Digital Diplomacy in the 21st Century: The Transformative Role of Social Media Platforms in Public Engagement

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Abstract. In today's digital epoch, the confluence of politics, public engagement, and technology is pronounced, with social media platforms playing a transformative role in political discourse and diplomacy. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology rooted in the "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power" theoretical framework, this study systematically explores extant literature from databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on digital diplomacy, soft power, and public diplomacy. Findings reveal the democratizing potential of the internet and platforms like Twitter in collective action, with social media emerging as a central tool for information dissemination, strategic diplomatic engagement, and crisis communication. However, alongside these benefits, challenges, including the spread of disinformation, are evident. Situated within the broader academic discourse on diplomacy and international relations, the research underscores the dynamic shifts introduced by digital platforms in diplomatic practices. While traditional diplomacy retains its significance, the digital realm is redefining engagement and influence mechanisms. The study acknowledges inherent limitations, such as potential oversight of platform-specific nuances and evolving geopolitical contexts. Given the rapid evolution of the digital landscape, there's a pressing need for continued research focusing on individual platform dynamics, algorithmic implications, and diverse geopolitical contexts in e-diplomacy.

Keywords: social media, digital public diplomacy, public engagement.

1 Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, the intersection of politics, public engagement, and technology has never been more pronounced. The rise of social media platforms has not only redefined interpersonal communication but has also brought about profound implications for political discourse, mobilization, and the broader realm of public diplomacy. The ability of these platforms to transcend geographical boundaries, democratize information dissemination, and amplify voices has made them central actors in the modern political arena.

Studies like those conducted by [1] and [2] have posited on the democratizing potential of the internet, particularly its capability to either normalize or equalize inter-party competition. On the other hand, research on movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Indignados [3], Milktea Alliance [4] and Black Lives Matter [5] have underscored the role of platforms like Twitter in mobilizing collective action. Furthermore, the Arab Spring — a wave of protests and uprisings in the Middle East — epitomized the might of social media in challenging and overturning established political regimes [6][7].

However, the narrative is not solely positive. The 2016 US Presidential Election brought to the fore the challenges posed by these platforms, notably the spread of disinformation and the potential manipulation of public opinion [8][9]. During the Covid 19 Pandemic, there was also a lot of misleading and false information circulating through social media to spread unfounded concerns and hatred [10]. Such dichotomies highlight the complex and multifaceted roles social media platforms play in the political landscape.

As nations grapple with these new realities, there is a growing imperative to understand the broader implications of social media on diplomacy, international relations, and public engagement. While extant literature provides insights into individual facets of this phenomenon, there is a discernible gap in holistic studies that encompass the entirety of these implications. This research seeks to address this lacuna, aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of social media in shaping diplomatic practices in the 21st century.

Over the past decade, the burgeoning role of digital communication tools, especially social media, has led to significant transformations across several sectors, including diplomacy. The subsequent review aims to grasp the roles played by social media platforms in the evolving landscape of diplomatic practices. Additionally, it seeks to explore areas that remain under-researched. Several literatures regarding social media in diplomacy found three main topics: research on the relation between social media and diplomatic engagement, the benefits of social media in diplomacy, and the influence of social media on transformation and the future of diplomacy.

[1][6] realize that the use of social media on a domestic scale can involve a more comprehensive public because of social media's reach. [1] explored the impact of the Internet on inter-party competition, suggesting that both major and minor party benefit from online platforms for election campaigning. This observation indicates the potential of digital platforms in levelling the diplomatic playing field, offering smaller nations a voice on the global stage. [6] found that social media platforms were instrumental during the Arab Spring in shaping political debates. Such platforms facilitate communication and play a pivotal role in framing diplomatic narratives.

[11][12] believe that social media has the positive side on diplomacy, namely as an effective and cheap communication tool in public diplomacy. However, on the other hand, social media also has a negative impact. Image-making tool for leaders and diplomats, cyber threats, misinterpretation, and judgment, anonymity and hacking are negative sides of social media in diplomacy. [13] calls it as the dual-edged nature of social media. The ability of social media to shape narratives and influence perceptions sometimes produces positive and negatives perceptions because narratives on social media can also deliver the opposite meaning. [13] depicted the dual-edged nature of social media in using social media by radical movements. He provides a unique perspective on the dual-edged nature of social media. The paper demonstrates how social media platforms, particularly in Central Asia, are vulnerable to radical ideologies. However, they also hold potential as tools to counter radical movements, protecting the youth from risks associated with radical recruitment and manipulations. While social media platforms have undeniably impacted diplomatic engagement, they also present vulnerabilities to address for effective diplomatic practices.

[14] assessed the influence of social media on real-world voting behavior in an experiment involving 61 million people. Their findings suggest that social media platforms can indirectly and directly impact political decisions, reaffirming the potential of these platforms in shaping diplomatic outcomes. [15][16] underlines the challenges of discerning truth from falsehood on social media. Given that reliable information is pivotal to diplomacy, this study emphasizes the potential pitfalls of relying heavily on social media for diplomatic communications. The study

by [17] introduces a novel approach to identifying radical opinions in hate group web forums using social media analytics.

While existing literature has extensively explored the multifaceted roles of social media in diplomacy, encompassing information dissemination, strategic engagement, and crisis communication, there appears to be a gap in understanding the nuanced effects of these platforms on diplomatic practices holistically. [18][19] [20] and others have showcased specific instances and platforms where social media has been pivotal in shaping a country's image or furthering foreign policy objectives. Similarly, insights from [21][22] work touch upon the strategic differences in platform utility for diverse diplomatic goals. Furthermore, the case of Ukraine's use of Twitter during the Russian invasion crisis exemplifies the potential of these platforms in nation-building and crisis communication. However, what remains underexplored is a comprehensive analysis of how these isolated instances shape the broader landscape of global diplomatic interactions on social media. The question arises: How are countries adapting and integrating these platforms into their overarching diplomatic strategies and what are the emerging best practices or pitfalls in this digital age of diplomacy?

2 Method

In exploring the research question of how countries are adapting and integrating digital platforms into their overarching diplomatic strategies, and pinpointing the emerging best practices or pitfalls in this digital age of diplomacy, we utilize a Literature Review methodology. Literature reviews involve an extensive exploration and critique of existing literature on a particular topic to identify gaps, debates, and consensus in the existing research [23]. This approach enables a broad understanding of the topic, providing a comprehensive overview rather than a focussed synthesis of evidence.

The study is underpinned by the theoretical framework of "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." This concept posits that nations can achieve greater influence through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion. In our current era, awash with information, the true challenge lies in capturing and maintaining an audience's attention. Countries that are adept at discerning valuable insights amidst the vast expanse of information, and then articulating their values and policies with clarity and conviction, position themselves to harness significant advantages in the global arena. Public diplomacy, an essential mechanism for deploying soft power, is structured into three critical dimensions: information, communication, and culture. The information dimension focuses on disseminating accurate and timely details to international audiences. Communication emphasizes the need for dialogue, geared towards understanding and addressing the concerns and perspectives of foreign entities. Meanwhile, the cultural dimension revolves around promoting a nation's cultural values, traditions, and policies on the global stage. It's worth noting that for soft power to be truly effective, nations must steer clear of policies that come across as self-centered or arrogantly framed. Such strategies can diminish a country's soft power appeal.

Regarding the Literature Review procedure, it is designed to provide an exhaustive and critical exploration of existing literature. The process commences with a scoping phase, during which a preliminary literature search is conducted on prominent databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using keywords related to digital diplomacy, soft power, and public diplomacy. This is succeeded by a review phase, wherein titles and abstracts are perused to identify relevant studies, which are then examined in full detail. Instead of setting strict

eligibility criteria, we aim to incorporate a wide range of articles that provide varied perspectives and insights on the topic. During the data extraction phase, pertinent data points from these studies are extracted, such as the digital platform under consideration, the focal country, outcomes of the digital diplomacy strategy, and any discerned best practices or pitfalls. Finally, in the synthesis phase, the collected data is analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and potential literature gaps. These insights will then be discussed and contextualized within the "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power" framework.

By intertwining the principles of "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power" with a meticulous Literature Review, our research aims to present a comprehensive perspective on how nations are leveraging digital platforms in their diplomatic endeavors, highlighting the victories and challenges of this digital age.

3   Results and Discussion

The results presented fall seamlessly within the contours of the "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy" theory. This theory underscores the importance of soft power, the subtle art of influencing others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercive means [25]. In an age rife with information, capturing and maintaining attention is the real game-changer. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the theory's tenets, demonstrating how countries wield soft power through digital platforms to shape international narratives.

3.1 Information Dissemination

[26] sees that the dynamics in diplomatic relations have changed. The boundaries between national and international political activities are becoming blurred because today's paramount issues have crossed these boundaries. Diplomatic policy can no longer be interpreted from a linear bureaucratic viewpoint because its structure is more network-like than a hermetic and inflexible hierarchy. The evolution of global communications is one of the main reasons for the loss of state monopoly over diplomatic affairs. On the one hand, the delivery of news and information regarding international affairs is no longer the exclusive authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The institutional aspects of government communications have been undermined by the emergence of alternative sources of information that – often – are more trusted by journalists and the general public. [26] proposed that digital public diplomacy could be a critical factor in diplomatic activities. Digital public diplomacy could be a crucial factor in public diplomacy based on four variables: the first variable is the functional aspect, namely how digital tools and social media influence how diplomacy operates and its work area. Variables are regulations and values because digitalization brings modernization and innovation, increases the efficiency of public services, and creates the impression that diplomacy is an active international actor. The third variable is analytics, which includes various criteria for evaluating digital public diplomacy results, such as digital agenda, relationship with traditional media, expansion of digital presence, and digital conversation generation. The fourth variable is institutional trends, which reflect changes in how citizens interact with their foreign ministries, embassies, and consulates.

In practice, several foreign ministries activate their Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts to reach a broader public to disseminate information regarding the direction of foreign policy, their policies on specific international issues and other information related to the interests

of diaspora administration. [27] suspects that many parties monitor the American government's social media to obtain information. [28] found that the concern among the Australian public increased when China used social media for public communication and propaganda. On the one hand, social media has become an effective communication tool for the Chinese diaspora and their relationships with the local population. Still, China's global economic power and increasing digital disruption have created a complicated communication environment. Thus, Chinese-language digital media in Australia poses complex challenges.

In conflict situations, fast communication becomes essential for the state. And social media can be an effective communication tool in cases where direct contact is problematic [29]. Social media lowers the barriers to entry for individuals and groups seeking to communicate and increases the speed and spread of information. However, this has consequences: the competition between various news outlets to be the first to report stories. Those who can be the first to report the account can create incentives to not thoroughly vet information. Third, social media builds strategic interaction and constant adaptation as each side shifts its communication technology and tactics [30].

The ability of social media to provide two-way communication is another critical consideration for countries or parties in conflict. Mutual understanding as a goal of public diplomacy [31][32][33][34] is facilitated by social media, which has features for providing comments and reposting messages. Through this feature, each participant can give their opinion and provide comments to each other on the information obtained. From the digital dialogue that occurs, just like two-way communication in the real world, mutual understanding can grow in digital public spaces.

By using social media, governments can disseminate information more efficiently, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and speaking directly to domestic and global audiences. The emphasis on two-way conversations on Twitter, as noted by [35][36] further underscores the communication dimension of the theory, suggesting that engaging in dialogues helps understand and address foreign publics' concerns and perspectives. This direct engagement, exemplified by the Indonesian Missions' use of Instagram [37], encapsulates the cultural dimension, promoting a country's values, ethos, and policies to foreign audiences.

3.2 Strategic Engagement, Relationship Building, and Foreign Policy Promotion

Beyond mere communication, social media offers a platform for strategic engagement, allowing for relationship building and the promotion of foreign policy objectives. The shift in public diplomacy due to the rise of social media networks is evident, as they disrupt traditional practices by enabling real-time, direct engagement [38]. Such platforms necessitate clear strategies for outreach, as embassies often grapple with distinguishing between platforms like Facebook, which is more aligned with cultural diplomacy, and Twitter, which leans towards advocacy [38]. [39] demonstrated the importance of platforms like Twitter for public diplomacy communication, while [22] sheds light on Weibo's utility in e-diplomacy, emphasizing the need for strategic planning and effective communication to maximize these platforms' potential.

The findings by [40] highlight the transformation of public diplomacy in the age of real-time social media engagement. This mirrors the theory's emphasis on the importance of setting a clear agenda and tailoring messaging to reinforce central themes or promote specific policies. The distinction between platforms like Facebook for cultural diplomacy and Twitter for advocacy is a testament to the theory's assertion that effective communication strategies are crucial for harnessing soft power. The strategic use of platforms, as demonstrated by [39][41],

aligns with the theory's argument that successful soft power implementation requires meticulous planning.

Strategic engagement could be arranged by building trust and, positives images. The development of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have created an open conversation space where government officials can communicate directly with the public and confident individuals. These two-way communication channels allow individuals to influence their governments in previously impossible ways. Governments, and ultimately, their foreign policies, benefit from interacting with these publics because they can better understand the public's views on specific issues. States and non-state actors occupy the open conversation space, which opens up opportunities for broader relations [42][43][44]. Openness and the presence of non-state actors in discussions of international issues encourage increased public trust in the direction of state policy (Duncombe) because a democratic digital public space creates a policy-making process that prioritizes the interests of society in general [45][46][47].

Social media diplomacy also being associated with digital diplomacy [48][49] or digital public diplomacy [50][51][52] because, it has the same function as public diplomacy in establishing networks and building goodwill and trust. Social media can spread news with a broad reach and high intensity. In a short time, social media can disseminate information to netizens worldwide so that the public knows the latest information about an international issue. Social media also has the facility to attract public attention with hashtags [53][54] or adding links to related news [55] and specific jargon/sentences [56] Intense efforts and engaging narratives attract public attention, and the public has an idea or an actual image in his mind.

Digital diplomacy research claims that social media's ability to build positives images and influence perceptions is in line with the goals of public diplomacy. found that Twitter restored Europe's image in the face of Covid 19. Referring to 12,935 tweets by 8 European Union authorities from 2020-202, the European Union succeeded in restoring the functions and values of the European Union. During the acute phase of the crisis, diplomats were less spontaneous, as their content depended more on their superiors, but in later stages, they produced proportionately more original content. The EU's performance on Twitter has become more competent over time, and second, there is a potential correlation between narrative and networking: better-defined strategic narratives indicate better digital diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Israel has improved its image through digital diplomacy by focusing its discourse on efforts to humanize the Israeli-occupied territories and eliminate stereotypes of the occupying entity. By using diverse languages and people who are skilled at communicating via social media, believes that Israel has succeeded in branding itself as a democratic country and has succeeded in building better relations with neighbouring countries. Likewise, thinks that the nuclear agreement between the P5+1 (Iran and the 5 permanent UN Security Council members) resulted from digital diplomacy efforts carried out by Iran and P5 diplomats. Communication results in the exchange of information and fosters trust and positive perceptions of Iran's foreign policy. Ultimately, the P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.

3.3 Crisis Communication and Nation Building

In times of crisis, social media has proven invaluable for nations to control narratives, build national identity, and communicate effectively with both their citizens and the international community. During the Russian invasion crisis, Ukraine and Kyiv's official Twitter accounts leveraged social media for crisis communication, public diplomacy, and nation-building. This study reinforced the idea that platforms like Twitter can shape international perceptions and foster national unity. However, the double-edged sword of social media was evident in the study

on the conflict over Ukraine, where the platform was also used for propaganda warfare, affecting diplomatic relations and public perceptions.

The Ukrainian case during the Russian invasion offers a vivid example of the theory in action. By leveraging Twitter, Ukraine managed to shape international perceptions, echoing the theory's claim that countries can gain an advantage in international relations by effectively communicating their values. The dual-use of social media, as evidenced by its use in propaganda warfare during the Ukraine conflict, serves as a reminder of the theory's warning against narrowly self-serving or arrogantly presented policies. Such approaches can be counterproductive, diminishing a country's soft power appeal.

Within the framework of nation-building, social media can be a proactive monitoring tool because it provides valuable insight to diplomatic institutions regarding emerging extremist narratives. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, diplomatic institutions must remain agile and adaptive, seizing opportunities and overcoming the challenges that come with them. Siga believes that social media can foster nationalism, and Ganesh thinks that social media can be a tool for terrorism-. Related to this, conducted research using NLP to detect types of content that contain Hate Speech or other extremist narratives. Detection through NPL aims to detect and prevent the spread of terrorist ideology through social media.

In sum, the findings resonate with the "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy" theory, showcasing the pivotal role of digital platforms in contemporary diplomacy. Countries that master the art of digital public diplomacy, as outlined by the theory, stand to gain substantial advantages in the global arena, underscoring the importance of soft power in this digital age.

4   Conclusion

This research embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the role of social media platforms in shaping diplomatic practices in the 21st century, particularly against the backdrop of the "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy" theory. Our findings underscore the transformative influence of social media in diplomacy. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged as pivotal tools, enabling nations to engage directly with diverse audiences, shape international narratives, and wield soft power more effectively than ever before. However, alongside the benefits, these platforms also present challenges, particularly in the realm of disinformation and propaganda.

Within the broader academic discourse on diplomacy and international relations, our research contributes by elucidating the multifaceted roles of social media. It supports the evolving understanding that while traditional diplomacy remains relevant, digital platforms are introducing dynamic shifts in how countries communicate, engage, and influence. The "Soft Power and Public Diplomacy" theory, which emphasizes the importance of attraction and persuasion in international relations, finds renewed relevance in this digital age, with social media serving as a crucial tool in the soft power arsenal.

However, it's imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While our research provides insights into the positive aspects of social media in diplomacy, it does not delve deeply into the nuances of each platform or the varied geopolitical contexts in which they operate. Additionally, our reliance on existing literature might not capture the most recent developments or evolving strategies of nations in the realm of e-diplomacy. Counterarguments emphasize that while social media offers democratizing potential, it can also amplify existing power dynamics, giving undue advantage to nations with superior digital infrastructure and capabilities.

There's a compelling need for further research that offers a more granular analysis of individual platforms, studies the interplay of social media with traditional diplomatic tools, and examines the digital strategies of nations in diverse geopolitical contexts. Research could also delve into the evolving algorithms of these platforms and their implications for information dissemination and public engagement in the diplomatic realm. As the digital landscape continues its rapid evolution, keeping abreast with its implications for diplomacy will remain an academic priority.

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