

Digital Diplomacy and Language in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The evolution of international relations in the Digital Age has been marked by the convergence of Digital Diplomacy and Language, reshaping the landscape of global communication and diplomatic engagement. This study explores the symbiotic relationship between these two realms, highlighting their profound impact on contemporary diplomatic practices, public engagement strategies, and global perceptions. Two research objectives were formulated to guide the study. Conceptual clarification on digital diplomacy and language in the digital era was done. The objectives of digital diplomacy and the opportunities in digital diplomacy for Nigerian Foreign policy were established. The study explored the role of language in digital diplomacy, focusing on using social media, digital communication tools, and online platforms in diplomatic relations. Also, the study examined how digital language and communication impact diplomatic discourse, public diplomacy, and global perceptions. The study recommended that governments, diplomatic entities, and policymakers enhance language proficiency, leverage digital tools effectively, and promote cultural understanding in diplomatic engagements. It emphasizes the imperative of integrating technology with linguistic expertise to navigate the complexities of digital diplomacy and foster constructive international relations in our interconnected world.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Language, Digital Age

Introduction

In the constantly evolving landscape of international relations, digital technology has transformed the nature of diplomacy, giving rise to a dynamic field known as "Digital Diplomacy." This innovative approach to diplomacy harnesses the power of digital tools and communication platforms to engage with global audiences, navigate complex geopolitical landscapes, and advance foreign policy objectives. Moreover, within this realm, the role of language in the digital age shapes how nations communicate, negotiate, and collaborate on a global scale (Kerry, 2013).

Digital Diplomacy refers to the strategic use of digital technologies by governments, diplomats, and non-state actors to conduct diplomatic activities. This includes utilizing social media platforms, websites, blogs, podcasts, virtual meetings, and various online communication channels to engage with international stakeholders, share information, shape public opinion, and promote a country's interests. Adesina (2017) disclosed that in the digital era, diplomats leverage these technological tools to reach broader and more diverse audiences,

bypass traditional media gatekeepers, and foster direct dialogue with citizens, policymakers, and influencers worldwide. Through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, diplomats can communicate in real-time, responding swiftly to global events, crises, or policy developments, enhancing transparency and immediacy in diplomatic exchanges.

Enuka and Ojukwu (2016) submitted that digital diplomacy also encompasses data analytics, artificial intelligence, and big data to gain insights into public sentiment, analyze trends, and tailor diplomatic strategies accordingly. Moreover, it facilitates virtual diplomacy, enabling officials to conduct meetings, negotiations, and conferences remotely, transcending geographical barriers and enhancing efficiency in diplomatic endeavours.

Language plays a critical role in shaping digital diplomacy. In a globalized and interconnected world, multilingual communication is vital for effective diplomatic engagement (Teibowei, 2023). The digital age has made language barriers more permeable through translation tools, language-learning apps, and real-time interpretation services, enabling diplomats to communicate in multiple languages and engage with diverse audiences.

Moreover, language and cultural context nuances become even more crucial in digital communication. Diplomats must navigate linguistic subtleties, idiomatic expressions, and cultural sensitivities to ensure accurate and culturally appropriate messaging in various languages. Additionally, the rise of machine translation and natural language processing technologies has facilitated cross-language communication. However, challenges persist in achieving contextually accurate translations, especially in diplomatic contexts where precision and nuance are paramount (Obuah, 2017).

Digital diplomacy and language in the digital age are intertwined facets shaping contemporary international relations. The strategic integration of digital tools with linguistic proficiency is essential for diplomats to effectively navigate the complexities of global communication, bridge cultural divides, and build meaningful connections in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The study examined digital diplomacy and language in the digital age. Specifically, the study achieved the following:

1. Analyze the role of language in digital diplomacy, focusing on using social media, digital communication tools, and online platforms in diplomatic relations.
2. Investigate how digital language and communication impact diplomatic discourse, public diplomacy, and global perceptions.

Conceptual Clarification

Digital Diplomacy Digital diplomacy is relatively new and lacks an all-encompassing definition. The undefined scope of digital diplomacy causes this problem. Some scholars include cyber security, social media and internet governance as part of digital diplomacy. Scholars and practitioners even alter the nomenclature of the concept to be 'cyber-diplomacy,' 'net-diplomacy,' 'e-diplomacy,' and 'Twiplomacy' (Verrekia, 2017).

The former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, thought digital diplomacy was redundant. He stated that digital technologies, in general, and social media do help advance states' foreign policy and bring people across the globe close. However, they ultimately fulfill the same objectives as diplomacy. Diplomacy aims to establish dialogue and find common ground among the broadest possible audience. Thus, digital diplomacy is simply diplomacy and nothing new (Kerry, 2013).

According to Adesina (2017), digital diplomacy uses social media platforms to promote a country's foreign policy and image abroad. It operates at the level of the foreign ministry and the embassies abroad. Foreign policy and national branding can be implemented through these two levels regarding the local audience's history, culture, values and traditions. It is the use of digital communication tools by diplomats to communicate among themselves and with the broader public. Digital diplomacy is often equated with public diplomacy, which limits the concept's scope. Digital diplomacy includes cyber espionage, information gathering over social media, negotiations between states via video conferencing, and communication between embassies and home offices over digital platforms (Verrekia, 2017). Notwithstanding, there are three components of digital diplomacy;

1. Public diplomacy using online platforms
2. Building expertise in technology to better understand international events
3. The use of ICT for economic growth (Adesina, 2017).

Digital diplomacy is solving foreign policy problems with the Internet. It is conventional diplomacy through a different medium. Digital diplomacy should not be seen as a replacement for traditional diplomacy but rather as a medium to complement traditional diplomacy.

Digital Diplomacy encompasses the strategic utilization of digital technologies by governments, diplomats, and international actors to conduct diplomatic activities in the digital realm. It uses social media platforms, websites, digital communication tools, and data-driven approaches to engage with global audiences, shape public opinion, and achieve foreign policy goals. Digital Diplomacy transcends traditional diplomatic practices by leveraging the speed, reach, and accessibility of digital platforms to enhance transparency, facilitate dialogue, and promote a country's interests on a global scale.

Within the Digital Diplomacy sphere, language's role *in the Digital Age* has become a pivotal factor. It refers to the influence, challenges, and opportunities posed by linguistic considerations in the context of digital communication across diverse cultures and languages. In today's interconnected world, multilingual communication is fundamental for effective diplomacy. Language in the Digital Age involves the dynamic interplay between technology-enabled language translation, cross-cultural communication, and the nuanced understanding of linguistic subtleties to convey accurate, contextually relevant, and culturally sensitive messages.

The conceptual relationship between Digital Diplomacy and Language in the Digital Age lies in their synergy. Digital Diplomacy harnesses the potential of digital tools to transcend geographical boundaries and engage diverse audiences. However, its effectiveness hinges on linguistic proficiency, considering the nuances of language, cultural context, and the challenges of accurate translation in the digital sphere. The strategic integration of technology, multilingualism, and cultural awareness is essential to navigating the complexities of digital communication, ensuring meaningful engagement, fostering mutual understanding, and building robust diplomatic relationships in the contemporary global landscape. In essence, Digital Diplomacy and Language in the Digital Age converge at the intersection of technology, diplomacy, and cross-cultural communication. Their symbiotic relationship underscores the importance of leveraging digital tools while recognizing the critical role of language as a bridge for practical, inclusive, and impactful diplomatic engagement in our digitally interconnected world.

Objectives of Digital Diplomacy

Diplomats continuously gather and analyze viable information from their host nations and send it to their home offices. The Internet has made such a function relatively instantaneous to the extent that information is transmitted in real time. Second negotiation, the heartbeat of diplomacy, is being done over the Internet. The COVID–19 pandemic in 2020 has encouraged virtual negotiations. In April 2020, OPEC and its allies held a virtual meeting to negotiate oil production cuts to improve the cost of oil (Turak, 2020).

Adesina in Nyewusira (2019) disclosed that digital diplomacy has eight main goals. They include:

1. Knowledge management: To harness departmental and whole government knowledge so that it is retained, shared and optimized in pursuit of national interests abroad.
2. Public diplomacy: To maintain contact with audiences as they migrate online, harness new communications tools to listen to and target important audiences with critical messages and influence major online influencers.
3. Information management: To help aggregate the overwhelming flow of information and to use this to inform policy-making better and to help anticipate and respond to emerging social and political movements.
4. Consular communications and response: To create direct, personal communications channels with citizens travelling overseas, with manageable communications in crises.
5. Disaster response: To harness the power of connective technologies in disaster response situations.
- vi. Internet freedom: Creation of technologies to keep the Internet free and open. This has the related objectives of promoting freedom of speech and democracy and undermining authoritarian regimes.
6. External resources: Creating digital mechanisms to draw on and harness external expertise to advance national goals.
7. Policy planning: To allow for effective oversight, coordination and planning of international policy across government in response to the internationalization of the bureaucracy (Adesina, 2017, p. 3).

Digital diplomacy has come to stay, and it is pertinent for states to utilize the opportunity to promote their foreign policy better. Nigeria should be included as the next section explores the various opportunities to be exploited from digital diplomacy.

Digital Diplomacy Opportunities for Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Foreign policy consists of two elements: national objectives and the means for achieving them. Digital diplomacy is one such means. The modern revolution in Information Communication Technology (ICT) provides many opportunities for less developed countries to exploit in foreign policy. The Internet, a means of communication that enables the publication, exchange and storage of information, has become an essential part of private and public communication and foreign policy. Nyewusira (2019) states the importance of the Internet thus.

The internet can be considered by governments as a unique diplomatic instrument; through its proper use they can advertise not only their position on different issues, but also promote their ideas worldwide. Such a function, if used in the right way, helps the embassy, and as a result the state that it represents, to create a positive image in the host state. (Christodoulides cited in Adesina, 2017, p.5)

In the same vein, also, according to Grant goes further to state that,

The Internet has its effects in foreign policy as it does in every other area of government policy.

The technology now controls the way in which information flows around the globe.

This has enabled the “news”, which is the base material of foreign policy and the way governments interact with each other, to become faster, more readily available, and able to reach almost every part of the world.

The interactions of governments, which are the purpose of diplomacy, are being affected by these developments in significant ways.

The prospect for even faster, and potentially more far-reaching, changes in the future will require foreign ministries to be nimble and informed in their responses (Grant, 2004, p.6).

However, Nigeria's foreign policy has three key opportunities to exploit from digital diplomacy. These areas are;

1. Consular and Diaspora relations
2. Nation branding
3. Networking

Nigeria, through its social media, can keep in touch with its large population in the Diaspora for economic and cultural benefits. Nigerian embassies may use Facebook and Twitter to keep nationals abreast of embassy events, consular assistance, political issues, and investment opportunities. Digital platforms serve as a key avenue to reach nationals in different states during emergencies and disasters. The use of Twitter to influence public opinion against the discrimination of Nigerians in China is one example of how Nigeria has explored the digital diplomacy option. On 14 April 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama, expressed his displeasure on Twitter regarding human rights discrimination against Nigerians in China. Nigerians were forcefully evacuated from their homes and forced into quarantine because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He stated, "The (Nigerian government) takes the issue of human rights and well-being of Nigerians everywhere in the world very seriously. The Nigerian government considers any issue in this regard an absolute obligation to intervene to protect the rights and dignities of Nigerians." (Onyeama, 2020)

Digital diplomacy creates an opportunity for Nigeria to manage its global image. Social media visibility would tackle stereotypes and change the narrative about Nigeria in the international community. Over two billion people are on social media (Adesina, 2017). According to Zimako (2009), the government is responsible for Nigeria's image at home and abroad. The view the world has about Nigeria is generally wrong. The lack of faith by Nigerians, the bad economy, and human rights abuses give Nigeria a poor image. Between 1999 and 2015, the United States and Britain, at different times, designated Nigeria an unsafe place for their nationals to visit. This is because of issues of militancy in the Niger Delta, terrorist activities, and general insecurity. Nigerians are considered corrupt, drug dealers, prostitutes, child traffickers, and fraudsters (Zimako, 2009).

Digital diplomacy provides a platform for the MFA to promote Nigeria's image directly to the foreign public. Social media allows Nigeria to network with other African countries. The speed with which information is disseminated globally provides a form of mobility on global issues. Nigeria can use social media to extend its diplomatic network with other non-state actors and direct public opinion towards its interests (Adesina, 2017).

Obuah puts it thus,

the social media can be useful to digital diplomacy by leveraging the opportunity to engage diverse niche communities to market key economic exports, culture, political behavior etc., of a country especially in the era where states have made a significant shift from hard power to soft power in the conduct of interstate relations (Obuah, 2017, p. 147).

The role of language in digital diplomacy focuses on using social media, digital communication tools, and online platforms in diplomatic relations.

In the modern era, the fusion of language, technology, and diplomacy has ushered in a paradigm shift in international relations, giving rise to Digital Diplomacy (Obuah, 2017). At the heart of this evolution lies the pivotal role of language, especially in leveraging social media, digital communication tools, and online platforms to navigate diplomatic relations across borders.

Teibowei (2023) disclosed that language is the cornerstone of effective communication in digital diplomacy. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn serve potent tools for diplomats to engage with global audiences. However, mastering language nuances in these platforms is crucial. Diplomats must adeptly craft messages in multiple languages, ensuring accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and appropriateness to resonate with diverse audiences worldwide. Whether it is a diplomatic statement, a public address, or engaging with stakeholders, the language used can significantly impact the perception and reception of the message.

Social media platforms have transformed diplomatic outreach by enabling direct engagement with citizens, policymakers, and influencers across the globe (Teibowei, 2022). Diplomats leverage these platforms for disseminating information and active dialogue, crisis management, and public diplomacy initiatives. Language proficiency in the digital space becomes instrumental in engaging local audiences, understanding cultural sensitivities, and effectively conveying a country's narrative. Furthermore, utilizing multiple languages on social media ensures inclusivity, breaking language barriers to foster cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

Nyewusira (2019) submitted that beyond social media, digital communication tools like webinars, virtual meetings, and online conferences have become integral to diplomatic engagements. These tools allow diplomats to transcend geographical limitations and communicate directly with counterparts and stakeholders worldwide. In this context, language proficiency and translation technologies are essential. While machine translation aids in breaking language barriers, linguistic and cultural nuances remain critical for effective communication. Diplomats must navigate these challenges by employing professional interpreters or ensuring accurate and contextually appropriate translations to facilitate meaningful discussions and negotiations.

Online platforms and digital forums offer diplomatic communities spaces for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving. Through dedicated diplomatic forums, international organizations' platforms, or specialized networks, diplomats can engage in multilateral discussions, share best practices, and negotiate agreements. Language in these spaces is pivotal in enabling effective communication, fostering mutual understanding, and building consensus among diverse stakeholders with varying linguistic backgrounds.

The role of language in digital diplomacy is indispensable. Effective communication across social media, digital communication tools, and online platforms requires linguistic proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. Nyewusira (2019) reported that diplomats leveraging these digital mediums must master the art of multilingual communication, using language as a conduit to bridge gaps, facilitate dialogue, and build robust diplomatic relations in the interconnected and linguistically diverse digital landscape of contemporary international relations.

Digital language and communication impact diplomatic discourse, public diplomacy, and global perceptions

In today's interconnected world, digital language and communication fusion have significantly reshaped diplomatic discourse, redefined public diplomacy strategies, and profoundly influenced global perceptions. The dynamic interplay between digital platforms, language use, and communication methods has fundamentally altered the landscape of international relations (Verrekia, 2017).

Digital language and communication have revolutionized diplomatic discourse by providing diplomats unprecedented avenues for engagement, negotiation, and information dissemination. Digital platforms, including social media, online forums, and virtual diplomacy tools, offer diplomats a direct channel to communicate with their counterparts, stakeholders, and the public across borders.

Teibowei (2022) opined that language proficiency is paramount in diplomatic discourse as it facilitates effective communication and fosters mutual understanding among diverse stakeholders. With digital tools, diplomats engage in real-time discussions, share policy perspectives, and respond swiftly to global events, shaping diplomatic narratives and influencing international discourse.

Moreover, digital communication enables diplomats to address complex global challenges collaboratively. It facilitates multilateral negotiations, allows for exchanging ideas, and promotes diplomatic cooperation among nations. However, the challenges of accurate translation and interpretation persist, underscoring the importance of linguistic accuracy in conveying diplomatic messages across different languages and cultures (Teibowei, 2023). Digital language and communication have redefined public diplomacy strategies, empowering nations to engage directly with global audiences, bypass traditional media channels, and shape public opinion. Social media platforms are powerful tools for public diplomacy initiatives, enabling governments and diplomats to craft narratives, share cultural insights, and promote their country's values and policies.

Language proficiency in digital public diplomacy is crucial to engaging diverse audiences effectively, tailoring messages to local contexts, and mitigating cultural misunderstandings. Diplomats adept in multiple languages can engage in meaningful dialogues, build relationships, and bridge cultural gaps, fostering positive perceptions of their country abroad (Onyeama, 2020). Digital communication allows for interactive public diplomacy, encouraging citizen engagement, feedback, and participation in diplomatic initiatives. It facilitates two-way communication, enabling diplomats to listen to public opinions, address concerns, and shape policies based on public sentiment, thereby fostering a more inclusive and responsive diplomatic approach.

The impact of digital language and communication on global perceptions cannot be overstated. Diplomatic engagement through digital platforms shapes how countries are

perceived globally. The language used in diplomatic communications, speeches, and social media posts influences how international audiences understand and receive nations.

Effective digital communication enables countries to project a positive image, counter misinformation, and clarify their positions on various global issues. Enuka and Ojukwu (2016) state that language proficiency is pivotal in conveying nuanced messages that resonate positively with diverse audiences, contributing to a country's soft power and global influence.

However, the rapid dissemination of information in the digital realm also poses challenges, as misinformation and disinformation can spread rapidly, impacting global perceptions (Obuah, 2017). Therefore, diplomats must employ language strategically, ensuring accurate, transparent, and credible communication to counter false narratives and maintain trust and credibility in international relations.

Digital language and communication fusion have transformed diplomatic discourse, amplified public diplomacy efforts, and shaped global perceptions. Language proficiency and strategic use of digital platforms are essential for diplomats to navigate the complexities of international relations, foster constructive dialogue, and influence positive perceptions of their countries on the global stage.

Conclusion

In the rapidly evolving landscape of international relations, the convergence of Digital Diplomacy and Language in the Digital Age has emerged as a defining force. The strategic integration of digital tools, multilingual communication, and cultural sensitivity has fundamentally reshaped diplomatic practices, public engagement, and global perceptions. The role of language proficiency in leveraging digital platforms for diplomatic outreach, effective communication, and strategic engagement cannot be overstated. Digital Diplomacy has transformed traditional diplomatic practices by providing unprecedented opportunities for direct engagement, transparency, and inclusivity. At the same time, language serves as the bridge that connects diverse cultures, enabling effective communication and fostering mutual understanding. By embracing these recommendations, diplomatic entities can harness the power of Digital Diplomacy while acknowledging the pivotal role of language in fostering effective communication, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and shaping positive global perceptions in the Digital Age. This strategic integration will pave the way for more inclusive, transparent, and impactful diplomatic engagements in the complex and interconnected world of contemporary international relations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were given:

1. Governments and diplomatic institutions should prioritize language training programs for diplomats to enhance multilingual proficiency. Proficiency in multiple languages equips diplomats with the tools to engage effectively across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes.
2. Diplomatic missions should develop comprehensive strategies for utilizing digital platforms effectively. This involves tailoring content in multiple languages, engaging with local audiences, and leveraging social media analytics to understand better and reach target demographics.
3. Encouraging cultural exchange programs, promoting cultural events, and facilitating dialogues celebrating diversity can foster mutual understanding and respect among nations, reducing cultural barriers in diplomatic interactions.

4. Advanced language technologies and professional translation services should be invested to ensure accurate and contextually relevant communication across different languages, especially in the digital realm.
5. The diplomatic corps should continuously build digital literacy skills among diplomats to navigate evolving digital landscapes effectively. This includes understanding data analytics, social media management, and digital security protocols.
6. Encouraging responsible and ethical online engagement is crucial. Diplomatic entities should uphold integrity in their digital communication, counter misinformation, and build credibility through transparent and accurate messaging.
7. Diplomatic communities should promote collaboration and knowledge sharing on best practices in digital diplomacy and multilingual communication to enhance collective learning and effectiveness in the field.

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