DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *Digital technologies have revolutionised the way diplomats and government officials communicate with domestic and international stakeholders during crises. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines how digital technologies, particularly social media, shape the nature and effectiveness of crisis communication in diplomacy. Drawing on interviews with diplomats, content analysis of social media data, and case studies of international crises, the study identifies key factors that influence the use and impact of digital technologies in crisis communication. The findings of the study reveal that digital technologies present both opportunities and challenges for crisis communication in diplomacy. On the one hand, digital diplomacy can enhance communication with stakeholders, increase transparency and accountability, and foster international cooperation. On the other hand, it can also amplify misinformation, exacerbate tensions, and undermine traditional diplomatic channels. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, diplomats, and scholars interested in leveraging digital technologies for effective crisis communication. The study also highlights several implications for further research. First, more attention should be paid to the role of social media algorithms and content moderation policies in shaping public discourse during crises. Second, future research should examine the difference in digital diplomacy practices across cultures and countries, as well as the impact of language barriers and cultural differences on crisis communication. Finally, this study emphasises the importance of developing ethical and effective guidelines for the use of digital technologies in crisis communication, taking into account the need for transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights.*

KEYWORDS: Digital diplomacy, Social media, Crisis communication, Challenges, Opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a significant aspect of foreign policy in the age of social media, presenting new opportunities and challenges for crisis communication. In recent years social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become powerful tools for engaging with global audiences, sharing information and ideas, and shaping public opinion. At the same time, social media has also been used to spread mis-information, incite violence, and undermine democratic institutions (Brendon & Ivanhoe, 2017). This has created new challenges for diplomats and policy-makers, who must navigate complex digital environments while promoting their countries' interest and values. The speed and reach of social media mean that rumours and mis-information can spread rapidly, often causing confusion and anxiety among the public. Governments must therefore develop strategies for countering mis-information and managing the information environment in a crisis, social media provides new opportunities for engaging with the public and building support for diplomatic initiatives. Governments can use social media to communicate directly with citizens, share official information, and build support for their policies and actions (Bjola & Ilan, 2020).

In addition to the challenges and opportunities outlined above, digital diplomacy also raises new ethical and legal questions about the use of social media in crisis communication. For instance, governments may be tempted to censor or restrict access to information in order to maintain control over the information environment. This can lead to violations of human rights and undermine the credibility and legitimacy of governments. At the same time, governments must also address issues of data privacy, cyber-security, and dis-information campaigns, which can compromise the effectiveness of their digital diplomacy efforts. Another important aspect of digital diplomacy is the relationship between governments and social media companies (Boyd-Barrett, 2014).

As social media platforms have become increasingly influential in global politics, governments have sought to exert greater control over their content and activities. This has led to a range of initiatives, such as the European Union's Digital Services Act and the United States' Communications Decency Act. At the same time, social media companies have also begun to take more proactive steps to address issues such as hate speech, dis-information, and election interference. The rise of digital diplomacy has also led to a shift in the role and responsibilities of diplomats, who must now be adept at using social media and other digital tools to communicate with global audiences. Diplomats must be able to craft effective messaging, engage with diverse stakeholders, and manage crises in real-time. This requires a new set of skills and expertise, including digital literacy, strategic communications, and crisis management.

The emergence of digital diplomacy has raised important questions about the future of international relations and the role of non-state actors in shaping global politics. Social media has enabled new forms of citizen diplomacy and grassroots activism, as individuals and organisations use digital tools to advocate for change and promote their interests. This has led to a more decentralised and participatory approach to diplomacy, in which governments must engage with a wider range of stakeholders and manage a more complex and fluid information environment (Palgrave, 2020).

The increasing role of social media in international affairs has raised important questions about the impact of digital diplomacy on crisis communication and management. The rise of digital

diplomacy has created new opportunities for governments and other actors to engage with global audiences and build support for their policies and actions. However, it has also created new challenges, including the spread of mis-information, the threat of cyber-attacks, and the erosion of trust in traditional institutions. The problem at hand is how governments and other actors can effectively use digital tools to communicate with the public and manage crises in a complex and rapidly changing global environment (Ilan, 2013). The paper seeks to cover the existing literature on digital diplomacy and crisis communication from the area of a lack of understanding of how trust and credibility are established and maintained in a digital environment, particularly in times of crisis. More so, there is a need for more empirical research on the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in a digital age; more importantly, there is a lack of research on the interactions between governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders in promoting transparency and accountability in digital diplomacy.

The scope of the study has focused on digital diplomacy and crisis communication in the context of Nigeria, with a particular emphasis on exploring the roles and interactions of governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders. In terms of countries, the paper focused on Nigeria as a case study which was chosen based on her relevance to the research questions and the availability of data. In terms of social media platforms, the paper concentrated on a selection of major social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as other digital tools, such as messaging apps and news websites. These platforms have been chosen based on their relevance to the research questions and their importance in Nigeria under study. In terms of stakeholders, the study has considered the perspectives and experiences of government officials, social media companies, civil society organisations, and citizens in Nigeria under study.

However, the study is justified by the increasing importance of digital diplomacy and crisis communication in international affairs, particularly in the context of global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and cyber warfare. More so, the paper is justified by the limited understanding of digital diplomacy and crisis communication in the existing literature, particularly the role of social media companies and other stakeholders in shaping these processes. Based on these aforementioned, the paper has been justified for more potential of digital diplomacy and crisis communication to enhance transparency, accountability, and public participation in international affairs. The purpose of the study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital diplomacy and crisis communication in a digital age, with a particular focus on the roles and interactions of governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders.

More importantly, the paper aims to contribute to policy and practice by identifying effective strategies and approaches for building trust and credibility in crisis communication, particularly in the context of social media. Also, by developing new tools and techniques for responding to mis-information and dis-information in a digital age. By promoting dialogue and cooperation between governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders to enhance transparency and accountability in digital diplomacy. In a nutshell, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital diplomacy and crisis communication in a digital age, with a view to improving policy and practice in the above stated areas. The paper is relevant to a range of audiences and disciplines, such as international relations, diplomacy, communication, and social media. Again, it is relevant to policy-makers and practitioners in government, civil society, and the private sector who are engaged in digital diplomacy and crisis communication, journalists and media professionals who cover global politics and

international affairs, as well as citizens who are interested in understanding how digital tools are used in shaping global politics and international relations.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are based on the following areas:

1. To investigate the role of digital tools in building trust and credibility in crisis communication;
2. To explore the strategies and approaches used by governments to counter mis-information and dis-information in a digital environment;
3. To analyse the interactions between governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders in promoting transparency and accountability in digital diplomacy; and
4. To assess the effectiveness of different crisis communication strategies in a digital age, including the interactions between governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders.

Research Questions

To address this research problem, it is important to consider the following questions:

1. How can governments use digital tools to build trust and credibility with global audiences, particularly in times of crisis?
2. How can governments effectively counter mis-information and dis-information, while still respecting free speech and the rights of citizens?
3. How can governments and other actors collaborate effectively with social media companies and other stakeholders to promote transparency and accountability in digital diplomacy?
4. How can governments adapt their crisis communication strategies to account for the unique challenges and opportunities of digital diplomacy?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper draws on a range of theories from different disciplines to inform the research questions and provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of digital diplomacy and crisis communication in a digital age. However, the following theories were considered particularly relevant – network theory, trust theory, crisis management theory, policy networks theory, digital diplomacy, crisis communication, public trust, misinformation and disinformation theory, digital sovereignty theory, and many more. From all the stated theories indicated above, crisis communication theory and digital diplomacy were chosen to substantiate the study. In terms of the interplay of these theories, the paper examined how digital diplomacy and crisis communication interact in a digital age, with a particular focus on the roles of governments, social media companies, and other stakeholders in shaping these processes.

The paper also considered how governments used digital tools and platforms for diplomacy, including the extent to which they are effective in building trust and credibility with foreign audiences. More importantly, it further considered how social media companies shape the

communication environment, including their policies and practices related to mis-information and dis-information, and their relationships with governments and civil society organisations.

Digital Diplomacy Theory

Digital diplomacy can be traced to the rapid spread of digital technologies in the 21st century and the resulting transformation of international relations. The proliferation of social media, smartphones, and other digital platforms has created new opportunities for diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy (Philip, 2011). In recent years, scholars and practitioners have increasingly focused on the role of digital technologies in international relations, including their use in diplomacy and public diplomacy. Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies to engage with foreign public, communicate with other governments, and promote national interests (Matthias & Kilian, 2017).

Theoretical approaches to digital diplomacy have evolved rapidly in response to the changing digital landscape. Against this background, networked public diplomacy emphasises the role of social media and other digital platforms in enabling networked communication and engagement between governments and foreign publics (Shaun, 2014). Also, algorithmic diplomacy examines the ways in which algorithms and other computational processes shape and influence diplomatic communication and engagement (Marike, 2020). More so, digital platform diplomacy focuses on the role of digital platforms, such as social media, messaging apps, and online forums, in shaping digital diplomacy practices. However, digital diplomacy can be particularly effective in engaging with younger generations, who are more likely to use digital technologies and to be influenced by social media and other online platforms. This can as well be used to monitor and analyse international trends and developments, providing governments with valuable data and insights for informed decision-making in foreign policy.

Moreover, digital technologies can help to level the playing field between smaller, less powerful countries and larger, more powerful countries to use digital technologies to promote their interests and engage with international audiences. It can be used to enhance cooperation and coordination between governments and non-state actors, such as civil society organisations and private sector entities, in addressing global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and cyber-crime (Roubachevsky, 2017).

Review of Literature

This literature review on digital diplomacy in the age of social media: challenges and opportunities for crisis communication, explores several key issues and themes. The focus of social media or online social network services is to build online communities of people who share common or similar interests and/or activities, or who have interest in reconnoitring the interests and activities of others (Afolaranmi, 2020). The rise of social media and other digital platforms has led to a shift from traditional, top-down public diplomacy to a more networked and participatory form of public diplomacy, often referred to as "digital public diplomacy" (Melissen, 2005) and Chatzky (2010). The role of social media platforms (Savic & Sahovic, 2014), has been debated to the extent to which social media platforms are shaping diplomatic engagement and public opinion. Some scholars argued that social media platforms have democratised diplomacy, enabling governments and non-state actors to engage directly with foreign publics (Vujovic, 2016). Additionally, scholars have explored the use of algorithms and other computational processes in shaping diplomatic engagement, particularly in the

context of social media platforms. Algorithms can be used to curate and target content, filter information, and shape public opinion. The rise of digital diplomacy has enabled non-state actors, such as civil society organisations and private corporations, to engage in diplomacy and shape public opinion on international issues.

Small (2014) and Riordan (2013) have differently examined the impact of digital diplomacy on international relations. According to them, they argued that digital diplomacy has contributed to the fragmentation of the international system, as governments and non-state actors increasingly communicate directly with foreign publics rather than through traditional diplomatic channels. According to Small (2014), digital diplomacy has also contributed to the globalisation of political communication, as social media platforms enable governments and non-state actors to reach global audiences and engage in cross-border dialogue. However, several literature on digital diplomacy and social media have also examined the role of digital diplomacy in different regions and countries. Wang and Zhao (2015) have explored China's use of social media platforms such as "WeChat" and "Weibo" for public diplomacy and crisis communication, particularly in the context of the South China Sea dispute. Likewise, Abok (2015) observed the growing interest in the role of digital diplomacy in African countries, particularly in terms of promoting development, strengthening democracy, and combating terrorism.

More importantly, the empirical literature on digital diplomacy and social media for crisis communication has revealed several key insights such as the effectiveness of digital diplomacy in achieving specific diplomatic objectives. This may include promoting national culture, raising awareness of international issues, and enhancing public opinion (Bin, 2019). More specifically, Guttormsen (2018) also observed the use of specific social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in digital diplomacy, exploring factors such as content strategy, audience engagement, and platform choice. Additionally, several studies have explored the role of stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, media outlets, and private corporations, in digital diplomacy, examining factors such as networked governance and public-private partnerships (Knight & Bucher, 2016). Again, several studies have assessed the cultural dimensions of digital diplomacy, exploring factors such as language, cultural norms, and national identity in shaping the effectiveness and impact of digital diplomacy (Ignatieva & Arhin, 2016).

Fagan (2020) has explored the impact of dis-information and mis-information on digital diplomacy, examining factors such as propaganda, botnets, and conspiracy theories. Collier, Cunha and Troesch (2020) also examined the role of trust and credibility in digital diplomacy, exploring factors such as source credibility, message consistency, and platform transparency. Similarly, several studies have explored the use of strategic communication in digital diplomacy, examining factors such as message framing, narrative construction, and propaganda techniques (Guttormsen, 2018). Fagan (2020) assessed the use of diplomatic language in social media, using factors such as politeness, hedging, and the role of emojis in diplomatic communication. Also, Collier *et al.* (2020) have explored the use of hashtags and metrics in digital diplomacy, examining factors such as hashtag campaigns, hashtag adoption, and social media analytics.

In recent years, the advent of social media has brought significant changes to crisis communication, both for better and for worse. On the one hand, social media has allowed for the rapid dissemination of information and enabled crisis responders to reach a wider audience

more quickly and easily. On the other hand, the prevalence of mis-information and the speed at which it can spread has made crisis communication more challenging (Afolaranmi, 2023). These challenges have been debated variously by scholars to include mis-information and fake news. The spread of mis-information and fake news can complicate crisis response efforts and hinder effective communication with the public (Gentile, 2020). More so, social media can amplify negative sentiment and cause rumours and unverified information to spread quickly, fuelling public anger and distrust (Castiglione & Macnamara, 2020).

The pressure to respond quickly to crisis situations on social media can lead to hasty and inaccurate communication, undermining the effectiveness of crisis response efforts (Kshatriya & Mazumdar, 2017). However, the decentralised nature of social media means that crisis responders have limited control over the dissemination and reception of information, making it difficult to manage public perceptions and expectations (Seely, 2018). These challenges underscore the need for crisis responders to develop effective strategies for using social media in crisis communication, such as building strong relationships with stakeholders, employing fact-checking mechanisms, and utilising data-driven communication tactics.

Based on the preceding literature review, several gaps in the existing scholarship on digital diplomacy and social media have been identified. Firstly, the majority of existing literature on digital diplomacy and social media focuses on Western nations, with limited attention paid to the experiences of developing countries, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Secondly, the existing literature has focused primarily on digital diplomacy practices of governments and diplomats, with limited attention paid to the role of non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, private corporations, and social movements. Lastly, the existing literature has largely been focused on international relations and communication studies, with limited attention paid to the perspectives of other disciplines, such as law, sociology, and political science.

In summary, the literature review conducted thus far suggests that digital diplomacy and social media have emerged as a significant and rapidly evolving area of international relations, public diplomacy, and communication struggles. While the literature has provided valuable insights into the use of social media platforms, communication channels, and objectives of digital diplomacy, several gaps remain, including a lack of attention to regional diversity, non-state actors, multi-disciplinary perspectives, longitudinal analysis, comparative analysis, and methodological diversity. To address these gaps and advance the understanding of digital diplomacy and social media, several possible research directions have been identified such as conducting case studies of developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to understand the specific challenges and opportunities facing digital diplomacy in these regions. Also, there is a need to investigate the role of non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, private corporations, and social movements, in digital diplomacy.

Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis communication theory has evolved in response to the increasing need for organisations, governments, and other stakeholders to effectively manage and respond to crises in the modern, digital age. The theory draws on concepts and principles from a variety of disciplines, including public relations, risk communication, and crisis management. This theory emphasises the importance of effective communication strategies in responding to crises, including the timely dissemination of accurate information, the use of multiple communication channels, and the

need for consistent messaging across different stakeholder groups (Coombs, 2012). Crisis communication theory has several key components. Among these include, preparedness, transparency, rapid response, emotional intelligence, social media, stakeholder management, and a host of others (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012).

Additionally, components of crisis communication theory also include emotional intelligence, social media, stakeholder management, and many more. Understanding the emotions and reactions of different stakeholders is important in crisis communication, as it enables organisations to tailor their communication strategies to meet the needs of different audiences. In addition, social media platforms are increasingly important in crisis communication, as they provide a platform for organisations to engage directly with stakeholders and manage their reputation in real time. More importantly, effective crisis communication requires the management of different stakeholder groups, including employees, customers, shareholders, regulators, and the media. Crisis communication theory in practice can as well include some steps such as monitoring, response, and evaluation, among several others (Benoit, 1997).

However, it is required of organisations to be prepared to respond to crises on social media platforms, including monitoring social media for crisis-related discussions, engaging with stakeholders on social media, and using social media to disseminate crisis-related information. Crisis communication is closely linked to reputation management, as organisations must manage their reputation in the aftermath of a crisis to minimise reputational damage and rebuild trust with stakeholders. Likewise, effective crisis communication requires strong leadership, as leaders must provide clear guidance and direction to staff and stakeholders during a crisis. Organisations should also provide crisis communication training to staff to ensure they are prepared to respond effectively to crises; and more significantly, organisations are expected to use crisis communication metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of their communication strategies and identify areas for improvement (Coombs, 2012).

Methodology

The study focused specifically on the Nigerian context, using a combination of purposive and random sampling techniques to select participants from the government officials. These include senior level officials in the Nigerian government responsible for digital diplomacy and crisis communication, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Emergency (NEMA), and the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC). Also, a representative sample of Nigerian citizens, including social media users and those who are less familiar with digital technologies, from different regions and socio-economic backgrounds of the country were considered in the study. In terms of sampling techniques, the study used a combination of purposive sampling of government officials, using government directories or other sources to identify and select relevant officials.

More so, random digit dialling technique was used to select a representative sample of the Nigerian citizens. However, a variety of demographic and socio-economic criteria were used to ensure a diverse sample of participants, including age, gender, location, and socio-economic status. For the purpose of triangulating data and validating findings, the study conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, media professionals, and social media influencers in Nigeria. The sample population size consists of approximately 10 government officials, including senior-level officials from relevant departments and agencies, as well as mid-level officials. Also, a sample

of approximately 100 citizens, including social media users and those who are less familiar with digital technologies, while a sample of approximately 20 representatives from major social media companies operating in Nigeria, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were selected. Data were analysed using thematic analysis of interview data, with the use of techniques such as grounded theory and personnel constant comparison to identify key themes and patterns in the data. Moreover, inductive coding of focus group discussion data was explored, using open coding and axial coding techniques to identify new and emerging themes related to digital diplomacy and crisis communication in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

Summary of Findings from Literature Review, Focus Group Discussions, and Expert Interviews, on Gender, Age, and Regional Representation in Nigerian Diplomacy

Table 1: Literature Review

Theme	Findings
Gender diversity	Remains a major challenge in Nigerian digital diplomacy, diplomacy, with women representing only 20% of digital diplomacy personnel. Women are still under-represented in Nigerian digital diplomacy, despite their important contributions to the field.
Age	A statistic from the literature review was found to be "Young digital diplomats make up 20% of the total population of digital diplomats in Nigeria." A discrimination is a barrier to the participation of young people in digital diplomacy, with many entry-level positions requiring several years of experience.
Communication Channels	A finding from "cross-platform" engagement, including both traditional and digital media, is essential for effective crisis communication.
Digital diplomacy challenges	The proliferation of mis-information and fake news poses a significant challenge to crisis communication on social media.
Technology trends	The use of artificial intelligence and machine learning for crisis communication is becoming increasingly common in digital diplomacy.
Regional differences	Regional differences in access to digital technologies, education, and economic opportunities create barriers to regional cooperation and effective digital diplomacy.
The use of digital technologies	When used in crisis communication, it is effective only when combined with traditional communication channels and community engagement strategies.

Digital diplomacy	Increasingly influenced by non-state actors, including private sector companies, civil society organisations, and individuals, creating new challenges for government agencies.
Proliferation of mis-information	During crisis situations is a significant challenge for crisis communication, requiring new strategies and protocols for information verification and dissemination. and fake news on social media
Digital technologies for surveillance and targeted messaging	Raises ethical and privacy concerns that must be addressed to maintain public trust and respect for human rights.
Innovative approaches	These include crowdsourcing and digital story-telling, can be effective in engaging diverse stakeholders and promoting a deeper understanding of complex issues.
Transnational, cultural, and social trends	Digital diplomacy is increasingly influenced by transnational, cultural and social trends, including memes, viral videos, and social media campaigns, requiring new approaches to language, content, and messaging.
Ability to analyse and respond To public sentiment on social Media	A critical skill for crisis communicators in the age of digital diplomacy.
Digital skills	Training in digital communication, data analysis Management is essential for effective digital diplomacy.

Table 2: Focused Group Discussions

Theme	Findings
Diverse perspective	A quote from Focused Group Discussions says "We need to ensure that all voices are heard in Nigerian digital diplomacy, regardless of gender, age, or region."
Inclusivity	A quote from a Focused Group Discussion "we need to ensure that our digital diplomacy efforts reflect the diversity of Nigerian society and represent all regions equally."
Regional identity	Participants reported a strong sense of regional identity and pride, but also expressed frustration with the of collaboration and representation in national digital diplomacy initiatives.

Professional development	Young participants expressed concern about the lack of opportunities for professional development and career advancement in digital diplomacy, particularly for those living outside of major cities.
Challenges of language and cultural barriers	Participants noted the challenges of language barriers and cultural differences in digital diplomacy, particularly in regards to communicating with international audiences and responding to crises in real-time.
Barriers to entry and Advancement	Female participants reported facing barriers to entry and in digital diplomacy, including sexist attitudes and limited support for work-life balance and family responsibilities.
Transparency and Accountability	Participants identified the need for greater transparency and accountability in digital diplomacy, particularly in regards to government messaging and the use of social media for crisis communication.
Use of digital technologies	Participants reported that the use of digital technologies in crisis communication can have unintended consequences, including the spread of mis-information and negative stereotypes.

Table 3: Interviews with Experts/Civil Society Organisation (CSO)

Theme	Findings
International engagement	A quote from an expert interview "Nigerian can strengthen its international reputation by fostering digital partnerships with other countries of the world."
Lack of diversity	This reflects a broader lack of representation and inclusion In Nigerian society, which must be addressed through targeted interventions and cultural change.
Access to networks, resources, and opportunities	"Young digital diplomats face significant challenges in terms of gaining access to networks, resources, and opportunities, which can limit their ability to contribute effectively to digital diplomacy initiatives."
Cross-regional cooperation	Hindered by a lack of coordination and investment, as well as historical and cultural tensions that limit trust and Understanding.

Capacity building and skills development	These are essential for effective digital diplomacy, particularly in areas such as digital literacy, strategic communication, and data analysis.
Collaboration and coordination Between government and agencies, NGOs, and private sector actors	Essential for effective digital diplomacy, particularly in crisis situations where rapid and effective communica-tion are crucial.
International engagement and Cross-cultural understanding	Essential components of digital diplomacy, requiring the development of effective strategies for communicating with diverse audiences and navigating geo-political tensions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on the findings from the literature review, focus group discussions, and expert/civil society organisation interviews, it is clear that digital diplomacy in Nigeria faces a range of challenges related to diversity, inclusivity, and effectiveness. Some key themes and insights that emerge from the data indicate that women are under-represented in Nigerian digital diplomacy, facing barriers to entry and advancement. Strategies to address this issue should focus on promoting gender equality, supporting work-life balance, and increasing female representation in digital diplomacy initiatives. Young digital diplomats face significant challenges in terms of gaining access to networks, resources, and opportunities, limiting their ability to contribute to digital diplomacy efforts. Strategies to address this issue should focus on providing mentorship, training, and opportunities for career advancement. However, regional diversity in access to digital technologies, education, and economic opportunities create barriers to effective digital diplomacy and regional cooperation. Strategies to address this issue should focus on promoting cross-regional collaboration, building trust, and addressing historical and cultural tensions.

Moreover, the use of social media in digital diplomacy has both benefits and challenges. Strategies to enhance the effectiveness of digital diplomacy should focus on fact-checking and verification of information, building capacity and skills in digital communication and data analysis, and fostering coordination and collaboration between stakeholders. Effective digital diplomacy requires the ability to communicate with diverse audiences, navigate geo-political tensions, and build partnerships with other countries and organisations. Strategies to enhance international engagement should focus on cultural awareness, strategic messaging, and data-driven analysis. Similarly, civil society organisations play an important role in promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in digital diplomacy. Strategies to strengthen the role of civil society should focus on engaging stakeholders in the development and implementation of digital diplomacy initiatives, building capacity and skills in digital advocacy, and fostering collaboration between government agencies and NGOs.

Based on these findings, recommendations for enhancing digital diplomacy in Nigeria should focus on promoting diversity and inclusivity, enhancing effectiveness and transparency,

building capacity and skills, fostering coordination and collaboration, and strengthening the role of civil society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified a range of challenges and opportunities for enhancing digital diplomacy in Nigeria. Digital diplomacy in Nigeria is characterised by a lack of gender, age, and regional diversity, which limits its effectiveness and inclusivity. The use of social media in digital diplomacy is both a challenge and an opportunity, requiring new strategies for crisis communication and mis-information management. It also helps in capacity building and skills development, cross-regional collaboration, and the involvement of civil society are essential components of effective digital diplomacy. However, the study has provided insights into the challenges and opportunities of digital diplomacy in Nigeria. While the field of diplomacy is still evolving and requires further research and analysis, the findings of the study have suggested several areas for improvement, including promoting diversity and inclusivity in diplomacy initiatives, with a focus on gender, age, and regional representation; enhancing the effectiveness of social media in crisis communication and mis-information management; building capacity and skills among digital diplomats and civil society organisations; and fostering cross-regional cooperation and international engagement through digital technologies.

While the study has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of digital diplomacy in Nigeria context, it is not without its limitations. However, the paper is limited based on its selection bias as the paper relied on expert interviews, focus group discussions, and a literature review, which may have introduced selection bias. The perspectives of experts and civil society organisations may not reflect the experiences of all stakeholders in digital diplomacy. More so, the findings of the paper are specific to the context of Nigeria, and may not be applicable to other countries or regions across the globe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations have been made to enhance digital diplomacy in Nigeria. These are stated below:

1. It is necessary for the Nigerian government to develop and implement a national strategy for digital diplomacy that incorporates diversity and inclusivity goals, with specific targets for gender, age, and, regional representation;
2. Nigerian government should create programmes for mentorship, training, and skill-building for young digital diplomats, particularly those from under-represented groups or regions;
3. Establish cross-regional digital diplomacy networks and platforms to facilitate knowledge-sharing and collaboration;
4. The government should develop guidelines and standards for crisis communication on social media, including protocols for fact-checking and verification, messaging, and engagement with stakeholders; and
5. To strengthen partnerships with international organisations to promote digital diplomacy for development and peace.

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