
The Impact of Digital Diplomacy on International Relations: A Case Study of Global Leaders' Social Media Use

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Abstract

This study explores the transformative impact of digital diplomacy on contemporary international relations through a focused case study of global leaders' social media usage. As digital platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram become increasingly integral to political communication, world leaders are now engaging in direct, unmediated dialogue with international publics, thereby bypassing traditional diplomatic institutions and reshaping geopolitical discourse. This paper investigates how digital diplomacy influences soft power projection, crisis communication, public diplomacy, and strategic signaling in global affairs. Utilizing a qualitative content analysis methodology, the research examines the digital behaviors of selected political leaders namely, Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Ukraine), Joe Biden (United States), Narendra Modi (India), and Emmanuel Macron (France) between 2022 and 2024. The study is grounded in theoretical frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2004), constructivism (Adler, 1997), and public diplomacy theory, providing a comprehensive lens through which to understand the strategic narratives embedded in social media discourse. Findings reveal that global leaders utilize digital platforms for persona construction, narrative framing, alliance reinforcement, and diplomatic signaling. Moreover, three case-based reviews, the Israel-Gaza war, Ukraine-Russia conflict, and U.S.-China tariff war demonstrate how digital diplomacy operates under real-time geopolitical stress. The paper concludes that digital diplomacy has become a central component of international relations, altering traditional conceptions of power, diplomacy, and influence. The research underscores the need for updated diplomatic protocols and ethical guidelines as states navigate this evolving communication environment. This study contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on digital governance, foreign policy, and international communication.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, International Relations, Public Diplomacy, Social Media, Soft Power.

1. Introduction

The advent of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of international relations, giving rise to new tools and strategies that states and leaders employ to communicate, negotiate, and exert influence. One of the most significant developments in this arena is the emergence of digital diplomacy, which refers to the use of digital platforms particularly social media

to conduct diplomatic engagement and foreign policy communication (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). As global leaders increasingly turn to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to issue statements, shape narratives, and communicate directly with foreign publics, the boundaries between formal diplomatic processes and informal digital interactions have become increasingly blurred.

Digital diplomacy not only enhances the speed and reach of diplomatic messages but also introduces a new layer of public visibility and interactivity that can influence bilateral and multilateral relationships. Scholars have noted that social media allows leaders to bypass traditional diplomatic channels, engage in real-time crisis communication, and shape global perceptions through personal branding (Manor, 2019). For example, leaders like Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy and India's Narendra Modi have effectively used Twitter to rally international support and communicate national narratives on the global stage. This shift reflects a broader transformation in the practice of diplomacy, where soft power and digital engagement are increasingly central to national strategy (Pamment, 2016).

This paper examines the impact of digital diplomacy on international relations by analyzing the social media use of selected global leaders. Through a qualitative case study approach, it explores how digital platforms are employed to influence foreign policy outcomes, manage diplomatic crises, and construct international legitimacy. By situating this analysis within broader theoretical debates on diplomacy and communication, the study seeks to assess the implications of digital engagement for the future of international relations.

2. Literature Review

The field of diplomacy has undergone significant evolution with the advent of the digital age, compelling scholars to reassess traditional paradigms and incorporate the influence of technology in international relations. At the forefront of this transformation is digital diplomacy, a concept broadly defined as the use of digital technologies and social media by state and non-state actors to achieve diplomatic objectives (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). The rise of platforms such as

Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enabled global leaders to engage in direct, real-time communication with both domestic and international audiences, thereby shifting the dynamics of diplomatic engagement.

Numerous empirical studies have explored how digital diplomacy is operationalized by global leaders. For instance, Manor (2019) examined how leaders craft digital personas to engage with international audiences and manage crises. His analysis of various heads of state demonstrates that social media has become a critical tool for identity construction, especially in times of conflict or diplomatic tension.

X (Twitter), in particular, has emerged as a platform of choice for many political figures due to its immediacy and global reach. Metzgar, Belsky, and Sahly (2020) found that world leaders use Twitter not only to communicate official policies but also to perform affective diplomacy building emotional connections with audiences through personal tone and informal language. Similarly, Kampf, Manor, and Segev (2015) argue that the interactive nature of social media alters traditional diplomatic hierarchies, enabling a more participatory form of engagement that challenges the exclusivity of formal diplomatic channels. Despite the opportunities offered by digital diplomacy, scholars have also highlighted significant challenges. These include the risks of misinformation, loss of diplomatic decorum, and the oversimplification of complex policy issues into 280-character soundbites (Bjola & Pamment, 2018). Additionally, the informal nature of digital communication can lead to diplomatic missteps, as seen in various Twitter controversies involving political leaders. The rise of digital diplomacy reflects a decentralization of diplomatic authority, where individual political leaders now operate as autonomous diplomatic actors

alongside traditional foreign ministries. Social media enables leaders to bypass formal diplomatic channels and communicate directly with foreign publics, institutions, and counterparts, thereby reshaping traditional hierarchies and protocols of international diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This democratization of communication introduces both opportunities for engagement and risks of miscommunication or diplomatic escalation.

Through digital diplomacy, leaders participate in constructing and contesting international norms. By publicly advocating for human rights, climate justice, or multilateralism, leaders help shape normative expectations in the global order. Conversely, digitally mediated confrontations or nationalist rhetoric can also undermine existing norms, contributing to polarization and uncertainty in international relations (Adler, 1997). Thus, digital diplomacy becomes both a site of consensus-building and contestation.

The real-time nature of social media fosters a new mode of crisis diplomacy, wherein immediate public responses are expected during international incidents, natural disasters, or geopolitical conflicts (Seib, 2012). Leaders' tweets can serve as strategic signals of condemnation, support, alliance, or neutrality often with immediate diplomatic consequences. This acceleration reduces the latency of traditional diplomatic processes and can complicate behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The growing prominence of digital diplomacy underscores a shift in the global communication ecology, where social media platforms are now central sites of geopolitical engagement. These platforms function as contested spaces of influence between state and non-state actors, where narrative dominance can translate into strategic advantage. This

trend compels international relations scholars and practitioners to adopt more interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating media studies, information science, and political psychology into diplomatic analysis.

Theoretical framework

Public diplomacy involves the direct communication of governments with foreign publics to influence their perceptions and attitudes in ways that advance the foreign policy goals of the state (Cull, 2009). Traditionally carried out through cultural programs, broadcasting, and educational exchanges, public diplomacy has been redefined in the digital era to include social media engagement. Leaders now act as both diplomats and digital influencers, utilizing platforms such as Twitter to address global audiences directly, often bypassing traditional media and diplomatic intermediaries (Melissen, 2005). This evolution reflects the shift from monologic, state-controlled messaging to dialogic and participatory forms of communication that characterize new public diplomacy.

Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power which is the ability of a country to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, is central to understanding the strategic use of social media by global leaders. Social media allows leaders to cultivate national images, values, and cultural narratives that can enhance a country's appeal and legitimacy. In the context of digital diplomacy, soft power is manifested in the tone, content, and aesthetic of social media messaging. Leaders like Canada's Justin Trudeau and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, for instance, have built international reputations through digitally mediated displays of empathy, inclusivity, and moral leadership (Hallams, 2020).

Constructivism in international relations posits that global politics is socially constructed through shared norms, beliefs, and identities rather than solely material

capabilities (Wendt, 1999). In the realm of digital diplomacy, this means that leaders' social media narratives play a role in shaping international identities and redefining diplomatic norms. The repeated performance of certain roles such as peacemaker, humanitarian, or visionary through digital platforms contributes to the global perception of a state's identity. Constructivist scholars emphasize how digital communication technologies offer new arenas for norm contestation and identity construction (Adler, 1997).

These three theoretical frameworks, public diplomacy, soft power, and constructivism offer complementary insights into how digital platforms are reshaping the landscape of international diplomacy.

Case studies

The Israel-Gaza War: Digital Diplomacy and Conflict Narratives

The Israel-Gaza conflict, especially during its recent escalations (e.g., October 2023), has underscored the importance of digital diplomacy in framing conflict narratives and mobilizing international opinion. Leaders from both sides, as well as international actors, used social media to justify actions, highlight humanitarian crises, and call for international support or condemnation. The Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have routinely used Twitter and other platforms to emphasize self-defense, counterterrorism, and the threat posed by Hamas, often accompanied by videos, real-time updates, and emotional appeals (Barakat, 2023).

Conversely, leaders and officials representing Palestinian interests, as well as pro-Palestinian global leaders, leveraged social media to draw attention to civilian casualties, infrastructure damage, and appeals for ceasefire and international intervention. Digital diplomacy here acts as a battleground for legitimacy, where competing state and non-state actors seek to shape the

international narrative and diplomatic pressure. The Israel-Gaza case shows that digital diplomacy democratizes conflict communication, allowing smaller actors and non-state representatives to challenge dominant geopolitical narratives (Fisher & Eccleston, 2022).

The Ukraine-Russia War: Social Media as Strategic Warfare

The Ukraine-Russia war has become a defining case of digital diplomacy, with President Volodymyr Zelensky emerging as a global symbol of resistance largely through his social media presence. Zelensky's real-time updates, appeals to foreign parliaments, and emotionally charged videos have not only rallied international support but also facilitated the imposition of sanctions and military aid packages (Manor, 2022). In contrast, the Russian state has attempted to counteract these efforts through its own digital propaganda, though with diminished credibility following widespread disinformation (Bjola & Pamment, 2023).

The strategic use of social media by Ukrainian leadership transformed digital diplomacy into an active component of war strategy, combining soft power with real-time policy influence. Digital diplomacy enabled Ukraine to build alliances, pressure international bodies like the EU and NATO, and sustain global attention over an extended conflict. This case highlights how digital diplomacy functions as a force multiplier in asymmetric conflicts, where narrative dominance can compensate for military disparities.

The U.S.-China Tariff War: Digital Signaling in Economic Diplomacy

During the height of the U.S.-China tariff war (2018–2020), digital diplomacy took on a strategic signaling role. Former U.S. President Donald Trump frequently used Twitter to announce tariffs, comment on negotiations, and publicly pressure China, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels.

These tweets often caused fluctuations in global markets and influenced the tempo of bilateral talks (Fang & Wu, 2021). In response, Chinese state-affiliated diplomats and media outlets adopted a more measured tone, using platforms like Twitter and WeChat to emphasize China's openness to dialogue and present itself as a responsible economic actor.

This bilateral digital interaction demonstrates the growing trend of economic diplomacy conducted in the public digital sphere, where leaders directly communicate policy positions to global stakeholders, including markets, businesses, and foreign governments. The U.S.-China case illustrates the use of digital diplomacy for economic signaling, where timing, tone, and transparency (or lack thereof) influence negotiation dynamics and global economic confidence.

Table 01, synthesizes key findings from case studies on Israel/Gaza, Ukraine/Russia, and US/China conflicts, comparing how digital diplomacy influences international relations.

Aspect	Israel/Gaza War	Ukraine/Russia War	US/China War	Tariff	Comparative Implications
Primary platforms	Twitter (X), Instagram, Telegram	Twitter, YouTube, Telegram	Twitter, Weibo, Official Statements		Twitter dominates; authoritarian states (China) prefer controlled platforms (Weibo).
Key actors	Israeli govt. (Netanyahu), Hamas, pro-Palestine activists	Zelensky (Ukraine), Putin (Russia), NATO	U.S. Presidents (Trump/Biden), Chinese Wolf Warriors (e.g., Zhao Lijian)		State vs. non-state actors shape narratives asymmetrically.
Strategies	- Hasbara (pro-Israel propaganda) - Grassroots Palestinian advocacy	• Zelensky's viral appeals • Russian disinformation (deepfakes, bots)	• Trump's tariff tweets • China's economic signaling		Democratic leaders use emotional appeals; autocrats deploy disinformation.
Impact on	Polarized global	Strong Western	Market volatility;		Social media

Synthesis and Comparative Implications

Across all three cases, digital diplomacy has shown itself to be more than a tool for public relations; it is a strategic domain in international relations with real-time, material consequences. Whether in kinetic conflict (Ukraine-Russia, Israel-Gaza) or economic rivalry (U.S.-China), leaders' social media use functions as; a narrative weapon to mobilize support or condemnation, a diplomatic accelerant to shape rapid responses, and a platform for performative statecraft that shapes perceptions globally. Furthermore, these cases reveal the blurring of public and private diplomacy, the rise of leader-centric foreign policy, and the growing influence of digital audiences on policy decisions.

public opinion	discourse; algorithmic bias against Palestinian voices	support for Ukraine; skepticism of Russian narratives	nationalist rhetoric in both nations	amplifies polarization but can mobilize international solidarity.
Diplomatic outcomes	Limited de-escalation due to entrenched narratives	Increased military aid to Ukraine; sanctions on Russia	Trade negotiations influenced by public posturing	Real-time diplomacy speeds up responses but risks miscalculation.
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misinformation • Shadow-banning of activists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepfake propaganda • Cyberattacks on infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic espionage • Misinterpretation of signals 	Regulation lags behind technological misuse; ethical dilemmas in content moderation.
Theoretical framework	Constructivism (competing narratives)	Hybrid Warfare Theory (digital + kinetic warfare)	Soft Power (Nye, 2004) and Economic Statecraft	Digital diplomacy blends traditional IR theories with new media dynamics.

Table: 01

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to explore the impact of digital diplomacy on international relations, with particular attention to global leaders' use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The qualitative approach is suitable for this research as it allows for in-depth analysis of communication patterns, diplomatic signaling, and audience reception phenomena that are inherently interpretive and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The study utilizes a multiple case study design, focusing on selected global leaders known for their active and strategic social media engagement,

namely, the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of India, and the President of Ukraine. These cases were purposively selected due to their prominent roles in global affairs and frequent use of digital platforms in diplomatic contexts. The comparative nature of the case studies allows for cross-cultural and geopolitical insights into how digital diplomacy shapes bilateral and multilateral relationships.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected through content analysis of official social media posts (tweets, videos, statements) over a defined 12-month period (e.g., January–December 2024). Posts will be selected based on relevance to key diplomatic events (e.g., summits, conflicts, international crises). Additionally, semi-

structured interviews with foreign affairs analysts, diplomatic correspondents, and social media experts will be conducted to gain expert perspectives.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying key narratives, discursive strategies, and diplomatic signals embedded in the digital content. NVivo software will assist in coding and organizing themes such as soft power projection, public diplomacy, crisis response, and strategic communication. Triangulation with interview data will enhance validity.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study involves public content and expert interviews, ethical considerations will include obtaining informed consent from interviewees, ensuring anonymity where requested, and adhering to data privacy regulations.

Limitations of the Methodology

The study is limited by its reliance on publicly available content, which may not fully capture behind-the-scenes diplomatic intentions. Furthermore, the focus on high-profile leaders may overlook digital diplomacy efforts by less visible but influential state actors.

4. Result and Discussion

Discussion of Major Findings

The analysis of global leaders' Twitter activity between 2022 and 2024 reveals critical insights into how digital diplomacy functions as both a strategic communication tool and a performative practice in international relations. The findings suggest that leaders use social media not only to disseminate policy but also to construct narratives, manage crises, and shape their country's global identity. Three major thematic patterns emerged: persona construction and narrative framing, crisis communication and real-time diplomacy, and strategic signaling and alliance-building.

One of the most significant findings is the deliberate use of social media to construct political personas that align with diplomatic objectives. Leaders such as Volodymyr Zelenskyy used Twitter to frame themselves as wartime communicators, consistently invoking themes of resilience, democracy, and international solidarity. His posts often included emotive appeals, imagery of resistance, and direct addresses to foreign publics and institutions, contributing to Ukraine's soft power during the Russian invasion (Manor, 2019).

Similarly, Narendra Modi employed narrative framing that emphasized India's role as a spiritual and developmental leader. His tweets often combined cultural motifs with calls for multilateral cooperation, particularly in forums like G20 and BRICS. These digital performances exemplify soft power in action, reinforcing national branding strategies in line with Nye's (2004) theoretical model.

A second key theme is the use of social media for real-time crisis diplomacy. The leaders analyzed frequently used Twitter to respond to international crises ranging from natural disasters and terror attacks to diplomatic escalations demonstrating immediacy and emotional engagement. Joe Biden, for instance, utilized social media to articulate U.S. positions on the Ukraine conflict, reaffirm alliances with NATO, and announce humanitarian or military aid packages.

This kind of public, real-time diplomacy not only accelerates the pace of international communication but also allows for public signaling to domestic and international audiences alike (Bjola & Pamment, 2018). It reshapes diplomatic timing and visibility, contributing to what Seib (2012) calls "real-time diplomacy," where the traditional delay of formal responses is replaced by instantaneous interaction.

A third major finding is the use of social media for strategic diplomatic signaling and reinforcing alliances. Leaders routinely mention or tag other world leaders, institutions like the United Nations, and events like COP summits to publicly signal alignment or partnership. Emmanuel Macron, for instance, frequently posted multilingual tweets addressing both French and international audiences, projecting France as a proactive and cooperative actor in global governance.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the idea that digital diplomacy is not merely a supplementary communication tool but an evolving arena of international engagement. Leaders' social media use has implications for soft power projection, norm construction, and the shaping of global public opinion. Moreover, the ability to directly influence international discourse and mobilize digital publics challenges traditional diplomatic hierarchies and protocols (Adler, 1997).

Importantly, the findings underscore the need to treat digital diplomacy as both performative and strategic, requiring intentionality, narrative coherence, and adaptability. As international norms continue to evolve in response to new technologies, the digital behaviors of global leaders will play a growing role in influencing both bilateral and multilateral relations.

Gaps in Literature Review

While the scholarly literature on digital diplomacy has grown significantly over the past decade, several critical gaps remain that warrant further investigation particularly concerning the strategic and symbolic use of social media by individual global leaders in shaping international relations.

First, much of the existing research has focused on institutional approaches to digital diplomacy, emphasizing foreign ministries and state-level actors rather than the personalized use of social media

by heads of state and government (Pamment, 2016). Although studies by Bjola and Holmes (2015) and Manor (2019) have acknowledged the agency of leaders, few have provided systematic comparisons of how different leaders construct digital diplomatic personas or engage with foreign publics during crises. Second, there is a lack of cross-cultural and cross-regional analyses. Many digital diplomacy studies are heavily focused on Western leaders and institutions, overlooking how non-Western actors employ social media to advance alternative diplomatic narratives and strategic communication (Zhang & Cameron, 2018). This gap limits our understanding of how digital diplomacy functions in diverse geopolitical and cultural contexts, particularly in emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and Turkey. Third, current literature tends to emphasize quantitative metrics such as follower counts, likes, and retweets as indicators of diplomatic influence, often at the expense of qualitative analysis of content, language, symbolism, and narrative construction (Metzgar et al., 2020). This creates an incomplete picture of how messages are framed and interpreted by international audiences.

Finally, there is limited longitudinal research examining how leaders' digital diplomacy evolves over time or across different phases of political leadership, conflict, or global events. As digital diplomacy is inherently dynamic, shaped by shifting domestic and international conditions, there is a need for research that tracks changes in leaders' social media strategies and their corresponding diplomatic outcomes (Kampf et al., 2015).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This study explored the impact of digital diplomacy on international relations through an in-depth case study of global leaders' social media usage. Drawing on

public diplomacy theory, soft power theory, and constructivism, the research demonstrated that social media platforms particularly X, have become integral tools in the exercise of diplomatic influence and statecraft.

Key findings revealed that global leaders strategically use digital platforms to construct international personas, engage in real-time crisis communication, and signal alliances. These practices are not merely communicative but are deeply embedded in broader efforts to shape perceptions, influence policy narratives, and recalibrate global power dynamics. Leaders such as Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Joe Biden, Narendra Modi, and Emmanuel Macron illustrate varying styles of digital diplomacy that reflect their respective national identities, geopolitical priorities, and communication strategies.

The study also addressed notable gaps in the literature, including the lack of qualitative analysis on narrative framing, the limited focus on non-Western actors, and the under-explored longitudinal evolution of digital diplomacy. As digital platforms continue to disrupt traditional diplomatic norms, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views social media as both a tool and a stage for contemporary international relations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, diplomats, and researchers to more effectively understand and harness the potential of digital diplomacy:

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- i. Ministries of foreign affairs should integrate digital communication training into their diplomatic curricula, emphasizing platform literacy, narrative construction, and crisis management.
 - ii. Global leaders should diversify their content linguistically and culturally to reach and resonate with broader international audiences, particularly in non-Western and underrepresented regions.
 - iii. While leaders' personal social media accounts are powerful, there must be alignment with national diplomatic goals to ensure coherence and consistency in messaging.
 - iv. Governments should focus more on the substance, coherence, and emotional appeal of their digital narratives rather than purely quantitative indicators like likes and retweets.
 - v. Given the immediacy of social media, governments should establish protocols for rapid, coordinated responses to international events, ensuring clarity and credibility.
 - vi. Interactive features such as Q&A sessions, live streams, and polls can enhance diplomatic transparency and foster greater trust with international publics.
 - vii. Regular analysis of online discourse can help diplomats assess the impact of their messaging and adjust strategies based on public and foreign reception.
1. Leaders and their digital teams must uphold ethical standards in online communication, avoiding misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric, or manipulation tactics that could damage diplomatic relations.

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