

## **Digital Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review**

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### **Abstract**

Digital diplomacy is becoming the dominant form globally. Africa, being part of the era of globalization, needs to embrace new technologies. However, African digital diplomacy faces various challenges like inadequate infrastructure, lack of expertise in new technologies, restrictive regulations, anonymity concerns, and more. Consequently, with the increasing use of digital tools, Africa is encountering a rise in cybersecurity risks such as hacking, online scams, and misinformation campaigns. Insufficient cybersecurity measures and limited capabilities to tackle these issues expose African nations to cyber threats. While the objectives of the research paper are to explore the opportunities digital diplomacy presents in Sub-Saharan African State and investigate the challenges of digital diplomacy in Sub-Saharan African State, the study utilised a qualitative research method drawing from secondary sources and document analysis. Subsequently, the gathered information undergoes thematic analysis. The study finds that, digital diplomacy presents a myriad of prospects and potentials as a result of the surge in internet and social media utilization in Sub Sahara Africa, coupled with enhanced mobile connectivity and accessibility to smartphones. Similarly, as emerging technology offers numerous advantages to digital diplomacy in Sub Sahara Africa, yet it also presents numerous drawbacks. The study recommends investment in digital infrastructure, prioritizing high-speed internet access and reliable communication networks, promoting digital literacy, and leveraging social media platforms to enhance digital diplomacy in Sub-Sharan African.

**Keywords:** Sub-Saharan Africa, Digital Diplomacy, Cyber-Security, Diplomacy

### **Introduction**

The scenery of diplomacy has been fundamentally transformed by widespread internet access and the rise of social media (Adesina, 2017). Historically, states have employed various diplomatic methods, but the defining feature of the twenty-first century is the pervasive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in every aspect of life (Ming'ala, 2019). With the global proliferation of internet technology, numerous countries are now leveraging

digital platforms, including social media, blogs, and websites, to enhance their image and accomplish their foreign policy objectives (Adesina, 2017).

In contemporary academia, there is increasing interest in the utilization of the Internet and social media for diplomatic purposes. However, current research on digital diplomacy primarily centers on Europe and the Americas, with insufficient evidence to demonstrate its impact on Africa (Masters, 2021). This has perpetuated the misconception that Africa is behind in democratic principles, traditions, and technological innovation. Despite these challenges, since the mid-2000s, Africa has been making efforts, though somewhat limited, to align with global standards and emulate Western advancements.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, digital diplomacy encounters numerous obstacles, including inadequate ICT infrastructure. Issues such as stringent social media regulations under authoritarian regimes, cybersecurity concerns, anonymity challenges, diplomats' skill deficiencies, and secrecy problems are significant. Several African nations, like Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Togo, Burundi, Chad, Mali, and Guinea, have controversially restricted or shut down social media and internet platforms, reflecting their skepticism towards the Internet (Huda, 2022). Despite these difficulties, African diplomacy sees immense potential in the digital sphere. The rising myth of the intelligent society, increasing Internet penetration, the smartphone revolution, growing interest in ICTs, and the active involvement of the African diaspora are transforming the landscape (Endong, 2020). This era presents opportunities for system digitization and enhanced transparency in African diplomacy. With its youthful population and rich resources, Sub Sahara Africa holds significant promise, underscoring the need for prioritizing digitally connected socioeconomic development (African Union, 2020).

The swift advance of digital technology can drive structural changes across African nations and stimulate regional development by enhancing diplomacy, financial transactions, and market effectiveness.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The burgeoning field of digital diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa presents a vast landscape ripe for exploration. This is because, amidst the opportunities of digital diplomacy lie significant challenges that demand attention. While some regions of the world particularly the global north boast advanced technological infrastructure and widespread internet access, Sub-Saharan African states struggle with limited connectivity and digital literacy, therefore paving way for difficulty in digital diplomacy. Such disparities hinder the equitable participation of all stakeholders in digital diplomacy efforts, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities and

marginalizing certain voices. Similarly, with the proliferation of social media platforms and digital communication channels, diplomatic actors face the challenge of effectively harnessing these tools while mitigating risks such as misinformation, cyber-attacks, and digital surveillance, among others.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This paper seeks to elucidate digital diplomacy in Sub-Saharan African states. However, specific objectives of the study are to:

1. explore the opportunities digital diplomacy presents in Sub-Saharan African State.
2. investigate the challenges of digital diplomacy in Sub-Saharan African State.

### **Methodology**

This research paper adopts a qualitative approach that involves the use of secondary data sources such as academic journals, government reports, and media reports. The choice of secondary data allows for an in-depth analysis of digital diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The data collected is analysed via content analysis.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Concept of Digital Diplomacy**

In developing regions such as Sub-Saharan African, the concept of digital diplomacy is relatively new in academic research. Despite its growing prominence in scholarly circles, digital diplomacy still lacks a universally accepted definition. Terms like virtual diplomacy, e-diplomacy, mobile diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and networked diplomacy are often used interchangeably to describe digital diplomacy (Adesina, 2017). Consequently, various researchers and organizations have their own interpretations of what digital diplomacy entails. Broadly, digital diplomacy involves the extensive use of technology, especially the Internet and other ICT-based innovations, in diplomatic practices (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Additionally, it encompasses the use of the Internet and information communication technologies (ICTs), such as video conferencing and social media, to help both state and non-state actors navigate global changes (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Digital diplomacy typically encompasses three main components, as identified by Bjola and Holmes (2015). Firstly, it involves the interaction between actors and non-actors to convey a particular message or image, known as the public diplomacy component. Secondly, it pertains to how foreign ministries and various public and private institutions organize and manage

information resources for diplomats and other stakeholders, referred to as the information accessibility component. Thirdly, it includes the techniques actors use to gather data on the ground to monitor subtle changes in political systems and public opinion, termed the data-analysis component. Consequently, although the term "digital diplomacy" is often used interchangeably with "public diplomacy," this usage limits the concept's scope (Mazumdar, 2024). Therefore, digital diplomacy is distinct from public diplomacy. For the purposes of this study, digital diplomacy is defined as "the use of digital technologies, such as social media, online communication tools, and other digital platforms, to conduct diplomatic activities and engage with foreign audiences." This encompasses utilizing digital tools to advance a nation's interests, values, and policies, as well as to build relationships and foster cooperation with other countries and international organizations.

Digital diplomacy serves various functions, such as engaging with the public, handling crises, facilitating cultural exchanges, and promoting trade. Consequently, activities like cyber espionage, gathering information from social media, conducting video conferences between states and non-state actors, and maintaining communication between embassies and their home offices exemplify the practice of digital diplomacy.

### **Digital Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan African State**

The subject of digital diplomacy within an African academic context is underscored by two main factors. Firstly, although traditional diplomats and international stakeholders are engaging in digital diplomacy in Africa, the extent of its practice is more limited compared to other regions. Secondly, digital diplomacy is notably absent in African institutions, revealing a substantial gap in research. However, by the early 2000s, African countries began adopting e-government systems in line with global trends. This development serves as a starting point for examining the history of digital diplomacy on the continent. Today, digital diplomacy is a widely recognized concept across Sub-Saharan states, from Kenya and South Africa to Mali, Namibia, and Rwanda (Bokstad, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly boosted African digital diplomacy. The challenges and restrictions brought about by the pandemic, including social distancing measures, have driven every African nation's foreign affairs ministry, embassies, and diplomats to embrace digital diplomacy (Bokstad, 2024). Consequently, most Sub-Saharan African countries have had to conduct bilateral and multilateral negotiations online. Additionally, countries with more developed economies and financial systems, like South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, are experiencing rapid increases in damages to computer infrastructure. This has

heightened the awareness among African governments of the critical role of digital diplomacy. As digital diplomacy evolves, several conferences have been held entirely online. For instance, in June and July 2020, the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California organized a series of webinars on digital diplomacy with African diplomats (Wekesa, Turianskyi, & Ayodele, 2021).

Similarly, despite the pandemic, African countries have managed to hold security conferences that have gathered thousands of stakeholders from across the continent (Medinilla, 2024). In May 2020, the African Union (AU) successfully hosted a three-week-long virtual conference titled "Silence the Guns." Since the onset of the pandemic, African leaders, including AU Chairman President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, have engaged in online discussions with various stakeholders (Olubukola, 2022). Additionally, in 2021, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) organized a capacity-building workshop on digital trade to prepare for the African Free Trade Area. While the progress is not entirely satisfactory, African nations are making a promising start.

### **Exploring the Opportunities of Digital Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan African States**

The digital landscape within African diplomacy presents a myriad of prospects and potentials. Among these, a notable opportunity lies in the expanding reach of the internet and the proliferation of mobile technology. Over the years, Africa has witnessed a steady increase in internet and social media adoption. Data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2020 revealed that Africa's internet penetration stood at 39.3%, trailing behind the global average of 59.5%. Nonetheless, the same report highlighted a significant upsurge in internet usage across the continent, with an annual growth rate of 9.1% recorded between 2010 and 2020. Moreover, Africa has experienced unparalleled growth rates in internet penetration in recent times, as indicated by Kemp (2018). The surge in internet and social media utilization, coupled with enhanced mobile connectivity and accessibility to smartphones, presents a favorable environment for African digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy, which revolves around leveraging information and communication technologies (ICTs), stands to benefit greatly from these advancements (Alhashimi, 2021).

The drive to cultivate a "smart society" presents yet another avenue for development. Across Africa, there's a growing interest in embracing this concept, akin to global trends. Notably, the Smart Africa Initiative, originating from a 2013 gathering in Kigali, Rwanda,

stands out among various endeavors. Seven heads of state, including those from Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Mali, Gabon, and Burkina Faso, endorsed the Smart Africa Manifesto, later ratified by all African Union member states during the 2014 General Assembly. Additionally, the African Union introduced its Digital Transformation Strategy for 2020–2030 in May 2020. This initiative holds promise, potentially paving the way for a continent-wide digital diplomacy strategy, mirroring the European Union's model. While current efforts primarily occur at the national level, the AU's framework encourages collaborative strategies among member states. This collective approach fosters inclusivity, facilitating continental-level engagements like conferences and forums, thus enhancing interactions between policymakers and citizens. Furthermore, digital diplomacy offers newfound opportunities for less developed nations to pursue their foreign policy objectives. By leveraging technology in diplomatic endeavors, African states can effectively advance their international agendas, as highlighted by Turianskyi, & Wekesa, (2021).

Furthermore, it paved the path towards transparency in governmental dealings regarding diplomatic affairs. Additionally, it plays a role in bolstering the involvement of the diaspora in public diplomacy. Lastly, the accessibility and affordability of social media and other digital channels enable widespread participation in diplomacy among African populations. To sum up, digital diplomacy in Africa presents substantial opportunities, including improved communication through mediums such as social media and virtual meetings. It empowers African nations to shape their narratives and counteract detrimental stereotypes, thereby promoting their cultural richness and investment potential. During crises, digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information, coordination of relief initiatives, and solicitation of international aid. Economic diplomacy and trade enhancement can be facilitated via online platforms, attracting foreign investments and fostering growth in export-oriented sectors. Citizen diplomacy and public involvement are cultivated, enabling citizens to engage in policy dialogues and bridge the divide between governments and the populace. Evidence-based policy decisions and forecasts are enabled through data-driven diplomacy. Digital platforms also offer avenues for capacity building, knowledge sharing, and networking among African diplomats. Consequently, digital diplomacy presents avenues for streamlined communication, economic advancement, crisis mitigation, citizen involvement, and policymaking in Africa.

### **Digital Diplomacy and Its Challenges in Sub Saharan African States**

This emerging technology offers numerous advantages, yet it also presents numerous drawbacks. The inadequacies in infrastructure significantly contribute to the disparities in African digital diplomacy, leading to negative consequences driven by the digital divide (Jansen, 2021). The digital divide denotes the unequal access to and distribution of information and technology. While this issue is global, its impacts are particularly acute in developing nations, especially in Africa. Nevertheless, Africa must strive to narrow the gap in internet usage compared to regions like the Global North and other parts of the Global South. Despite its vast population, Africa's internet usage stands at approximately 11.5%, as depicted in the figure below, highlighting the significant differences in internet access on a global scale.

Another obstacle lies in the observation that various metrics suggest that African Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions, and governmental leaders require greater adaptability and agility to embrace the evolving landscape of digitally influenced diplomatic practices. There exists a notable hesitancy, uncertainty, skepticism, and even fear towards highly sophisticated digital diplomatic methods amidst a period of rapid, technology-fueled transformations. While certain entities leave a detrimental impression by their absence on social media platforms, others simply remain inactive.

Culture exerts a profound influence on the dynamics of digital diplomacy across Africa. Renowned for its remarkable diversity encompassing myriad ethnicities, languages, customs, and belief systems, the continent's rich cultural tapestry shapes how African nations navigate digital diplomacy and interact with global audiences. Cultural subtleties and sensibilities significantly mold the approach to digital diplomacy, affecting how African nations communicate and engage internationally. Factors such as language preferences, communication methodologies, and societal norms directly impact the efficacy of digital diplomacy endeavors. Appreciating and honoring cultural disparities stands as a pivotal necessity to ensure fruitful digital diplomatic interactions, as misinterpretations or miscommunications could impede constructive dialogue and the cultivation of relationships.

Moreover, cultural hurdles such as the digital divide and differential levels of technological assimilation across various African regions and communities can curtail the reach and engagement of digital diplomacy initiatives. Thus, cultural awareness and sensitivity emerge as indispensable for harnessing the full potential of digital diplomacy in Africa. Additionally, the continent faces escalating concerns regarding cyber-attacks and hacking in the realm of digital diplomacy. For instance, the cyber-attack on Transnet, a South African

state-owned entity managing crucial ports, disrupted regional supply chains to an unprecedented degree in 2021 (Allen, 2022).

Government secrecy and censorship pose significant challenges, especially in the era of social media. Maintaining confidentiality and controlling potentially harmful content, which threatens national security, becomes increasingly difficult due to the open and inclusive nature of platforms like social media. This issue is particularly pronounced in African nations such as Ethiopia, where authoritarian measures have been implemented to restrict access to social media. For instance, in March 2020, Ethiopia introduced the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation in an attempt to tackle longstanding issues of hate speech and misinformation within the country. However, according to the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) in 2020, this legislation has faced criticism for its overly broad definitions and its potential for misinterpretation and abuse. Furthermore, it imposes severe penalties on both social media users and intermediaries, which contradicts established international human rights norms outlined in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The emergence of the internet's "culture of anonymity," allowing individuals to assume various identities and even launch attacks, presents a significant hurdle in digital diplomacy. Additionally, the proliferation of fake news from adversarial sources compounds this challenge. The widespread adoption of digital platforms like social media has precipitated a crisis of confidence in online information, constituting both a political and media battleground. The pervasive nature of fake news dissemination, whether through fabrications or distorted facts concerning a specific nation or its leaders, strains bilateral relations, erodes trust, and fosters tensions (Pinnell, 2018).

Fake news not only exacerbates conflicts but also fosters misunderstandings and hinders diplomatic endeavors aimed at conflict resolution. Moreover, there exists a pressing need for a deeper understanding of leveraging new communication technologies, the internet, and social media, given their potential for adverse ramifications. Practitioners of digital diplomacy must undergo continual training and acclimatization to emerging digital tools, especially those of a complex nature, to mitigate associated risks (Antwi-Boateng, & Al Mazrouei, 2021).

Furthermore, African ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, and heads of government necessitate greater adaptability and agility to navigate the evolving landscape of digitally driven diplomatic cultures. Many stakeholders exhibit hesitancy, uncertainty, mistrust, and



even apprehension toward embracing sophisticated digital diplomacy amidst the rapid, technologically fueled transformations of the present era. While some entities leave a negative impression by their lack of activity on social media, others remain entirely inactive (Endong, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Before the onset of COVID-19, there were only a few social media platforms available, suggesting that although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could utilize digital diplomacy for diplomatic engagements, there is a pressing need for its further implementation in Africa. Despite ongoing digital diplomatic efforts in Africa, there has been insufficient emphasis on both the concept and practice. Given the ever-evolving landscape of digital diplomacy worldwide, Africa must align itself with current trends and changes. As digital diplomacy gains prominence globally, it becomes imperative for Africa to embrace new technologies to adapt to the era of globalization.

Undoubtedly, African digital diplomacy has encountered a myriad of obstacles, ranging from deficient infrastructure and limited proficiency in utilizing modern technologies to restrictive regulatory frameworks and the persistent issue of anonymity. Nevertheless, the continent harbors a wealth of prospects and capabilities for advancing digital diplomatic endeavors. Among these are the expanding reach of the internet, growing public interest, active engagement from the African diaspora, the formulation of digital policies by the African Union (AU), aspirations towards fostering smart societies, and the proliferation of smartphones, which collectively represent pivotal drivers.

Africa's potential is further underscored by its abundant human and natural resources, which can be harnessed to bolster digital infrastructure. Consequently, there exists a pressing need for concerted efforts aimed at fortifying ICT infrastructure and promoting comprehensive training initiatives tailored to digital platforms. By embracing this imperative, Africa can play a significant role in shaping the landscape of global diplomacy. Despite the inherent challenges, Africa stands to reap substantial benefits from its endeavours in digital diplomacy. Such initiatives have the potential to catalyze transformative shifts, facilitate the seamless flow of financial resources, generate employment opportunities, and serve as conduits for amplifying African values and cultures across the continent and beyond.

In essence, Sub Saharan Africa's commitment to nurturing its digital diplomatic capabilities holds promise not only for enhancing connectivity and technological proficiency but also for fostering socioeconomic development and fostering a more inclusive global

discourse. By strategically leveraging its resources and prioritizing investments in digital infrastructure and human capital development, Africa can carve out a more prominent role in the digital arena, thereby bolstering its diplomatic influence and contributing to the advancement of shared global objectives.

### **Recommendations**

The research paper thereby makes the following recommendations:

- 1. Invest in Digital Infrastructure:** Prioritize investments in digital infrastructure such as high-speed internet access and reliable communication networks. This infrastructure forms the backbone of digital diplomacy efforts, facilitating communication and information exchange.
- 2. Promote Digital Literacy:** Launch educational initiatives to enhance digital literacy among citizens, diplomats, and government officials. This includes training programs on digital tools, cybersecurity, and online etiquette to ensure effective engagement in digital diplomacy activities.
- 3. Leverage Social Media Platforms:** Embrace social media platforms as powerful tools for diplomacy. Establish official social media accounts for diplomatic missions and government agencies to engage with citizens, disseminate information, and shape public perceptions about Sub-Saharan Africa on the global stage.
- 4. Engage with Digital Diaspora Communities:** Tap into the potential of digital diaspora communities to strengthen diplomatic ties and promote cultural exchange. Facilitate online platforms and initiatives that connect diaspora members with their home countries, fostering collaboration and investment opportunities.
- 5. Support Digital Innovation Hubs:** Foster the growth of digital innovation hubs and startup ecosystems across Sub-Saharan Africa. These hubs serve as platforms for technological innovation and entrepreneurship, fostering collaboration between governments, private sector, and civil society to address common challenges through digital solutions.
- 6. Enhance Cybersecurity Measures:** Prioritize cybersecurity measures to safeguard digital diplomacy efforts against cyber threats and attacks. Invest in robust cybersecurity infrastructure, training, and collaboration with international partners to mitigate risks and ensure the integrity of digital communications.
- 7. Facilitate E-Diplomacy Training:** Develop specialized training programs on e-diplomacy for diplomats and government officials. These programs should cover topics

such as digital communication strategies, online negotiation skills, and crisis management in the digital age to enhance diplomatic effectiveness in the digital realm.

- 8. Promote Open Data Initiatives:** Embrace open data initiatives to increase transparency and accountability in governance. By making government data freely available online, Sub-Saharan African countries can foster public trust, enable data-driven decision-making, and enhance collaboration with international partners through shared data repositories.
- 9. Forge Digital Diplomacy Partnerships:** Strengthen partnerships with international organizations, tech companies, and other governments to advance digital diplomacy goals. Collaborate on joint initiatives such as digital infrastructure projects, cybersecurity cooperation, and knowledge sharing to leverage collective expertise and resources.
- 10. Harness Digital Diplomacy for Development:** Integrate digital diplomacy efforts into broader development agendas to address socio-economic challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. Use digital tools and platforms to promote sustainable development goals, improve access to essential services, and empower marginalized communities through innovative digital solutions.

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