of America and the Russian Federation.

Keywords

co-orientation theory, international communication, United States of America, Russian Federation

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Correction (October 2024): Article updated to update the second affiliation to “RUDN University, Russia.”

Translated Abstracts

الملخص

تقارن هذه الدراسة وجهات النظر الحالية للشباب الأمريكي والروسي حول قضايا الحرب النووية العالمية، وتكشف ميولهم نحو دعم الضربات النووية سواء الضربات الأولى أو الضربات النووية التالية التي تأتي بغرض الانتقام. كما تستكشف الدراسة مدى استعداد هؤلاء الشباب لتقديم تضحيات شخصية في حالة نشوب صراع نووي. ومن خلال الاستفادة من نظرية التوجه المشترك كأطار نظري، تقوم الدراسة بشكل منهجي بتقييم مستويات الاتفاق والتطابق والدقة لشعبي البلدين بشأن القضايا المتعلقة بالصراع النووي. وتظهر النتائج أن الشباب الأمريكي والروسي هم حالياً في حالة من عدم التوازن في التوجه المشترك – وهي حالة محددة حديثاً في نظرية التوجه المشترك.

摘要

本研究比较了美国和俄罗斯青少年对全球核战争问题的当前看法，探讨了他们在核冲突中支持第一次核打击、核报复和做出个人牺牲意愿的倾向。本研究利用共向理论作为理论框架，系统评估了两国人民在核冲突相关问题上的共识、一致性和准确性。结果表明，美国和俄罗斯青少年目前处于不平衡的共向状态——这是共向理论中新定义的一种状态。

Résumé

Cette étude compare les points de vue actuels des jeunes Américains et Russes sur les questions de guerre nucléaire mondiale, en explorant leurs inclinaisons à soutenir une première frappe nucléaire, des représailles nucléaires, et leur volonté de faire des sacrifices personnels dans le cas d'un conflit nucléaire. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la co-orientation comme cadre théorique, l'étude évalue méthodiquement les niveaux d'accord, de congruence et de précision des habitants des deux pays sur les questions liées au conflit nucléaire. Les résultats montrent que les jeunes Américains et Russes se trouvent actuellement dans un état de co-orientation déséquilibrée—un état nouvellement défini dans la théorie de la co-orientation.

Абстракт

В данном исследовании сравниваются взгляды американской и российской молодежи на проблемы глобальной ядерной войны, изучается их склонность к поддержке первого ядерного удара, ядерного возмездия и готовности пойти на личные жертвы в случае ядерного конфликта. Используя теорию коориентации в качестве теоретической основы, в исследовании методично оцениваются уровни согласия, конгруэнтности и точности жителей обеих стран по вопросам, связанным с ядерным конфликтом. Результаты показывают, что

американская и российская молодежь в настоящее время находится в состоянии несбалансированной коориентации - новое определение этого состояния в теории коориентации.

Resumen

Este estudio compara las opiniones actuales de la juventud estadounidense y rusa sobre las cuestiones de la guerra nuclear global, explorando sus inclinaciones hacia el apoyo de un primer ataque nuclear, la represalia nuclear y la disposición a hacer sacrificios personales en caso de un conflicto nuclear. Aprovechando la teoría de la coorientación como marco teórico, el estudio evalúa metódicamente los niveles de acuerdo, congruencia y precisión de los pueblos de ambos países sobre las cuestiones relacionadas con el conflicto nuclear. Los resultados muestran que la juventud estadounidense y rusa se encuentra actualmente en un estado de coorientación desequilibrada, un estado recién definido en la teoría de la coorientación.

February 24, 2022, marked the Russian military's attack on Ukraine. In a declaration to the nation, Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, referred to the attack as a "special military operation" and claimed that there was "no other option" to protect Russia from NATO's military expansion toward its borders (Al Jazeera Staff, 2022).

One significant concern about this war focused on the issue of nuclear warfare. In his official declaration, Putin mentioned nuclear weapons twice, including a direct threat to use them, if needed:

As for the military sphere, today, modern Russia, even after the collapse of the USSR and the loss of a significant part of its capacity, is one of the most powerful nuclear powers in the world and possesses certain advantages in some of the newest types of weaponry. In this regard, no one should have any doubts that a direct attack on our country will lead to defeat and horrible consequences for any potential aggressor. (As cited in Al Jazeera Staff, 2022)

It is no surprise that many in the United States of America and around the world expressed real concerns about the close possibility of a full-blown nuclear war between Russia and the United States in the future—some even calling it World War III (Bove, 2022; L. Brown, 2022; Gongloff, 2022; Wertheim, 2022). President Biden talked about nuclear Armageddon on several occasions (Collinson, 2022).

While we know what the media and politicians think about potential nuclear war, we know less about what the regular people think. Specifically, this study seeks to compare and contrast the views on nuclear war expressed by the people of the United

States and Russia—two countries with the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons. This study analyzes the current views of American and Russian people on the issues of global nuclear war and nuclear weapons, and explores their inclinations toward supporting a first nuclear strike, nuclear retaliation, and their willingness to make personal sacrifices in the event of a nuclear conflict.

Leveraging the co-orientation theory as the theoretical framework in the context of public diplomacy communications, the study methodically assesses the views of Americans, the views of Russians, the meta-perspective of Americans, and the meta-perspective of Russians to estimate the level of agreement on the issue of nuclear war, the level of accuracy in understanding the views of each other, and, finally, the level of congruency between the position of people in one country and their respective perceptions of what people in the other country think. As public diplomacy focuses on developing mutual understanding between peoples of different countries, co-orientation measures provide a starting point for communication campaigns.

Furthermore, the fears and concerns of the war in Ukraine leading to a nuclear war between Russia and the United States were also widely shared on social media. In fact, this military conflict is often described as viral—with billions of views and millions of memes (The Economist, 2022; Suciu, 2022). This viral nature of what some called the first TikTok war (Tiffany, 2022) helped it reach the younger generations—the population traditionally known for its lack of interest in political issues and international relations (“College students and politics—from apathy to enthusiasm,” 2007). This presented an interesting question—what do the younger generations think about the possibility of a global nuclear war that may end their lives?

As a result, this study focuses on the youths of the United States of America and the Russian Federation; the two countries holding the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Previous research noted that older generations in these two countries are strongly influenced by the Cold War propaganda from both the Soviet Union and the United States—thus, it is important for research to focus on the generation without these Cold War memories (Laskin, 2014, 2023; Mankoff, 2010). To access youth participants, the study recruited potential respondents at two universities: a mid-size university located in the east of the United States and a mid-size university located in the west of Russia. While having students serve as proxies for all youth is likely to skew the results, this also allows the study to focus on those who are more likely to represent the future political, social, and economic leadership of their countries. In fact, a recent report on public diplomacy cites “youth audiences and emerging leaders” as key audiences for public diplomacy efforts (Fitzpatrick, 2022, p. 18).

Literature Review

Co-Orientation Theory

The co-orientation perspective is traced back to Cooley’s (1902) concept of the looking-glass self: “We always imagine, and in imagination, share the judgments of the

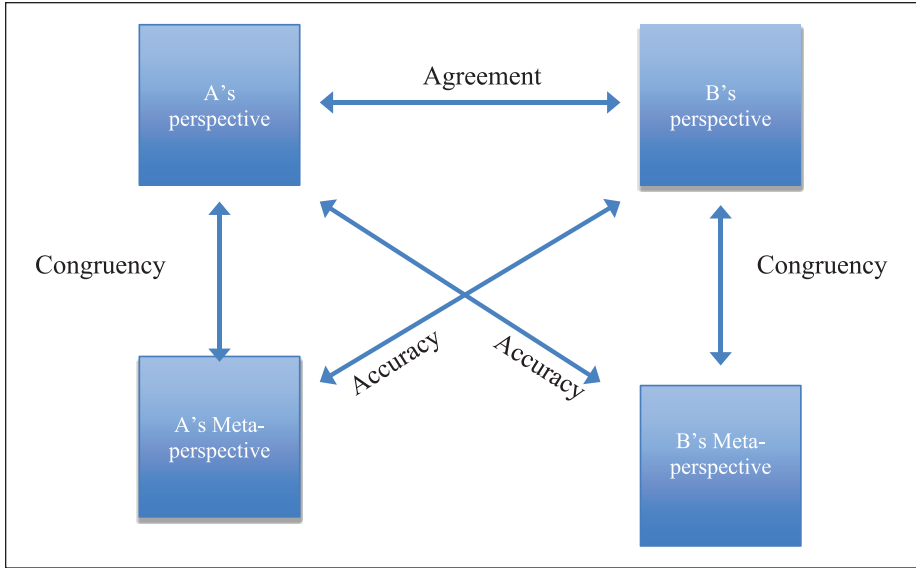


Figure 1. The Co-Orientation Model.

other mind” (p. 184). Newcomb (1953) noted that if we have two parties involved in the communication, then we also have two imagined perspectives added to the two real viewpoints. And these imagined perspectives are not always a correct representation of what the other party may actually think.

Thus, the co-orientation theory focuses on this shared sense-making (Botan & Penchalapadu, 2009). Laskin et al. (2019) propose that perhaps the key issue in such shared sense-making must be what is “the reality of the other mind or what we imagine that other mind to be, and what happens if our imagination and the reality are not in agreement?” (p. 169).

Indeed, the focus on people’s awareness of the other person’s opinion is the central concept in the co-orientation theory that has its roots in interpersonal communications (O’Keefe, 1973; Purnine & Carey, 1999). Tagiuri, Bruner, and Blake (1953) propose three major variables that will serve as the foundation of co-orientation research: *mutuality*: how much people like or agree with each other, *congruency*: the level of similarity between your own thoughts and your perception of the other person’s thoughts, and *accuracy*: how accurate your perception of the other person’s thoughts is in comparison with reality.

Based on these earlier studies, the modern co-orientation model was developed (Chaffee & McLeod, 1968; Chaffee & McLeod, 1973; Laing et al., 1966; Scheff, 1967)—see Figure 1. The top two squares in the model are called *direct perspectives*—opinions of A and B toward an issue. The bottom two boxes are *meta-perspectives*—in other words, perceptions of the other person’s direct perspective: A’s

meta-perspective is their evaluation of B's direct perspective, and, vice versa, B's meta-perspective is their evaluation of A's direct perspective.

Based on this model, it is possible to measure three key concepts: *agreement* (how much the direct perspectives of A and B agree with each other—previously called mutuality); *congruency* (relationship between a person's direct perspective and his meta-perspective of another person's opinion; an intrapersonal measure); and *accuracy* (whether a person's meta-perspective of the other person actually matches that other person's direct perspective).

In the end, the relations between the parties involved in the communication can be summarized by one of four co-orientation scenarios (Scheff, 1967). The first scenario is a *monolithic consensus*—both parties agree and are accurate in perceiving this agreement. The second is a state of *dissensus*—parties disagree but accurately perceive that the disagreement exists. The remaining two scenarios present situations when parties do not accurately evaluate each other's positions. The third is a *pluralistic ignorance*: both parties have an agreement about an issue under study, but they erroneously think that they disagree with each other. The fourth is a *false consensus*: both parties are under the impression that they agree on an issue, while disagreement exists. The parties involved may see the issue differently and have different approaches toward working with this issue, all without even realizing and acknowledging these disagreements.

Communication Management in Public Diplomacy

Countries around the world find it important to invest in building their international relationships through various mediated communication activities. Such international communication management known as public diplomacy becomes a key part of foreign policy (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000). The importance of public diplomacy is especially highlighted at the time of military conflicts or large terrorist attacks. Bloom (1991) explains that public diplomacy is always preferable to losing lives and engaging in actual warfare. With growing instability around the world in recent years, research on public diplomacy is gaining renewed attention (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Yet, public diplomacy is not a new practice. The 1948 United States Information and Educational Exchange Act required the United States government “to promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries, and to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.” This Act created a dual mandate for U.S. public diplomacy:

- to help “people abroad understand U.S. policies, ideas, and values (the foreign mandate)”;
- to enhance “Americans’ understanding of other nations’ policies, ideas, and values (the domestic mandate)” (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 5).

While both mandates are needed for mutual understanding, the U.S. government invested most of its efforts into promoting America abroad, while the second, or

reverse mandate, was largely forgotten (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005; Walker, Fitzpatrick, & Wang, 2022). This, however, can present a myriad of problems—one of which is the lack of understanding in the United States about what people in other countries think about America. In addition, this can lead to misrepresentation of what these foreign audiences think about a variety of critical issues—from terrorism to global warming—thus making finding common ground difficult, if not outright impossible.

Many U.S. presidents and other government leaders realized the dangers of such communication failure and called for public diplomacy to move away from one-way to two-way mutual conversations focused on listening, understanding, and engagement. President Obama demanded to focus public diplomacy efforts on “a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground” (The White House, 2009). Jennifer Hall Godfrey (2022) concludes,

While we have traditionally viewed Public Diplomacy as limited to engaging foreign audiences abroad, the Department must also engage American citizens, businesses, and organizations in discussions at home about U.S. foreign policy activities and solicit their input into those efforts. (p. 3)

Yet even today, this second mandate focused on helping Americans understand what people of other nations think, despite several recent studies (Huijgh, 2019; Jurkova, 2018; Pisarska, 2016), is often ignored. In fact, Fitzpatrick (2010) called it a “neglected” mandate. Others even suggested that “public diplomacy is not intended for domestic consumption” (Yang, 2020, p. 369).

With the increased importance of strategic communication management between people of different countries (Walker et al., 2022), focusing on both foreign and domestic audiences would allow for the creation of “mutual understanding between peoples” (The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 1980) of different nations. The effectiveness of public diplomacy, therefore, may be measured not based on the agreement between countries but through the accuracy with which they understand the other. Good strategic communication

should always improve accuracy, even to the absolute point where each person knows precisely what the other is thinking; this would be perfect communication in a quite literal sense. And yet they might disagree (and know they disagree) and even choose not to co orient to the same things in the same degree. (Chaffee & McLeod, 1970, p. 9)

This allows for public diplomacy, a communication activity, to be evaluated from the standpoint of communication: with the focus on the communication outcome. This is important: even when we disagree, we should be able to understand each other’s positions accurately and understand where everyone is coming from. In other words, co-orientation theory can be a valuable approach to measuring strategic public diplomacy’s communication outcomes.

Co-Orientation Research in Public Relations and Public Diplomacy

Unfortunately, the co-orientation research that could provide a theoretical perspective for measuring such communication outcomes is not very widespread. In 1973, *American Behavioral Scientist* dedicated a special issue to a co-orientation perspective that specifically focused on “applying the interpersonal perception model to the real world” (Chaffee, 1973). Likely the earliest co-orientation studies in strategic communication scholarship were published in that issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* (Grunig & Stamm, 1973) as well as in the *Journal of Communication* a year earlier (Grunig, 1972). These studies showed the value of the co-orientational approach as, for example, Grunig (1972) discovered that high levels of accuracy may co-exist with low levels of congruency and agreement. Another notable study is by Stamm and Bowes (1972) who showed that the co-orientation variables may vary based on the specific issue even within the same broader subject. Specifically, they found that community members had a better understanding of the Army Corps of Engineers position about the advantages of the project than about disadvantages. This finding helped re-evaluate the Corps’ communication strategy that focused on emphasizing the positives while ignoring the negatives.

After that, however, the co-orientation perspective was largely forgotten with a few notable exceptions (Avery et al., 2010; Botan & Penchalapadu, 2009; Bowes & Stamm, 1975; Broom, 1977; Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cameron & McCollum, 1993; Christen, 2005; Connelly & Knuth, 2002; Hon & Brunner, 2002; Stegall & Sanders, 1986; Tannenbaum, 1963; Tichenor & Wackman, 1973). For example, in the leading study on theory development, co-orientation is not listed at all as a theoretical perspective in public relations and strategic communication (Sallot et al, 2003).

The search in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* journal’s database reveals 29 journal articles focused on the co-orientational perspective. However, most of these articles (23 out of 29) were published prior to 2000; there were no co-orientation articles published in the *JMCQ* in over 15 years.

On the other hand, while journal publications ignored co-orientation, it was prominently featured in many books and textbooks, including the foundational public relations publication, *Managing Public Relations* (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In fact, when adopted to the public relations industry, the co-orientation becomes a way to measure and manage strategic communication outcomes: measures of exposure to new information can be thought of in terms of mutual awareness; measures of retention—in terms of accuracy; measures of cognition—understanding; attitude—agreement, and, finally, behavioral effects become measures of symbiotic behavior between the parties involved (Grunig, 2009). More recently, however, the co-orientation theory started making a comeback within the field of public relations with van Ruler (2018) drawing attention to the importance of co-orientation theory for understanding strategic communication as a two-way process.

An important consideration of applying co-orientation, an interpersonal concept, in organizational settings is an inherent imbalance between the parties trying to co-orient. In the interpersonal context, for example in a study of a married couple, it would

be unimaginable to measure only one of the partner's perspectives and ignore the other one (Laing, 1969). In the organizational application of the co-orientation, it is quite common to see the organizational side ignored (Seltzer, 2007). In other words, researchers measure what the public thinks but not what the organization thinks. For example, in the study of employee relations, Cameron and McCollum (1993) measured the employees' side of the co-orientation but not what the organization thinks of the relationship with their employees.

On the other hand, when two somewhat equal groups are measured, the co-orientation perspective is the most appropriate. For example, Shin and Cameron (2005) measured the relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists using co-orientation as the theoretical foundation for the study. Thus, in the current research that focuses on the co-orientation between two international audiences, co-orientation once again seems to be a uniquely relevant theoretical perspective.

As a result, it is not a surprise that several recent studies specifically apply co-orientation to public diplomacy. Vercic et al. (2006) and Tkalcic et al. (2019) evaluated co-orientation between two countries—Slovenia and Croatia on the most prominent issues for both countries. The authors discovered a state of false consensus for several issues and concluded that “strategies developed on the basis of inaccurate perceptions of the other party's attitudes will not result in an appropriate reaction to the situation” (2006; p. 8). The authors also called for more research on the “co-orientation model of public diplomacy developed from studies comparing public diplomacy and public relations” (2019; p. 1625). The study concluded that public diplomacy must “improve understanding between nations” and that, to do so, it must focus its efforts on both foreign and domestic audiences (p. 1639).

Another recent study was the 2019 research focused on the co-orientation analysis between Russians and Americans on 10 key issues affecting the two countries at the time, such as Ukraine, Syria, and Edward Snowden (Laskin et al., 2019). The study concluded that the Russian-US relationships are in a state of dissensus: “The U.S.A. and the Russian Federation disagree with each other on major issues affecting the relationships between the countries, and they both accurately perceive this position of disagreement” (p. 177). On one hand, dissensus is a negative state as the countries disagree with each other, but the author also notes the positives: in dissensus, these disagreements are out in the open and both countries are accurate in assessing each other's positions.

That study did not include the issue of nuclear war as one of the issues for the co-orientational investigation. Today, with nuclear war becoming an alarmingly dangerous possibility, more research is appearing on the topic of nuclear weapons and nuclear strategies (Suh, 2022). The discussion of whether Russia will use nuclear weapons and whether the United States will retaliate is becoming increasingly prominent (Betts, 2022). Thus, it becomes important to evaluate if the people of the United States and the Russian Federation are on the same page when it comes to the dangers of a nuclear war and if they understand each other's positions accurately. As a result, this study proposes using a co-orientational approach to better understand how American and Russian youth perceive the potential issue of nuclear war.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review above, the study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the level of agreement between the respondents from the United States of America and the Russian Federation on the issue of nuclear war?

In public diplomacy, having people of both countries agree on any given issue is a common target of communication activities. Agreement is a central measure of the co-orientation theory—it compares the direct perspectives of both parties. Agreement or disagreement becomes the foundation that defines the relationship between countries.

RQ2: What is the level of congruency for the respondents from the United States of America on the issue of nuclear war?

Congruency for the U.S. participants allows the study to evaluate how their direct perspective is similar or different to their imagined perspective of the Russian participants. This is a particularly important measure in the context of public diplomacy as people would act based on their perceived agreement or disagreement.

RQ3: What is the level of congruency for the respondents from the Russian Federation on the issue of nuclear war?

Same as in **RQ2**, **RQ3** measures the congruency but only for the Russian participants.

RQ4: What is the level of accuracy for the respondents from the United States of America on the issue of nuclear war?

Accuracy for the U.S. participants allows the study to evaluate how their imagined perspective of the Russian participants is similar or different from the Russian participants' direct perspective. This is a measure that strategic communication efforts have the most direct effect on and thus should be the starting point for many public diplomacy campaigns. Improved accuracy has the potential to provide a foundation for affecting all other communication outcomes.

RQ5: What is the level of accuracy for the respondents from the Russian Federation on the issue of nuclear war?

Similar to **RQ4**, **RQ5** measures accuracy but only for the Russian respondents.

RQ6: What co-orientation scenario (consensus, dissensus, pluralistic ignorance, or false consensus) best describes the state of U.S.-Russia relations as perceived by the study respondents on the issue of nuclear war?

Finally, **RQ6** attempts to describe the overall state of U.S.-Russia relations from the co-orientation perspective and classify it into one of the four previously defined scenarios.

These research questions focus on the standard measures of the co-orientation theory—agreement, accuracy, and congruency—and thus are similar in structure to the research questions of previous co-orientation studies. However, these questions are applied to a novel context: potential nuclear war between the United States and the Russian Federation as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

Method

The study relies on a survey as its main method of data collection. Surveys are one of the leading methods of inquiry in the social sciences. It relies on a nomothetic explanation. Instead of looking for what is unique, it tries to find what is common, make generalizations, and describe the population under study (Babbie, 2020). The questions were measured on a 1-to-10 scale to achieve a high level of sensitivity to variations, where 1 means “completely disagree” and 10 means “completely agree.” The questionnaire presented to the U.S. audiences was in English; for the Russian respondents, the survey questions were translated into Russian by a native Russian speaker and then translated back to English to verify accuracy. After comparing the translated version with the original, the Russian questionnaire was modified again to achieve better congruence between survey items in both languages. The study was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board.

Following the standard approach of the co-orientation theory, each question was asked twice: what the respondents thought about an issue and what they thought people in another country would think about the same issue. This allows the development of the direct perspective and the meta-perspective and the measuring of the relations between them. The co-orientation is measured using the *d*-score, which is the measure of difference between the perspectives. A *t*-test is used to evaluate where the differences are statistically significant. The study asked 11 questions divided into three categories: general perceptions of nuclear war, readiness to use nuclear weapons, and the specific threat of a nuclear war between the United States and Russia.

Previous research in public diplomacy suggested that there may be a variety of publics who may hold different views on the same subject. As a result, it is critical to identify the strategic publics on which to focus public diplomacy efforts—previous studies proposed ways to segment and evaluate audiences in public diplomacy (Pacher, 2018; Tam & Kim, 2019).

As explained earlier, this study chose to focus on the undergraduate university students of both countries. First, the younger generation is less likely to have been influenced by the old Cold War propaganda, and second, students represent their countries’ future leaders (Mankoff, 2010). To access the participants, the study recruited potential respondents at two universities: a mid-size university located in the east of the United States and a mid-size university located in the west of Russia. Only U.S. or Russian citizens were included in this study. The total number of respondents was 253:

Table 1. Levels of Agreement Between U.S. and Russian Respondents About the Issue of War and Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
Any war is a threat	6.98	2.49	8.24	2.37	-1.26	3.42	251	.001*
Nuclear weapons are a threat	7.51	2.42	8.55	2.18	-1.04	2.93	251	.004*
Nuclear weapons make the world safer	3.60	2.73	3.17	2.44	0.43	1.07	251	.284
Nuclear weapons are deterrents from war	5.76	2.90	6.29	2.91	-0.53	1.22	251	.225
Nuclear war is inevitable	3.47	2.40	3.16	2.30	0.31	0.88	251	.382

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 2. Levels of Agreement Between U.S. and Russian Respondents About Using Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
Nuclear weapons can be used only in response to a nuclear attack	6.18	3.05	6.29	2.97	-0.11	0.24	251	.811
Nuclear weapons can be used only in response to an attack	3.49	2.90	2.93	2.45	0.56	1.34	251	.181
Nuclear weapons can be used first	3.57	2.71	2.88	2.44	0.70	1.75	251	.081

Table 3. Levels of Agreement Between U.S. and Russian Respondents About Nuclear War Between the United States and the Russian Federation Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
Good relations between Russia and the United States	4.63	2.41	4.34	2.34	0.28	0.79	251	.433
Conflict between Russia and the United States will lead to nuclear war	4.78	2.65	4.12	2.80	0.66	1.65	251	.100
I am willing to sacrifice my life in a nuclear conflict	2.44	2.67	2.50	2.50	0.06	0.16	251	.871

195 U.S. respondents and 58 Russian respondents. This discrepancy in the number of participants was related to the difficulty in recruiting Russian participants, many of whom were afraid to participate in the study. All the participants were undergraduate students. Most respondents were female ($N = 155$; 61%). The t -tests, however, did not show any effects of gender on the responses.

Results

RQ1 asked what the level of agreement is between the U.S. and Russian respondents on the issue of nuclear war (see Tables 1 to 3). Out of the 11 questions asked, nine showed agreement between the American and Russian respondents. In fact, both Russian and American respondents agreed on every single question about the level of

Table 4. Levels of Congruency for the U.S. Respondents About the Issue of War and Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
War threat	6.98	2.49	6.43	2.50	0.55	2.19	388	.029*
Nuclear threat	7.51	2.42	7.02	2.52	0.50	1.99	388	.048*
Safer world	3.60	2.73	5.04	2.76	-1.44	5.19	388	.000*
Deterrent	5.76	2.90	5.94	2.60	-0.17	0.63	388	.532
Inevitable	3.47	2.40	4.72	2.70	-1.26	4.86	388	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 5. Levels of Congruency for the U.S. Respondents About Using Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Nuclear attack	6.18	3.05	5.30	2.85	0.88	2.95	388	.003*
Any attack	3.49	2.90	5.01	3.03	-1.52	5.06	388	.000*
First use	3.57	2.71	5.07	2.85	-1.49	5.30	388	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

threat of nuclear war between the United States and Russia, as well as readiness to use nuclear weapons. Neither group of respondents saw it as appropriate to use nuclear weapons in a military conflict in an attacking mode but only in response to another country using nuclear weapons first. Both groups of respondents were also moderately concerned about the current level of relations between the United States and Russia and were not willing to sacrifice their lives in any potential nuclear conflict.

The only two questions with statistically significant differences in responses focused on the perception of the war: “The main threat to human existence is war”—Russian respondents scored significantly higher on this question (d -score = 1.26; $p = .001$); and “The main threat to human existence is nuclear weapons”—again, Russian respondents scored significantly higher on this question (d -score = 1.04; $p = .004$). As a result, in response to **RQ1**, the study results show a high level of agreement between the U.S. and Russian respondents on the issue of nuclear weapons.

RQ2 asked about the level of congruency for the U.S. respondents on the issue of nuclear war. Here, the study results highlight a potential issue. While both parties are largely in agreement, in the minds of the U.S. respondents, Russians disagree with the Americans. Out of 11 questions asked, the U.S. respondents perceived a disagreement on 10 of those issues (see Tables 4 to 6). The U.S. respondents think that Russians are willing to sacrifice their lives in the nuclear war (d -score = 1.95; $p = .000$), ready to use nuclear weapons first in the attacking mode (d -score = 1.49; $p = .000$) or in response to conventional warfare (d -score = 1.52; $p = .000$) and see nuclear war as inevitable (d -score = 1.26; $p = .000$). As a result, in response to **RQ2**, the study results show the lack of congruence for the U.S. respondents.

Table 6. Levels of Congruency for the U.S. Respondents About Nuclear War Between the United States and the Russian Federation Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta	SD	d	t	df	p
Relations	4.63	2.41	5.16	2.46	-0.54	2.19	388	.029*
Conflict	4.78	2.65	5.43	2.54	-0.65	2.45	388	.015*
Sacrifice	2.44	2.67	4.39	3.18	-1.95	6.57	388	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 7. Levels of Congruency for the Russian Respondents About the Issue of War and Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
War threat	8.24	2.37	8.24	1.88	0	0	114	1.000
Nuclear threat	8.55	2.18	8.19	2.24	0.36	0.88	114	.379
Safer world	3.17	2.44	4.26	2.83	-1.09	2.21	114	.029*
Deterrent	6.29	2.91	6.14	2.78	0.16	0.29	114	.770
Inevitable	3.16	2.30	3.86	2.53	-0.71	1.57	114	.118

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 8. Levels of Congruency for the Russian Respondents About Using Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
Nuclear attack	6.29	2.97	6.17	2.84	0.12	0.22	114	.823
Any attack	2.93	2.45	3.41	2.56	-0.48	1.04	114	.301
First use	2.88	2.44	3.55	2.54	-0.67	1.46	114	.149

Table 9. Levels of Congruency for the Russian Respondents About Nuclear War Between the United States and the Russian Federation Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	d	t	df	p
Relations	4.34	2.34	4.72	2.33	-0.38	0.88	114	.383
Conflict	4.12	2.80	4.59	2.66	-0.47	0.92	114	.360
Sacrifice	2.50	2.50	2.97	2.35	-0.47	1.03	114	.303

RQ3 asked about the level of congruency for the Russian respondents on the issue of nuclear war. Russian respondents' levels of congruency were exceedingly high. Out of the 11 questions asked, the Russian respondents perceived an agreement on 10 of those issues (see Tables 7 to 9). In other words, the Russians expected Americans to be

Table 10. Levels of Accuracy for the U.S. Respondents About the Issue of War and Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, US	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
War threat	8.24	2.37	6.43	2.50	1.82	4.92	251	.000*
Nuclear threat	8.55	2.18	7.02	2.52	1.54	4.20	251	.000*
Safer world	3.17	2.44	5.04	2.76	-1.87	4.65	251	.000*
Deterrent	6.29	2.91	5.94	2.60	0.36	0.89	251	.376
Inevitable	3.16	2.30	4.72	2.70	-1.57	4.01	251	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 11. Levels of Accuracy for the U.S. Respondents About Using Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, US	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Nuclear attack	6.29	2.97	5.30	2.85	0.99	2.30	251	.022*
Any attack	2.93	2.45	5.01	3.03	-2.08	4.78	251	.000*
First use	2.88	2.44	5.07	2.85	-2.19	5.29	251	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 12. Levels of Accuracy for the U.S. Respondents About Nuclear War Between the United States and the Russian Federation Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	Russia	SD	Meta, US	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Relations	4.34	2.34	5.16	2.46	-0.82	2.25	251	.025*
Conflict	4.12	2.80	5.43	2.54	-1.31	3.36	251	.001*
Sacrifice	2.50	2.50	4.39	3.18	-1.89	4.16	251	.000*

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

on the same page as them. As a result, in response to **RQ3**, the study results show a high level of congruence for the Russian respondents.

RQ4 asked about the level of accuracy for the U.S. respondents on the issue of nuclear war. Here, the study results show that the Americans have very inaccurate perceptions of what Russians think about the nuclear war. Out of the 11 questions asked, the U.S. respondents misperceived Russian views on 10 of those issues (see Tables 10 to 12). The U.S. respondents overestimate Russians' willingness to sacrifice their lives in the nuclear war (d -score = 1.89; $p = .000$) and see nuclear war as inevitable (d -score = 1.57; $p = .000$). American respondents also underestimate how much of a threat Russians view the war (d -score = 1.82; $p = .000$) and the nuclear weapons (d -score = 1.54; $p = .000$). The largest error, however, is for the question of willingness to use nuclear weapons first in the attacking mode. The Americans overestimate

Table 13. Levels of Accuracy for the Russian Respondents About the Issue of War and Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
War threat	6.98	2.49	8.24	1.88	-1.26	3.57	251	.000*
Nuclear threat	7.51	2.42	8.19	2.24	-0.68	1.90	251	.059
Safer world	3.60	2.73	4.26	2.83	-0.66	1.60	251	.110
Deterrent	5.76	2.90	6.14	2.78	-0.37	0.87	251	.385
Inevitable	3.47	2.40	3.86	2.53	-0.40	1.09	251	.278

*Statistically significant if $p \leq .05$.

Table 14. Levels of Accuracy for the Russian Respondents About Using Nuclear Weapons Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Nuclear attack	6.18	3.05	6.17	2.84	0.01	0.03	251	.978
Any attack	3.49	2.90	3.41	2.56	0.08	0.19	251	.853
First use	3.57	2.71	3.55	2.54	0.02	0.06	251	.955

Table 15. Levels of Accuracy for the Russian Respondents About Nuclear War Between the United States and the Russian Federation Showing Means, Standard Deviations, d-Score, t-Value, Degrees of Freedom, and p-Value.

Variable	US	SD	Meta, Russia	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Relations	4.63	2.41	4.72	2.33	-0.00	0.28	251	.783
Conflict	4.78	2.65	4.59	2.66	0.19	0.50	251	.618
Sacrifice	2.44	2.67	2.97	2.35	-0.53	1.36	251	.175

how likely Russians are to do that by a large margin (*d*-score = 2.19; $p = .000$). As a result, in response to **RQ4**, the study results show the lack of accuracy for the U.S. respondents.

RQ5 asked about the level of accuracy for the Russian respondents on the issue of nuclear war. Russian respondents' levels of accuracy were very high. Out of the 11 questions asked, the Russian respondents accurately estimated the position of Americans on 10 of those issues (see Tables 13 to 15). Interestingly, the only inaccurate perception Russian had about the Americans was the issue of a war threat. Russians overestimated how much of a threat Americans perceive the war to be (*d*-score = 1.26; $p = .000$). As a result, in response to **RQ5**, the study results show the high level of accuracy for the Russian respondents.

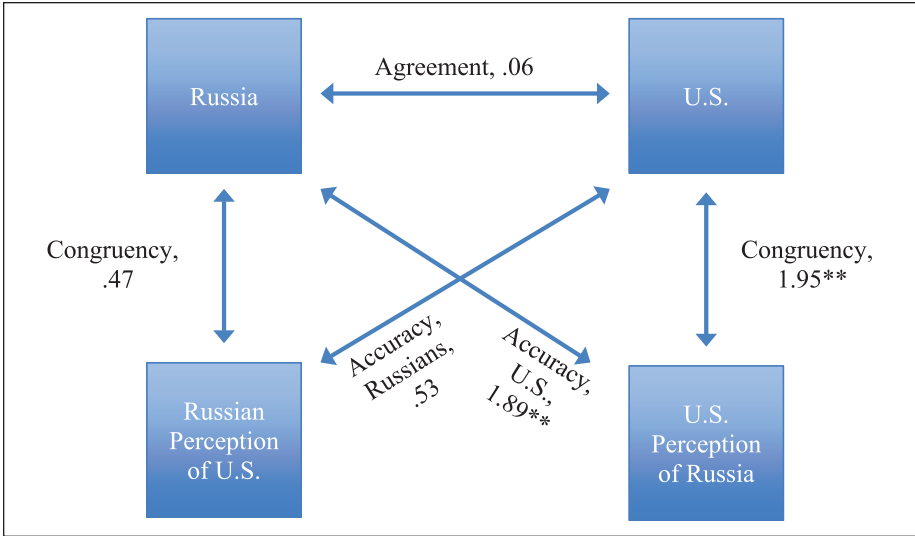


Figure 2. Co-Orientation Results for the Willingness to Sacrifice Own Life in Nuclear War Expressed as d-Scores.

*D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .05$. **D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .001$.

To answer **RQ6** which asked about the overall co-orientation scenario in the relations between countries on the issue of nuclear weapons, three co-orientation diagrams were created as illustrations (see Figures 2 to 4). Each figure focuses on a key question related to nuclear weapons (while illustrations are not provided for the other eight questions, all the data for all questions are provided in the tables above). Figure 2 shows the co-orientation scenario in response to the question “I am willing to sacrifice my life in a nuclear conflict between the United States and Russia”; Figure 3 shows the co-orientation scenario in response to the question “A country should have the option to use the nuclear weapons first if it finds it justified”; and Figure 4 shows the co-orientation scenario in response to the question “Nuclear war is inevitable.”

In each of these questions, the co-orientation scenario is the same: the respondents agree with each other—however, Russian respondents perceive this agreement accurately but the American respondents, instead, erroneously think that the disagreement exists. This leads to the U.S. respondents lacking in accuracy (not accurately evaluating the views of others) and congruency (perceiving a disagreement where agreement exists) measures.

While the earlier co-orientation studies often identified the differences in the levels of agreement, congruency, and accuracy between the parties involved, the results of this study show both parties involved in the co-orientation situated in completely different co-orientation scenarios. For Russians, it is a state of *consensus* (agreement exists and it is accurately perceived), but for Americans, it is a state of *pluralistic ignorance* (agreement exists but the disagreement is perceived). This suggests a need

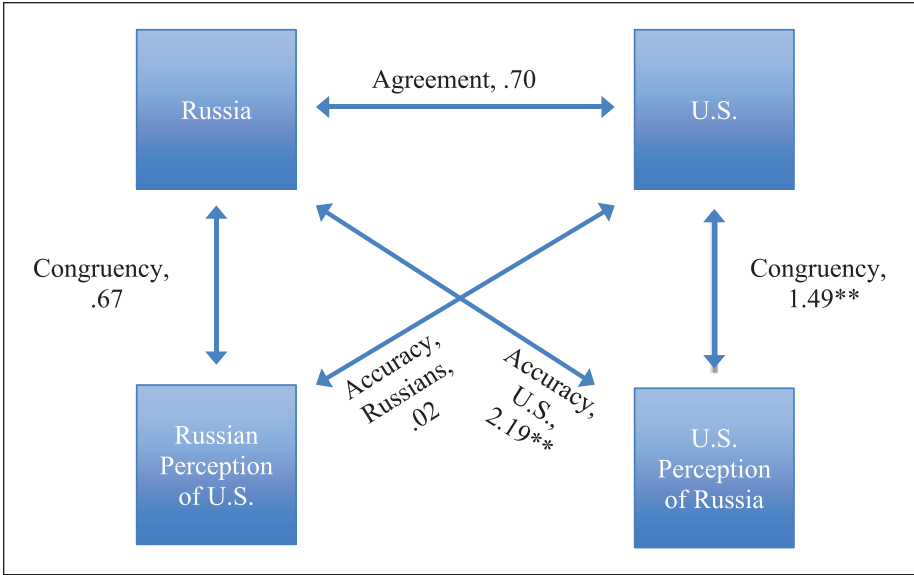


Figure 3. Co-Orientation Results for the Acceptance of Using Nuclear Weapons First Expressed as d-Scores.

*D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .05$. **D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .001$.

to expand the co-orientation theory and propose a new state of co-orientation: when parties involved are, in fact, in different co-orientation scenarios simultaneously—this can be labeled as the *Imbalanced Co-orientation* scenario. While this term is introduced here for the first time, the scenario may apply to the earlier co-orientation studies as well (e.g., Grunig, 1972; Stamm & Bowes, 1972).

Discussion

The current study focused on the issue of a potential nuclear war between the United States of America and the Russian Federation, an issue often discussed today by professional politicians, pundits, mainstream media, and common folk. The results of this study highlighted an interesting issue: American respondents failed to accurately understand what Russians think. In fact, Americans perceived disagreements where there were none. In general, Americans viewed Russians as more aggressive and more willing to engage in a nuclear conflict.

This may be quite an important finding for communication professionals. Since Americans think that Russians are willing to start a nuclear war and even die in it, it may lead the American public to support more aggressive actions of its government toward Russia and may lead to an escalation of current tense relations into a global nuclear crisis. This is also an important finding from the theoretical standpoint:

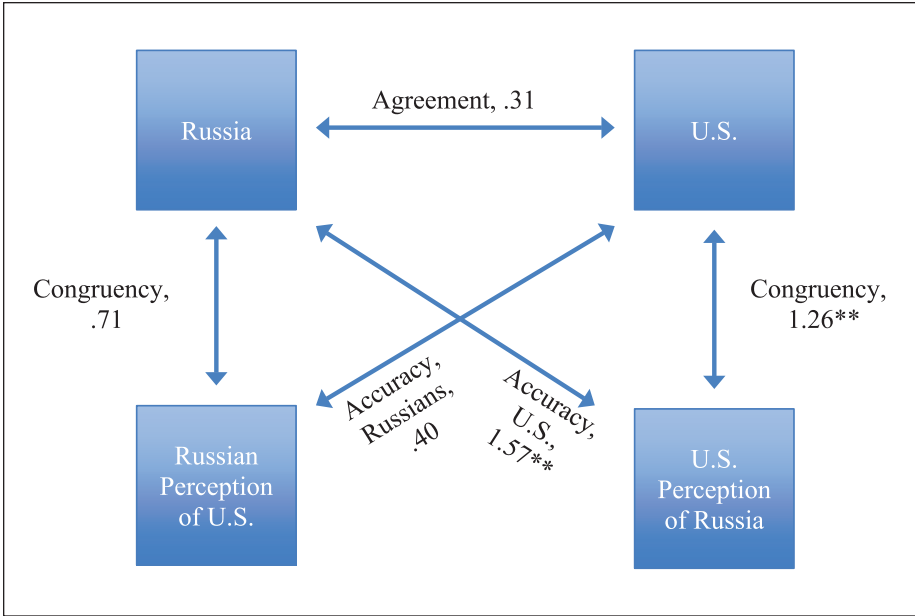


Figure 4. Co-Orientation Results for the Perception of the Inevitability of the Nuclear War Expressed as d-Scores.

*D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .05$. **D-scores are statistically significant if $p \leq .001$.

co-orientation theory specifically focuses on the issues of accuracy and congruence, and, as a result, it is the most appropriate theory to identify and analyze such a disconnect.

The reasons for such misunderstanding may reside in the significant divide between what Russian people think and what the Russian state machine communicates. In recent months, after the start of the Ukrainian invasion, many Russian official channels took quite an aggressive stance, including multiple threats of nuclear war (Cole, 2022). Because of this, it is not much of a surprise that Americans do not accurately understand what the Russian people think.

It is not accurate to think that public diplomacy is exclusively responsible for views of the foreign public on any given issue, but if the goal of public diplomacy is developing mutual understanding between the peoples of different countries, the U.S. public diplomacy domestic mandate has a responsibility to gather accurate data of what common people of Russia think and inform the American people about it; in other words, to “contribute to the development of American understanding of others” (The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 1980). For example, on January 22, 2023, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow account on Twitter posted a collection of tweets from Russian citizens devastated and distraught by the horrors of destruction in Ukraine (The United States Embassy in Russia, 2022). This may serve as an example

of domestic public diplomacy that could help educate Americans on the difference between the Russian government's and Russian citizens' views on the war. Additional research is needed, however, to investigate the process of opinion formation about Russians and the sources of information to better understand an aggressive image of Russians in the United States. Future research, perhaps qualitative studies using interviews and focus groups, could investigate the causes of these opinions.

Russians, on the other hand, were more accurate in estimating the Americans' attitudes toward the nuclear war. This may suggest the successful effort of the U.S. public diplomacy foreign mandate demonstrating the U.S. people's desire for peace and for avoiding nuclear confrontation or the successful work of the Russian public diplomacy domestic mandate.

Previous research concluded that communication not only contributes to the maintenance of a consensus as a form of social control but also seeks a new consensus as a form of social change (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This is especially important when the issue is as important as nuclear war. Today, developing a proper and accurate understanding of this issue and looking for a new consensus is important for the survival of civilization. C.Brown (2015) notes that this issue may be especially important for the people of the United States: "the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons" in a war (p. 1). Perhaps, this can explain why Americans overestimate Russians' willingness to use their nuclear weapons. But, if this is the case, it suggests the even larger importance of working on developing an accurate understanding and investing more efforts in the domestic public diplomacy mandate. Such efforts may one day save the world from nuclear destruction.

The study also highlights the relevance of the co-orientation theory to understanding and evaluating strategic communication and public diplomacy in academic and professional contexts. Co-orientation theory can contribute to strategic public diplomacy by "providing a coherent framework" (Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018, p. 429) with a testable model. The political process in general and public diplomacy efforts in particular are based on strategic communication (McLeod, 2001) focused on developing mutual understanding (The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 1980); we should strive to understand each other's positions accurately, including when we agree and when we disagree. The co-orientation approach allows scholars and practitioners to apply this model to measure the levels of agreement, accuracy, and congruency between the peoples of different countries.

As public diplomacy's importance increases, there is also a heightened need for accountability about the return on public diplomacy investments (Walker et al., 2022). Thus, another practical contribution of this study is the confirmation that the co-orientation theory can provide a roadmap for evaluating the return on investments in public diplomacy efforts. The co-orientation model can be used to record a benchmark measure of accuracy, agreement, and congruency prior to the campaign that can later be compared with the measures of accuracy, agreement, and congruency after the campaign is finished to evaluate the effectiveness of the public diplomacy campaign. Furthermore, such measures can evaluate the effectiveness of both foreign and domestic public diplomacy mandates.

Finally, the study also makes an important theoretical contribution to the co-orientation theory's model. In addition to previously identified four states of co-orientation—*consensus*, *dissensus*, *false consensus*, and *pluralistic ignorance*—the research uncovered and defined the fifth co-orientation scenario, *imbalanced co-orientation*. This scenario is defined as having two communicating parties in different conditions: in this study, one had accurate perceptions of the other party's viewpoints and was in congruence and in agreement with them, while the other party was in an incongruent state and did not have an accurate view on the other party's positions.

This finding necessitates updating the overall theoretical model of co-orientation with this fifth scenario of co-orientation—*imbalanced co-orientation* that would apply to the situations with the parties in different states: one party may be congruent and the other incongruent, or one party may be accurate and the other inaccurate. This modification of the theory has practical applications as well. When the public are in a state of *imbalanced co-orientation*, each party must proceed differently with their communication activities to improve their effectiveness and efficiency to be able to reach congruency, accuracy, and, perhaps, even agreement. While earlier co-orientation studies noted that public may differ on the levels of agreement, congruency, or accuracy, no prior study defined the *imbalanced co-orientation* as the unique scenario with communicating parties being in different co-orientation states.

Conclusions and Limitations

The study examined the perceptions of American and Russian youths on the potential for a nuclear war between the United States and Russia. The findings revealed that Americans perceive Russians as more aggressive and more willing to engage in a nuclear conflict than they actually are. The study calls for improving the accuracy of such perception. Additional research, however, is needed to investigate the process of opinion formation about Russians and the sources of information used to form these opinions.

The study also highlights the relevance of co-orientation theory to understanding and evaluating public diplomacy. Co-orientation theory is a communication theory that posits that people are more likely to be satisfied with a communication interaction if they perceive that they have a similar understanding of the situation as the other person. The key contribution of this study is the identification of the fifth, previously undefined, co-orientation scenario, *imbalanced co-orientation*. This scenario, for example, can be used to explain why public diplomacy efforts may sometimes fail, even when both parties have access to accurate information. This should also be tested in other contexts outside of public diplomacy to see if the theory holds in other communication environments.

One of the key weaknesses of this research (as well as many other cross-sectional studies) is the lack of dimension of time. Building a country's reputation is a process that takes place over time, and it is therefore important to study how public opinion changes in response to public diplomacy efforts (Laskin, 2024). Future research should use a longitudinal design to track changes in public opinion over time. Especially now, during active military conflict, the situation and people's opinions may change daily. Yet, this

cross-sectional approach can measure only the results at one point in time. Future research could also repeat this study at later points in time or conduct longitudinal panel studies to better capture the dynamic of continuity and change in co-orientation.

Previous co-orientation studies also note another weakness of the theory: co-orientation theory assumes equal status of both parties—"A and B co-orient as a symmetrical pair of persons having equivalent statuses, access to communication channels, and so on" (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p. 489). This makes co-orientation difficult to apply in the organizational context. But even in the case of public diplomacy with two international audiences, the assumption of equal status may not always be accurate: the United States is spending significantly more resources on its international public diplomacy efforts to engage foreign stakeholders than the Russian Federation (Laskin, 2014). Governments of different countries may also have different motives, incentives, and goals for communicating with each other. The state of imbalanced co-orientation may be the most appropriate outcome in such situations.

Finally, public diplomacy strategic efforts are not the only sources of information about people of foreign countries. Future studies could evaluate sources of information for the people of different countries. A vast body of literature on the relationships between international affairs and public opinion asserts that media are often the key source of information about other countries; therefore, future studies could add a content analysis of the media coverage and how the coverage influences people's thinking. In addition to mediated communication, interpersonal experiences or receiving foreign humanitarian aid may play a significant role in public diplomacy (Popkova, 2022; Tokdemir, 2017). Future research should try to account for such communication channels.

The study also had a small and purposive sample which made generalizations beyond the study's population difficult. The sample is especially small for the Russian respondents due to the respondents' fear of participating. This could have potentially skewed the results. To account for this small sample with unequal groups, the study relied on the *t*-test, specifically designed for small samples with unequal sizes and unequal variances (Walpole & Myers, 2006). Future studies, nevertheless, may expand the sample to the overall populations of the countries allowing for generalizability of the results. Another concern with the Russian sample may be the respondents' fear of providing honest answers despite the anonymous participation—this, however, did not seem to be the case as Russian responses were more pro-Western rather than following the Russian propaganda themes.

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