

Digital Diplomacy: How Technology Is Becoming a Soft Power Tool for Emerging Economies

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2024.5044>

IJMSSSR 2024

VOLUME 6

ISSUE 3 MAY - JUNE

ISSN: 2582 – 0265

Abstract: Digital diplomacy has emerged as a transformative dimension of contemporary international relations, reshaping how states project influence, engage foreign publics, and advance national interests in an increasingly interconnected world. For emerging economies, digital technologies present unprecedented opportunities to overcome traditional diplomatic constraints associated with limited financial resources, restricted geopolitical reach, and historical power asymmetries. Through digital platforms, social media, data-driven communication strategies, and virtual diplomatic infrastructures, states are now able to exercise soft power in ways that were previously inaccessible.

This conceptual review examines digital diplomacy as an evolving instrument of soft power for emerging economies. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from international relations, communication studies, political economy, and development studies published between 2015 and 2024, the paper analyzes how digital tools are reshaping diplomatic practice, public diplomacy, and global image construction. The study explores the strategic functions of digital diplomacy, including narrative framing, international branding, diaspora engagement, economic diplomacy, and crisis communication. It also critically evaluates the structural, technological, and political constraints that limit the effectiveness of digital diplomacy in developing contexts, such as digital divides, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, platform dependence, and information credibility challenges.

The review argues that digital diplomacy offers emerging economies a strategic pathway to amplify voice, visibility, and influence in global affairs, but only when embedded within coherent foreign policy frameworks and supported by institutional capacity, digital literacy, and ethical governance. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how technology is redefining soft power dynamics and provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy development in digital diplomacy.

Keywords: Digital diplomacy; Soft power; Emerging economies; Public diplomacy; Technology and international relations; Digital governance

1. Introduction

1.1 Digital Transformation and the Evolution of Diplomacy

The rapid expansion of digital technologies over the past two decades has profoundly altered the conduct of international relations. Traditional diplomacy, historically characterized by closed-door negotiations, elite state actors, and formal diplomatic channels, has increasingly been supplemented by digital modes of engagement that are faster, more interactive, and publicly visible. The proliferation of social media platforms, digital communication tools, and online information ecosystems has transformed how states communicate with foreign publics, manage international reputations, and pursue strategic interests [1].

This transformation has given rise to the concept of digital diplomacy, which refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to achieve diplomatic objectives. Digital diplomacy encompasses a broad range of activities, including public diplomacy through social media, virtual embassy operations, digital crisis

communication, online cultural exchange, and the strategic use of data analytics to inform foreign policy decisions [2]. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is often restricted to official actors and formal settings, digital diplomacy operates in open, networked environments where state and non-state actors interact continuously.

For emerging economies, digital diplomacy represents a particularly significant development. Historically, diplomatic influence has been closely tied to military strength, economic power, and institutional dominance within the international system. Digital technologies, however, reduce entry barriers and enable states with limited material resources to engage global audiences directly, shape narratives, and enhance their international visibility [3]. As a result, digital diplomacy has become an increasingly important component of soft power strategies among emerging states seeking greater influence in global affairs.

1.2 Soft Power in the Digital Age

The concept of soft power, originally articulated by Nye, refers to a state's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment [4]. Cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy constitute the core sources of soft power. Traditionally, soft power was exercised through cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, international broadcasting, and development assistance. In the digital era, however, these instruments have been reshaped by technology-driven communication ecosystems.

Digital platforms amplify the reach and speed of soft power projection by enabling real-time engagement with global audiences. Governments can now communicate policy positions directly to foreign citizens, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. Social media diplomacy, online campaigns, and digital storytelling have become central tools for shaping international perceptions and national branding [5]. These developments have blurred the boundaries between diplomacy, public relations, and strategic communication.

For emerging economies, digital soft power offers both opportunity and risk. On the one hand, digital tools allow states to showcase cultural heritage, innovation capacity, tourism potential, and development narratives to a global audience at relatively low cost. On the other hand, digital environments are highly competitive and susceptible to misinformation, reputational damage, and geopolitical contestation. The effectiveness of digital diplomacy therefore depends not only on technological access but also on strategic coherence, credibility, and institutional capacity [6].

1.3 Emerging Economies and the Reconfiguration of Global Influence

Emerging economies occupy an increasingly prominent position in the global political and economic landscape. Countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East have experienced rapid economic growth, demographic expansion, and greater participation in international institutions. Despite these advances, many emerging economies continue to face structural limitations in traditional diplomatic influence, including constrained financial resources, limited diplomatic networks, and historical marginalization in global governance structures [7].

Digital diplomacy provides a potential pathway to mitigate these constraints. Through strategic use of digital platforms, emerging economies can project national narratives, engage diasporas, attract investment, and participate in global discourse without relying exclusively on conventional diplomatic infrastructure. Examples include the use of Twitter diplomacy by foreign ministries, virtual trade missions, online cultural diplomacy initiatives, and digital engagement during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic [8].

However, the ability of emerging economies to leverage digital diplomacy effectively is shaped by uneven digital development, disparities in internet access, and varying levels of institutional readiness. Moreover, reliance on global technology platforms owned by corporations in advanced economies introduces new forms of dependency and vulnerability, raising questions about digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy [9].

1.4 Rationale and Objectives of the Study

Despite the growing scholarly attention devoted to digital diplomacy, the existing literature remains fragmented

and largely concentrated on advanced economies or isolated case studies. As a result, there is limited integrative analysis that examines how digital diplomacy operates as a soft power instrument specifically within emerging economies, or how technological, political, and institutional factors interact to shape its effectiveness in these contexts.

In response to this gap, the present review offers a comprehensive conceptual examination of digital diplomacy as a soft power tool in emerging economies. The study pursues four interrelated objectives. To begin with, it investigates the theoretical foundations linking digital diplomacy and soft power within the broader landscape of global political communication. It then analyzes the strategic functions of digital diplomacy in emerging economies, with particular attention to public engagement, nation branding, and economic diplomacy. Subsequently, the review explores the structural and operational constraints that limit digital diplomatic efforts in developing contexts. Finally, it advances an analytical framework designed to clarify how emerging economies can more effectively leverage digital technologies to enhance diplomatic influence.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Digital Diplomacy and Soft Power

2.1 Conceptualizing Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies, platforms, and communication tools by state and non-state actors to advance foreign policy objectives and manage international relationships. It represents an evolution of traditional diplomacy rather than a complete departure from it, integrating long-standing diplomatic goals with new modes of engagement enabled by the internet, social media, and data-driven communication systems [10].

At its core, digital diplomacy encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including official government communication via social media, online public diplomacy campaigns, digital consular services, virtual summits, and the strategic use of online narratives to shape international opinion. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which operates largely through closed channels and elite negotiations, digital diplomacy functions in an open, participatory, and highly networked environment where information circulates rapidly and audiences are no longer passive recipients [11].

The interactive nature of digital platforms fundamentally alters the relationship between states and global publics. Citizens, civil society organizations, diasporas, journalists, and even automated actors such as bots now participate in diplomatic discourse, influencing perceptions of states and shaping international agendas. This shift has redefined diplomacy as a multidirectional process rather than a unidirectional transmission of state interests [12].

For emerging economies, digital diplomacy offers a means of bypassing traditional diplomatic hierarchies. Whereas classical diplomacy often privileges states with extensive diplomatic networks and financial resources, digital diplomacy lowers entry barriers by enabling states to communicate directly with global audiences at relatively low cost. This democratization of diplomatic communication is central to its appeal as a soft power tool for developing and middle-income countries.

2.2 Soft Power Theory in the Digital Era

Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye, refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy rather than coercion or economic inducement [13]. Traditional sources of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policy credibility. In the digital era, these sources are increasingly mediated through communication technologies that amplify visibility and accelerate information flows.

Digitalization has transformed the mechanisms through which soft power is generated and exercised. Cultural products are now disseminated globally through streaming platforms and social media. Political values are communicated through online discourse, official statements, and digital campaigns. Foreign policy actions are instantly scrutinized, interpreted, and contested in digital spaces [14]. As a result, soft power has become more dynamic, contested, and vulnerable to reputational shocks.

For emerging economies, digital platforms provide opportunities to reshape global perceptions that have historically been dominated by narratives produced in the Global North. Through strategic storytelling, visual diplomacy, and digital engagement, states can project alternative images that emphasize innovation, cultural richness, political reform, or economic opportunity. However, digital soft power is fragile; credibility, consistency, and authenticity are essential for sustained influence [15].

Digital soft power also differs from its traditional counterpart in that it relies heavily on engagement rather than broadcasting. Influence is no longer achieved solely through dissemination of messages but through interaction, responsiveness, and the ability to participate meaningfully in global conversations. This participatory dimension reshapes how legitimacy and trust are constructed in international relations.

2.3 Theoretical Linkages Between Technology and Diplomacy

The relationship between technology and diplomacy has long been recognized in international relations theory. From the telegraph to satellite communication, technological innovations have historically reshaped diplomatic practice by altering the speed, scale, and scope of communication [16]. Digital technologies represent the latest phase in this evolution, introducing unprecedented levels of connectivity, data availability, and real-time engagement.

From a constructivist perspective, digital diplomacy influences how identities, norms, and interests are constructed in global politics. Online interactions contribute to the social construction of national images and shape perceptions of legitimacy, modernity, and credibility [17]. Digital platforms also facilitate norm diffusion, enabling emerging economies to participate in global debates on development, governance, climate change, and human rights.

From a realist perspective, digital diplomacy can be understood as an instrument of strategic competition. States seek to leverage digital tools to enhance influence, counter adversaries, and protect national interests in an increasingly contested information environment. Cyber diplomacy, information warfare, and digital propaganda reflect this strategic dimension, particularly in contexts of geopolitical rivalry [18].

Liberal institutionalist perspectives emphasize the role of digital diplomacy in fostering cooperation, transparency, and multilateral engagement. Digital platforms facilitate dialogue among states, international organizations, and non-state actors, potentially strengthening global governance mechanisms and enabling more inclusive participation by developing countries [19].

Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight that digital diplomacy is not merely a technical innovation but a transformation of diplomatic power relations shaped by political, social, and technological forces.

2.4 Digital Public Diplomacy and Networked Influence

Digital diplomacy is closely linked to the concept of digital public diplomacy, which focuses on engagement with foreign publics rather than state elites alone. Digital public diplomacy leverages social media, websites, and interactive platforms to communicate national narratives, promote cultural exchange, and build long-term relationships with international audiences [20].

The networked nature of digital communication challenges traditional top-down models of public diplomacy. Influence now emerges through networks of interaction involving diplomats, influencers, journalists, diaspora communities, and ordinary citizens. In this environment, credibility is derived less from official status and more from perceived authenticity, responsiveness, and relevance [21].

For emerging economies, digital public diplomacy offers a means of amplifying voice and visibility in global discourse. Strategic use of social media campaigns, cultural diplomacy initiatives, and digital storytelling can help counter stereotypes, promote national brands, and attract tourism, investment, and partnerships. Successful digital diplomacy campaigns often combine cultural appeal with policy messaging, aligning soft power objectives with national development goals [22].

However, networked diplomacy also exposes states to new vulnerabilities. Negative narratives, misinformation, and reputational crises can spread rapidly, undermining diplomatic efforts. Effective digital diplomacy therefore requires not only content creation but also monitoring, engagement management, and crisis response capabilities.

2.5 Digital Diplomacy and the Changing Nature of Power

The rise of digital diplomacy reflects broader transformations in the nature of power in international relations. Power is increasingly diffuse, relational, and mediated by information flows rather than solely by material capabilities. States no longer monopolize the production of diplomatic narratives; instead, they compete within complex digital ecosystems where influence is shaped by attention, credibility, and network reach [23].

For emerging economies, this shift presents both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, digital platforms reduce dependence on traditional diplomatic infrastructures and enable rapid global engagement. On the other hand, digital power asymmetries persist, as platform ownership, algorithmic control, and technological expertise remain concentrated in a small number of countries and corporations [24].

This duality underscores the importance of strategic digital capacity-building. Effective digital diplomacy requires not only access to technology but also institutional coordination, skilled personnel, and coherent messaging aligned with national interests. Without these elements, digital engagement risks becoming fragmented, reactive, or ineffective.

2.6 Implications for Emerging Economies

For emerging economies, the theoretical foundations of digital diplomacy point to several important implications. Digital diplomacy should be conceptualized as a long-term strategic investment rather than a short-term communication instrument, as sustainable influence depends on consistency, credibility, and alignment with broader foreign policy objectives [25]. When approached in this manner, digital engagement becomes an integral component of statecraft rather than a reactive messaging tool.

In addition, digital diplomacy needs to be embedded within national development strategies. Areas such as economic diplomacy, investment promotion, tourism branding, and diaspora engagement stand to benefit significantly from coordinated digital initiatives. When aligned with domestic development priorities, digital diplomacy can contribute meaningfully to economic growth, international visibility, and strategic positioning.

At the same time, emerging economies must carefully navigate the ethical and political challenges associated with digital engagement. Issues related to data privacy, information integrity, and digital inequality require deliberate policy attention, as failure to address them can erode public trust and weaken soft power outcomes.

3. Digital Diplomacy as a Soft Power Instrument in Emerging Economies

3.1 Reframing Soft Power in the Context of Emerging Economies

Soft power has traditionally been associated with culturally dominant or economically advanced states that possess globally attractive values, media industries, and educational institutions. Emerging economies, by contrast, have often been positioned as soft power consumers rather than producers. Digital diplomacy has begun to disrupt this hierarchy by offering alternative channels through which states can shape narratives, project identity, and engage international audiences without relying on conventional power resources [26].

For emerging economies, soft power is increasingly constructed through visibility, storytelling, and symbolic representation rather than material dominance. Digital platforms enable states to project narratives of development, innovation, cultural richness, and political transformation, thereby reshaping how they are perceived globally. This is particularly important for countries that have historically been framed through deficit-oriented narratives related to poverty, conflict, or underdevelopment [27].

Digital diplomacy thus functions as a strategic equalizer. It allows emerging economies to compete in the global marketplace of ideas by leveraging creativity, authenticity, and engagement rather than military or economic coercion. When effectively deployed, digital diplomacy enhances reputational capital, strengthens diplomatic relationships, and supports broader foreign policy objectives.

3.2 Strategic Functions of Digital Diplomacy in Emerging Economies

Digital diplomacy serves multiple strategic functions that collectively contribute to soft power accumulation. One of the most significant is international image construction. Through official social media accounts, digital campaigns, and online cultural initiatives, states can curate narratives that emphasize national achievements, heritage, innovation, and resilience. These narratives help counter negative stereotypes and reposition emerging economies as credible global actors [28].

Another critical function is public engagement. Digital diplomacy enables governments to communicate directly with foreign publics, bypassing traditional diplomatic intermediaries and international media filters. This direct engagement fosters transparency, builds trust, and allows states to respond rapidly to global events or misinformation. For emerging economies with limited access to international media platforms, this direct communication channel is particularly valuable [29].

Economic diplomacy is also increasingly mediated through digital platforms. Governments use digital tools to promote trade, attract foreign direct investment, and market tourism destinations. Virtual trade missions, online investment forums, and digital branding campaigns have become common, particularly in the wake of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic [30]. These initiatives allow emerging economies to remain visible and competitive in global markets despite logistical and financial constraints.

Diaspora engagement represents another important dimension of digital soft power. Digital platforms enable states to maintain continuous relationships with expatriate communities, mobilize diaspora resources, and strengthen cultural and economic ties. For many emerging economies, diasporas serve as informal ambassadors who amplify national narratives and contribute to development through remittances, investment, and advocacy [31].

3.3 Social Media Diplomacy and Narrative Power

Social media has become the most visible and influential tool of digital diplomacy. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and increasingly TikTok allow diplomatic actors to communicate in real time with global audiences. Ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, and political leaders now maintain active online presences that function as extensions of formal diplomacy [32].

For emerging economies, social media diplomacy offers a cost-effective means of achieving global reach. Strategic use of hashtags, multimedia content, and interactive messaging enables states to participate in international conversations and shape narratives around global events. Successful digital diplomacy campaigns often blend policy communication with cultural storytelling, humor, and visual symbolism to enhance relatability and engagement [33].

Narrative power is central to this process. Digital diplomacy allows states to frame their identities in ways that resonate with global audiences, emphasizing themes such as innovation, resilience, sustainability, or cultural heritage. These narratives contribute to the construction of national brand identities that influence tourism, investment, and diplomatic partnerships [34].

However, narrative competition in digital spaces is intense. Emerging economies must contend with misinformation, disinformation, and competing geopolitical narratives that can undermine credibility. Effective digital diplomacy therefore requires strategic coherence, consistent messaging, and institutional capacity to monitor and respond to online discourse.

3.4 Digital Diplomacy in Economic and Developmental Engagement

Digital diplomacy has become an important tool for advancing economic and development objectives. Emerging economies increasingly use digital platforms to promote trade opportunities, attract foreign investment, and showcase innovation ecosystems. Online investment summits, digital trade fairs, and virtual business forums have expanded access to international markets, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises [35].

In addition, digital diplomacy supports development cooperation by facilitating knowledge exchange, technical assistance, and international partnerships. Governments use digital channels to communicate development priorities, attract donor support, and coordinate with multilateral organizations. This has become especially significant in areas such as climate change, public health, and digital transformation, where global collaboration is essential [36].

Digital diplomacy also enables emerging economies to participate more actively in global policy debates. Through online engagement with international organizations, think tanks, and civil society actors, states can articulate policy positions and contribute to agenda-setting processes that were previously dominated by advanced economies. This enhanced participation strengthens diplomatic agency and reinforces soft power credentials.

3.5 Crisis Communication and Reputation Management

One of the most critical applications of digital diplomacy is crisis communication. Global crises such as pandemics, political unrest, natural disasters, or security incidents place intense pressure on state communication systems. Digital platforms allow governments to disseminate timely information, counter misinformation, and reassure international audiences [37].

For emerging economies, effective digital crisis communication can mitigate reputational damage and reinforce perceptions of competence and transparency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many developing countries used digital platforms to share public health updates, coordinate international assistance, and communicate policy responses to global audiences [38].

However, crisis communication also exposes vulnerabilities. Inconsistent messaging, lack of coordination, or misinformation can rapidly erode trust. Digital diplomacy therefore requires not only technological capacity but also institutional coordination, strategic planning, and communication expertise.

3.6 Limitations and Risks of Digital Soft Power

Despite its potential, digital diplomacy is not a panacea for the structural limitations faced by emerging economies. Several constraints limit its effectiveness as a soft power tool. Digital divides, both within and between countries, restrict access to online platforms and limit audience reach. Unequal internet penetration, low digital literacy, and infrastructure gaps reduce the inclusivity and impact of digital engagement [39].

Platform dependency represents another significant challenge. Most global digital platforms are owned and regulated by corporations based in advanced economies, creating asymmetries in control, data governance, and content moderation. Emerging economies often lack influence over platform policies, exposing them to algorithmic bias and information vulnerability [40].

Cybersecurity risks, including hacking, disinformation campaigns, and data breaches, further complicate digital diplomacy efforts. States with limited cyber capabilities may struggle to protect digital assets and maintain credibility in the face of information warfare.

Finally, digital diplomacy requires sustained institutional investment. Without trained personnel, clear strategies, and inter-agency coordination, digital initiatives risk becoming fragmented, inconsistent, or symbolic rather than impactful.

3.7 Synthesis and Implications

Digital diplomacy has become a central instrument through which emerging economies pursue soft power in the contemporary international system. By leveraging digital platforms, states can enhance visibility, shape narratives, engage global publics, and advance economic and diplomatic objectives. The relative accessibility of digital tools offers opportunities to overcome traditional power asymmetries and participate more actively in global affairs. However, the effectiveness of digital diplomacy depends on strategic coherence, institutional capacity, and ethical governance. Without these foundations, digital engagement may fail to translate into sustained influence or credibility. For emerging economies, the challenge lies not only in adopting digital tools but in embedding them within broader foreign policy strategies that prioritize long-term relationship-building, transparency, and trust.

4. Institutional, Technological, and Political Constraints on Digital Diplomacy in Emerging Economies

4.1 Institutional Capacity and Governance Limitations

One of the most significant barriers to effective digital diplomacy in emerging economies is limited institutional capacity. While digital tools are relatively accessible, their strategic use requires well-developed bureaucratic structures, inter-agency coordination, and skilled personnel. In many emerging economies, foreign ministries and diplomatic services continue to operate within traditional administrative models that are ill-equipped to manage the speed, openness, and complexity of digital communication environments [41].

Digital diplomacy demands specialized competencies, including strategic communication, data analytics, crisis management, and platform-specific engagement. However, many diplomatic institutions lack dedicated digital units or adequately trained staff to manage these functions. As a result, digital initiatives are often ad hoc, reactive, or dependent on individual diplomats rather than embedded within institutional frameworks [42].

Fragmentation of responsibility further weakens digital diplomacy efforts. In some contexts, digital engagement is dispersed across ministries of foreign affairs, information, technology, and culture without clear coordination mechanisms. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent messaging, duplication of efforts, and limited strategic coherence. Without institutional integration, digital diplomacy risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

4.2 Digital Infrastructure and Technological Inequality

Technological capacity plays a decisive role in shaping the effectiveness of digital diplomacy. Although internet access has expanded significantly in many emerging economies, substantial disparities persist in terms of connectivity, bandwidth, affordability, and digital literacy. These inequalities constrain both the production and reception of digital diplomatic content [43].

Limited digital infrastructure affects not only external communication but also internal coordination within diplomatic institutions. Weak connectivity, outdated systems, and insufficient cybersecurity infrastructure undermine the ability of foreign ministries to operate effectively in digital environments. This technological gap is particularly pronounced in least developed countries and fragile states, where digital diplomacy competes with basic governance priorities.

Moreover, the global digital ecosystem is characterized by asymmetrical power relations. Major digital platforms are predominantly owned and governed by corporations based in advanced economies, giving them significant control over algorithms, content moderation, and data flows. Emerging economies often lack leverage over these platforms, making their digital diplomacy efforts vulnerable to external regulation and opaque decision-making processes [44].

4.3 Political Constraints and Governance Challenges

Political context significantly influences the scope and effectiveness of digital diplomacy. In some emerging economies, political instability, authoritarian governance, or limited freedom of expression constrains digital

engagement. Governments may view open digital communication as a threat to domestic control, leading to restrictions on online discourse or heavy-handed regulation of digital platforms [45].

Such constraints undermine the credibility of digital diplomacy abroad. Soft power relies on perceived legitimacy and openness; restrictive digital environments can erode trust and weaken international appeal. Foreign audiences are increasingly attentive to issues such as internet freedom, media independence, and digital rights, which shape perceptions of state credibility and governance quality [46].

Additionally, politicization of digital communication can compromise diplomatic effectiveness. When digital platforms are used primarily for propaganda or domestic political messaging, their value as tools of engagement and dialogue diminishes. Sustainable digital diplomacy requires a degree of institutional autonomy, professionalism, and commitment to transparency.

4.4 Cybersecurity and Information Integrity Risks

Digital diplomacy exposes states to a range of cybersecurity threats, including hacking, data breaches, impersonation, and disinformation campaigns. These risks are particularly acute for emerging economies with limited cyber defense capabilities. Diplomatic accounts and communication channels can become targets of cyberattacks aimed at undermining credibility or extracting sensitive information [47].

Information integrity poses an equally significant challenge. The spread of misinformation and disinformation can rapidly distort diplomatic messages and damage national reputations. In highly polarized or contested information environments, false narratives may gain greater visibility than official communications, weakening the effectiveness of digital diplomacy efforts [48].

Managing these risks requires investment in cybersecurity infrastructure, digital literacy training, and inter-agency coordination. However, resource constraints often limit the capacity of emerging economies to respond effectively. As a result, digital diplomacy strategies must balance openness with security considerations, a challenge that continues to evolve as technologies advance.

4.5 Platform Dependency and Digital Sovereignty

A critical structural constraint on digital diplomacy is platform dependency. Most diplomatic engagement occurs on privately owned platforms whose governance structures are outside the control of states. Algorithmic prioritization, content moderation policies, and platform regulations can significantly shape the visibility and reach of diplomatic messages [49].

For emerging economies, this dependency raises concerns about digital sovereignty. Changes in platform policies or geopolitical tensions between platform-owning states and user countries can affect access, visibility, or content moderation practices. Furthermore, reliance on external platforms limits the ability of states to control data flows and protect sensitive information [50].

Some emerging economies have attempted to address this challenge by developing domestic digital platforms or pursuing regional digital cooperation. However, these efforts face significant barriers related to scale, user adoption, and international interoperability. As a result, platform dependency remains a structural constraint on digital diplomacy.

4.6 Human Capital and Skills Gaps

The effectiveness of digital diplomacy depends heavily on human capital. Diplomatic personnel must possess not only traditional diplomatic skills but also competencies in digital communication, strategic messaging, data interpretation, and online engagement. In many emerging economies, training programs have not kept pace with the evolving demands of digital diplomacy [51].

Skill gaps are particularly evident in areas such as social media analytics, content creation, and crisis communication. Diplomatic training institutions often prioritize protocol and negotiation over digital literacy, leaving diplomats underprepared for online engagement. Furthermore, high turnover and limited career incentives for digital specialization hinder the development of sustained expertise [52].

Addressing these gaps requires systematic investment in training, recruitment, and professional development. Partnerships with academic institutions, technology firms, and international organizations can support capacity building, but long-term institutional commitment is essential for meaningful progress.

4.7 Ethical, Legal, and Normative Challenges

Digital diplomacy also raises complex ethical and legal questions. Issues such as data privacy, surveillance, consent, and information manipulation complicate the use of digital tools in diplomatic practice. Emerging economies must navigate these challenges while balancing national interests with international norms and human rights obligations [53].

Legal frameworks governing digital communication are often underdeveloped or fragmented, creating uncertainty around accountability and regulation. This is particularly problematic in cross-border digital engagement, where jurisdictional boundaries are blurred. The absence of clear international norms governing digital diplomacy further complicates regulatory oversight [54].

Normatively, digital diplomacy raises questions about authenticity, transparency, and trust. Excessive reliance on strategic messaging or image management risks undermining credibility if audiences perceive communication as inauthentic or propagandistic. Ethical digital diplomacy therefore requires adherence to principles of accuracy, openness, and respect for diverse perspectives.

4.8 Synthesis: Structural Constraints and Strategic Implications

The constraints facing digital diplomacy in emerging economies are multifaceted and interrelated. Institutional weaknesses, technological inequalities, political limitations, cybersecurity risks, and platform dependency collectively shape the scope and effectiveness of digital engagement. These challenges do not negate the value of digital diplomacy but underscore the need for strategic realism and long-term investment.

For emerging economies, the key challenge lies in transforming digital diplomacy from a reactive communication tool into a coherent component of foreign policy. This requires strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing digital literacy, investing in infrastructure, and developing normative frameworks that promote ethical and effective digital engagement.

5. Strategic Models and Best Practices for Digital Diplomacy in Emerging Economies

5.1 Rationale for Strategic Digital Diplomacy

The effectiveness of digital diplomacy in emerging economies depends not merely on technological adoption but on the strategic integration of digital tools into foreign policy objectives. Without a coherent strategy, digital diplomacy risks becoming fragmented, reactive, or symbolic. A strategic approach ensures that digital engagement supports long-term national interests, reinforces credibility, and contributes meaningfully to soft power accumulation [55].

Strategic digital diplomacy requires alignment between foreign policy priorities, institutional capacity, and communication practices. It also necessitates clarity regarding target audiences, desired outcomes, and performance evaluation mechanisms. Emerging economies that have successfully leveraged digital diplomacy tend to view it not as an auxiliary activity but as a core dimension of modern statecraft [56].

5.2 Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society Approaches

One of the most effective models for digital diplomacy is the whole-of-government approach, which emphasizes coordination across ministries, agencies, and diplomatic missions. Digital engagement is most impactful when foreign ministries collaborate with trade, culture, tourism, technology, and education agencies to deliver coherent national narratives [57].

In emerging economies, fragmented institutional structures often undermine message consistency. Establishing centralized digital diplomacy units or inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms helps align communication strategies and avoid duplication. Such coordination ensures that diplomatic messaging reinforces national development priorities, economic strategies, and international commitments.

A complementary model is the whole-of-society approach, which recognizes the role of non-state actors in shaping national image. Civil society organizations, cultural institutions, academic bodies, private firms, and diaspora communities all contribute to digital narratives. By engaging these actors, governments can amplify reach, enhance authenticity, and build credibility in international communication [58].

5.3 Strategic Communication and Narrative Development

Narrative coherence is central to effective digital diplomacy. Emerging economies must articulate compelling national stories that resonate with international audiences while remaining grounded in domestic realities. Strategic narratives often emphasize themes such as innovation, resilience, cultural richness, sustainability, or economic opportunity, depending on national priorities [59].

Digital storytelling techniques including visual media, short-form videos, interactive content, and multilingual messaging enhance audience engagement and emotional connection. Successful digital diplomacy campaigns are not purely informational; they are designed to evoke interest, empathy, and trust.

Narrative consistency across platforms is equally important. Diplomatic messaging must align with policy actions, domestic governance practices, and international behavior. Inconsistencies between rhetoric and reality can quickly undermine credibility, particularly in the highly transparent digital environment [60].

5.4 Capacity Building and Professionalization of Digital Diplomacy

Human capital development is a cornerstone of effective digital diplomacy. Emerging economies must invest in training diplomats and communication professionals in digital skills, including content creation, data analytics, crisis communication, and audience engagement. Traditional diplomatic training curricula often lag behind technological developments, necessitating targeted capacity-building initiatives [61].

Professionalization also involves establishing career pathways for digital specialists within foreign services. Without institutional recognition and incentives, digital diplomacy risks being marginalized or treated as an auxiliary function. Countries that have institutionalized digital diplomacy through dedicated units, specialized training, and performance evaluation frameworks demonstrate greater consistency and effectiveness [62].

Partnerships with universities, technology firms, and international organizations can support skills development and knowledge exchange. Such collaborations enable emerging economies to access technical expertise while adapting digital strategies to local contexts.

5.5 Leveraging Data and Digital Analytics

Data-driven decision-making is increasingly central to modern diplomacy. Digital platforms generate vast amounts of data that can inform strategy, evaluate impact, and refine messaging. Analytics tools allow diplomats to monitor engagement patterns, audience sentiment, and narrative diffusion in real time [63].

For emerging economies, the strategic use of data enhances efficiency and accountability. By analyzing which messages resonate most with target audiences, governments can optimize content and allocate resources more effectively. Data also supports evidence-based evaluation of digital diplomacy initiatives, moving beyond anecdotal assessments toward measurable outcomes.

However, ethical considerations are critical. Data collection and analysis must respect privacy, transparency, and consent. Overreliance on surveillance-based analytics can undermine trust and raise concerns about digital rights, particularly in sensitive political contexts [64].

5.6 Integrating Digital Diplomacy with Economic and Development Goals

Digital diplomacy is most effective when aligned with broader economic and development strategies. Emerging economies increasingly use digital platforms to promote investment opportunities, tourism, innovation ecosystems, and export industries. These efforts contribute directly to national development objectives while enhancing international visibility [65].

Economic diplomacy initiatives such as virtual trade missions, online investment roadshows, and digital branding campaigns have proven particularly valuable for countries with limited physical diplomatic presence. Digital tools reduce transaction costs and expand access to global markets, benefiting small and medium-sized enterprises and fostering inclusive growth.

Development diplomacy also benefits from digital engagement. Governments can use digital platforms to communicate development priorities, coordinate international assistance, and share best practices. In areas such as climate change, health, and education, digital diplomacy facilitates collaboration and knowledge exchange across borders [66].

5.7 Crisis Management and Adaptive Communication Strategies

A defining feature of digital diplomacy is its role in crisis management. Effective crisis communication requires speed, accuracy, and coherence. Emerging economies that have developed digital response protocols are better positioned to manage reputational risks during political, economic, or humanitarian crises [67].

Best practices include pre-established communication chains, verified official accounts, and real-time monitoring of digital discourse. Transparency and consistency are essential to maintaining credibility, particularly when information is evolving rapidly.

Adaptive communication strategies are equally important. Digital environments are dynamic, and successful diplomacy requires continuous learning and adjustment. Monitoring audience feedback, tracking misinformation trends, and refining messaging allow states to remain responsive and relevant in changing contexts [68].

5.8 Regional and South–South Cooperation in Digital Diplomacy

Emerging economies increasingly benefit from regional and South–South cooperation in digital diplomacy. Shared experiences, similar development challenges, and cultural affinities provide a foundation for collaborative digital initiatives. Regional organizations and multilateral platforms offer opportunities for joint campaigns, capacity building, and knowledge sharing [69].

Such cooperation enhances collective visibility and strengthens bargaining power in global digital governance debates. It also enables resource pooling, reducing the costs associated with digital infrastructure and training. For many emerging economies, regional digital diplomacy represents a pragmatic pathway to amplifying voice and influence on the global stage.

5.9 Synthesis: Toward Sustainable Digital Diplomacy Models

Strategic digital diplomacy in emerging economies requires more than technological adoption. It demands institutional integration, skilled human capital, ethical governance, and alignment with national development objectives. Successful models are characterized by coordination, adaptability, and long-term vision rather than short-term visibility.

By adopting strategic frameworks that emphasize narrative coherence, capacity building, data-driven decision-making, and inclusive engagement, emerging economies can transform digital diplomacy into a sustainable source of soft power. These practices not only enhance international standing but also contribute to domestic development and global cooperation.

6. Digital Diplomacy, Global Power Shifts, and the Future of Soft Power in Emerging Economies

6.1 Digital Diplomacy and the Reconfiguration of Global Power

The rise of digital diplomacy coincides with broader shifts in the global distribution of power. Traditional international relations were shaped by military strength, economic dominance, and institutional control concentrated in a small group of advanced economies. In contrast, the digital era has introduced new pathways through which influence can be exercised, allowing emerging economies to participate more actively in shaping global discourse [70].

Digital technologies have weakened the monopoly of traditional power holders over information flows and agenda-setting. Through online platforms, emerging economies can articulate perspectives that challenge dominant narratives, engage international publics directly, and participate in global debates without relying solely on established diplomatic hierarchies. This shift reflects a broader transformation from hierarchical to networked power structures in global politics [71].

However, this redistribution of influence is uneven. While digital tools lower entry barriers, structural inequalities persist in terms of technological capacity, platform ownership, and information control. As a result, digital diplomacy does not eliminate power asymmetries but reshapes how they are expressed and contested. Emerging economies must therefore navigate a complex landscape in which opportunity and vulnerability coexist.

6.2 Digital Diplomacy and Geopolitical Competition

Digital diplomacy has become increasingly entangled with geopolitical competition. States use digital platforms not only for engagement and cooperation but also for strategic signaling, narrative contestation, and influence operations. In this context, digital diplomacy intersects with information warfare, cyber strategy, and geopolitical rivalry [72].

For emerging economies, this environment presents both risks and opportunities. On one hand, they may become arenas for competing digital narratives advanced by major powers. On the other hand, they can leverage digital diplomacy to assert strategic autonomy, articulate independent foreign policy positions, and avoid alignment with any single geopolitical bloc.

Digital diplomacy also enables emerging economies to participate more actively in multilateral forums and global governance debates. By articulating shared concerns related to development, climate change, and digital equity, they can build coalitions and influence international norms. This collective engagement enhances bargaining power and contributes to a more pluralistic global order [73].

6.3 Digital Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy

As digital diplomacy expands, questions of digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy have become increasingly salient. Digital sovereignty refers to a state's ability to control its digital infrastructure, data flows, and online information environment. For emerging economies, dependence on foreign-owned platforms and technologies poses significant challenges to autonomy and security [74].

Digital diplomacy is constrained when communication channels, algorithms, and data governance structures are externally controlled. This dependency can affect message visibility, content moderation, and access to audiences. It also raises concerns about surveillance, data exploitation, and political leverage by technology-producing states.

In response, some emerging economies have pursued strategies aimed at enhancing digital sovereignty, including investment in domestic digital infrastructure, development of local platforms, and participation in regional digital cooperation initiatives. While these efforts face economic and technical constraints, they reflect a growing recognition that digital diplomacy is inseparable from broader issues of technological governance and national autonomy [75].

6.4 The Role of Digital Diplomacy in Global Governance

Digital diplomacy is increasingly shaping global governance processes. International organizations, multilateral forums, and transnational networks rely heavily on digital communication to coordinate policy, disseminate information, and engage stakeholders. Emerging economies can use digital diplomacy to amplify their voices in these spaces and advocate for more inclusive governance arrangements [76].

In areas such as climate change, public health, digital trade, and sustainable development, digital platforms facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing. During global crises, digital diplomacy enables rapid coordination and collective response, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. For emerging economies, participation in these digital governance processes enhances visibility and strengthens claims to leadership roles in global problem-solving.

However, meaningful participation requires technical expertise, institutional capacity, and sustained engagement. Without these, emerging economies risk being marginalized in digital governance discussions dominated by technologically advanced states and private sector actors.

6.5 Soft Power Sustainability in the Digital Age

Sustaining soft power in the digital era requires more than episodic engagement or viral campaigns. Digital soft power is cumulative and relational, built through consistent behavior, credible communication, and long-term engagement. For emerging economies, sustainability depends on aligning digital diplomacy with domestic governance quality, policy coherence, and international conduct [77].

Reputation in digital spaces is highly sensitive to inconsistency. Contradictions between digital messaging and domestic practices such as restrictions on media freedom or human rights concerns can undermine credibility and weaken soft power gains. Authenticity, transparency, and accountability therefore remain central to effective digital diplomacy.

Moreover, digital audiences are increasingly sophisticated and skeptical. They evaluate states not only on messaging but also on actions, responsiveness, and values. Sustainable digital diplomacy thus requires continuous adaptation, ethical communication, and meaningful engagement rather than one-directional promotion.

6.6 Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Looking forward, several trends are likely to shape the future of digital diplomacy in emerging economies. Artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality are expected to play growing roles in diplomatic communication and public engagement. These technologies offer new possibilities for storytelling, simulation, and audience interaction, but also raise ethical and governance challenges [78].

Another emerging trend is the increasing role of non-state actors in digital diplomacy. Cities, universities, corporations, and civil society organizations are becoming important diplomatic actors in their own right, often operating through digital networks. This pluralization of diplomacy expands opportunities for engagement but also complicates coordination and accountability.

Finally, global debates over digital governance, data regulation, and platform accountability will shape the future operating environment for digital diplomacy. Emerging economies have a strategic interest in participating actively in these debates to ensure that global digital norms reflect diverse perspectives and development priorities [79].

6.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

The evolving landscape of digital diplomacy carries important implications for policymakers in emerging economies. A key priority is the integration of digital diplomacy into national foreign policy strategies rather than its treatment as a supplementary communication function. Clearly articulated objectives, well-defined institutional mandates, and adequate resource allocation are essential to ensure sustained and meaningful impact.

Equally significant is the need for sustained investment in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and human capital. In the absence of these foundational elements, digital diplomacy initiatives are likely to remain limited in scope and vulnerable to technological or security disruptions. Capacity-building efforts should therefore emphasize not only technical proficiency but also strategic thinking and adaptive policy design.

At the same time, ethical governance must serve as a cornerstone of digital engagement. Principles such as transparency, respect for human rights, and responsible communication practices enhance credibility and safeguard long-term soft power interests. Emerging economies that demonstrate normative leadership in digital governance are better positioned to strengthen international trust and reinforce their standing within the global community.

6.8 Synthesis

Digital diplomacy represents a transformative force in contemporary international relations, reshaping how influence is exercised and contested. For emerging economies, it offers a pathway to enhanced visibility, strategic autonomy, and participation in global governance. However, digital diplomacy is not inherently empowering; its effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, strategic coherence, and ethical commitment.

As global power continues to diffuse and digital technologies evolve, emerging economies that invest in sustainable digital diplomacy will be better positioned to navigate complexity, build alliances, and shape international narratives. The future of soft power will increasingly be determined not by material resources alone but by the ability to communicate credibly, engage meaningfully, and adapt strategically in the digital domain.

7. Policy Implications, Research Directions, and Conclusion

7.1 Policy Implications for Emerging Economies

The analysis presented in this review underscores several policy-relevant implications for emerging economies seeking to leverage digital diplomacy as a soft power instrument. A central implication is the need to embed digital diplomacy formally within national foreign policy frameworks rather than treating it as a peripheral communication activity. This requires explicit policy recognition of digital engagement as a strategic tool for advancing diplomatic, economic, and cultural objectives.

Institutional arrangements play a critical role in this process. Governments would benefit from establishing dedicated digital diplomacy units within ministries of foreign affairs or equivalent bodies, supported by clear mandates, trained personnel, and operational autonomy. Effective digital diplomacy further depends on close coordination with agencies responsible for trade, culture, technology, and national branding in order to ensure coherence in messaging and strategic alignment. In the absence of such coordination, digital initiatives are likely to remain fragmented and inefficient.

Equally important is sustained investment in capacity building. Digital diplomacy relies heavily on human capital, particularly skills related to digital communication, data analysis, strategic storytelling, and crisis management. Emerging economies should therefore prioritize continuous professional development for diplomats and communication officers, integrating digital competencies into diplomatic training curricula. Collaborative

partnerships with universities, international organizations, and technology firms can play a valuable role in facilitating knowledge transfer and strengthening institutional capacity.

In parallel, attention must be given to strengthening digital infrastructure and cybersecurity. Effective digital engagement requires reliable connectivity, secure communication systems, and resilience against cyber threats. Weak infrastructure not only limits diplomatic outreach but also exposes states to reputational and security vulnerabilities. Strengthening cybersecurity frameworks is thus essential for protecting diplomatic communication and sustaining credibility in digital environments.

Finally, ethical governance should serve as a foundational principle guiding all digital diplomacy initiatives. Transparency, accountability, respect for privacy, and adherence to international norms are central to building trust and legitimacy. Emerging economies that demonstrate ethical leadership in digital engagement are more likely to secure enduring soft power benefits and strengthen their standing in the international system.

7.2 Implications for International Cooperation and Global Governance

Digital diplomacy also carries important implications for international cooperation and global governance. As digital platforms increasingly mediate diplomatic engagement, there is a growing need for international norms and frameworks to regulate digital conduct, data governance, and information integrity. Emerging economies have a strategic interest in participating actively in these norm-setting processes to ensure that global digital governance reflects diverse developmental realities and perspectives.

Multilateral institutions can play a facilitating role by promoting best practices, supporting capacity building, and encouraging inclusive participation in digital governance debates. Regional organizations, in particular, offer valuable platforms for cooperation among emerging economies, enabling shared learning, pooled resources, and collective bargaining power in global digital negotiations.

Digital diplomacy also presents opportunities for enhanced South–South cooperation. By sharing experiences, technologies, and policy approaches, emerging economies can collectively strengthen their digital capacities and amplify their voices in international forums. Such collaboration contributes to a more balanced and representative global diplomatic system.

7.3 Implications for Research and Theory Development

From an academic perspective, this review reveals several important gaps in the existing body of scholarship. One key limitation lies in the scarcity of empirical studies that examine the impact of digital diplomacy on measurable foreign policy outcomes, particularly within emerging economy contexts. Much of the available literature remains largely descriptive or conceptual, with relatively little systematic evaluation of effectiveness.

Beyond this, future research would benefit from adopting comparative and longitudinal approaches capable of tracing how digital diplomacy strategies evolve across time and differing political, economic, and cultural environments. Comparative analyses between emerging and advanced economies, in particular, could generate valuable insights into the ways structural constraints shape patterns of digital engagement and influence.

In addition, stronger theoretical integration is required across international relations, communication studies, and political economy. Because digital diplomacy operates at the intersection of these disciplines, interdisciplinary frameworks are essential for capturing its complexity. Concepts such as network power, platform governance, and digital sovereignty offer especially promising directions for advancing theory in this area.

Equally important, the ethical dimensions of digital diplomacy warrant deeper scholarly attention. Challenges related to misinformation, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and digital inequality raise normative concerns that extend well beyond technical efficiency. Future research should therefore explore how ethical principles can be meaningfully operationalized within digital diplomatic practice and institutional frameworks.

8. Conclusion

This review has examined digital diplomacy as an emerging soft power instrument for developing and middle-income states in an increasingly digitalized international system. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, the study has shown that digital diplomacy offers emerging economies unprecedented opportunities to enhance visibility, shape narratives, engage global publics, and participate more actively in international affairs.

At the same time, the analysis has demonstrated that digital diplomacy is not inherently empowering. Its effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, technological infrastructure, strategic coherence, and ethical governance. Structural constraints such as digital inequality, platform dependency, cybersecurity risks, and political limitations continue to shape the scope and impact of digital engagement.

The central argument advanced in this review is that digital diplomacy should be understood not as a technological add-on but as a strategic dimension of modern statecraft. When integrated into broader foreign policy frameworks and supported by sustained investment in human capital and institutional capacity, digital diplomacy can serve as a powerful soft power tool for emerging economies.

As global politics becomes increasingly mediated through digital platforms, the ability to communicate credibly, engage constructively, and adapt strategically will be central to international influence. For emerging economies, the challenge is not simply to participate in digital diplomacy but to shape its norms, practices, and future trajectory in ways that reflect their interests, values, and aspirations.

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